

FROM “FEMINA GRATA” TO “FEMINA SACRA”:
SHIFTING APPROACHES TO KURDISH WOMEN
IN FEMINIST ACADEMIC DISCOURSE



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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

From “Femina Grata” to “Femina Sacra”:

Shifting Approaches to Kurdish Women in Feminist Academic Discourse

This thesis investigates how the scholarly approach to Kurdish women in gender literature has transformed from 1980 to the present in Turkey by examining the political developments that have influenced and shaped these changes. The first part of the thesis addresses the impact of these political conditions on academic production. Through interviews with experienced scholars and researchers, as well as document analysis, it explores how theoretical approaches have been reflected in academic work over the years due to political developments, interactions, and debates within feminist grassroots movements. It also examines the theoretical alliances and divergences that have arisen.

After examining how political conditions have evolved over the years and how academics have positioned themselves in response to these changes, the second part of the thesis explores the theoretical shifts in feminist academic production, highlighting the theoretical approaches that have gained prominence over time through an analysis of strategically selected academic texts. As a result of the interviews and document analysis, theoretical approaches to Kurdish women have been analyzed in a way that can be broadly divided into three main periods. Despite covering a range of texts, this part mainly focuses on the most influential academic works and purports to illustrate the three main approaches identified in the study.

ÖZET

“Makbul kadın”dan “kutsal kadın”a:

Feminist Akademik Söylemde Kürt Kadınlara Yönelik Değişen Yaklaşımlar

Bu tez, Türkiye’de 1980’den günümüze kadar toplumsal cinsiyet literatüründe Kürt kadınlara yönelik akademik yaklaşımın nasıl dönüştüğünü ve bu değişimlere etki eden ve onları şekillendiren politik koşulları incelemektedir. Tezin ilk bölümü, bu politik koşulların akademik üretim üzerindeki etkilerini analiz etmektedir. Deneyimli akademisyenler ve araştırmacılarla gerçekleştirilen mülakatlar ve doküman analizleri aracılığıyla, teorik yaklaşımların politik gelişmeler, feminist taban hareketindeki etkileşimler ve tartışmalar ışığında yıllar içinde akademik üretime nasıl yansıdığı ve hangi teorik ve politik ortaklaşmalar ile kopuşlara yol açtığı ele alınmaktadır.

Politik koşulların yıllar içinde nasıl değiştiğini ve akademisyenlerin bu değişimlere yanıt olarak kendilerini nasıl konumlandıklarını inceledikten sonra, tezin ikinci bölümünde feminist akademik üretimdeki teorik değişimler araştırılmakta ve stratejik olarak seçilmiş akademik metinlerin analizi yoluyla zaman içinde öne çıkan teorik yaklaşımlar ortaya konmaktadır. İlk bölümde, mülakatlar ve doküman analizleri sonucunda, Kürt kadınlara dair teorik yaklaşımlar genel olarak üç ana döneme ayrılabilir. İkinci bölüm, birçok metni kapsamasına rağmen, özellikle yayınlandığı dönemde ve sonrasında geniş etki yaratmış akademik eserlere odaklanmakta ve bu üç yaklaşımı göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

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To the memory of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi and Nagihan Akarsel

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	<i>Avrupa Birliđi</i> European Union
AKP	<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i> Justice and Development Party
BİKG	<i>Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi</i> Women's Initiative for Peace
CARA	Council for At-Risk Academics
ÇATOM	<i>Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezi</i> Multi-purpose Community Center
CHP	<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i> Republican People's Party
CORDIS	Community Research and Development Information Service
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
DDKAD	<i>Devrimci Demokrat Kadınlar Derneđi</i> Revolutionary Democratic Women's Association
DDKD	<i>Devrimci Demokrat Kültür Derneđi</i> Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association
DDKO	Devrimci Dođu Kültür Ocakları
DEHAP	<i>Demokratik Halk Partisi</i> Democratic People's Party

DEP	<i>Demokrasi Partisi</i> Democracy Party
DİSK	<i>Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu</i> Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey
DMP	Diyarbakır Military Prison
DÖKH	<i>Demokratik Özgür Kadın Hareketi</i> Democratic Free Women's Movement
DP	<i>Demokrat Parti</i> Democrat Party
ESA	<i>Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu</i> Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia
EU	European Union
GAP	<i>Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi</i> Southeastern Anatolia Project
GWS	Gender and Women's Studies
HADEP	<i>Halkın Demokrasi Partisi</i> People's Democracy Party
HDP	<i>Halkların Demokratik Partisi</i> People's Democratic Party
HEP	<i>Halkın Emek Partisi</i> People's Labor Party
IHD	<i>İnsan Hakları Derneği</i> Human Rights Association

IKWSN	International Kurdish Women's Studies Network
KAMER	<i>Kadın Merkezi Eğitim, Üretim, Danışma ve Dayanışma Vakfı</i> Women's Center Education Production Consultation and Solidarity Foundation
KGSN	Kurdish Gender Studies Network
KİP	<i>Kürdistan İşçi Partisi</i> Kurdistan Workers' Party
ÖDP	<i>Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi</i> Freedom and Solidarity Party
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i> Kürdistan İşçi Partisi
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i> Democratic Union Party
SAR	Scholars at Risk
TBMM	<i>Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi</i> Turkish Grand National Assembly
TESEV	<i>Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı</i> Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation
TİP	<i>Türkiye İşçi Partisi</i> Workers' Party of Turkey
TÜBİTAK	<i>Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu</i> Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey
UN	United Nations

YAZKO

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YÖK

Yükseköğretim Kurulu

Council of Higher Education

YPG

Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

People's Protection Units

YPJ

Yekîneyên Parastina Jin

Women's Protection Units

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Kurdish women as a subject of inquiry in scholarly literature began to appear in the 1990s (Mojab, 2003, p. 5), while scholarly endeavors shedding light on the dynamics of the political organization of Kurdish women came into view within the academic discourse during the 2000s in Turkey. The dearth of data about Kurdish women may be attributed to several reasons. First and foremost, Kurds are a non-state nation, and the nation-states that govern Kurdish regions often suppress them by enforcing practices of assimilation and exclusion, banning the Kurdish language, and denying their very existence. This situation impedes the ability to collect and disseminate information on Kurds, such as census information and academic research on Kurdish women. Additionally, the stateless status of Kurds restrains their access to international platforms, thus undercutting international awareness and support for Kurdish women's issues (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021, p. 14).

By considering these circumstances, it is safe to say that universities and research centers affiliated with universities in Turkey cannot conduct independent and quality research, especially due to the fact that academic freedom has been under threat in the presence of successive authoritarian governments and archival silencing (Seggie & Gokbel, 2014; Butler, 2017; Aktas, Nilsson & Borell, 2019; Safta-Zecheria, 2022). Besides investigating censorship, we need further research that would probe thoroughly into the conditions under which scholarly work on Kurdish women in gender studies is produced, particularly examining how academic institutions' market-oriented and state-centric biases obstruct such studies. Moreover,

neoliberalism, with its focus on performance metrics and rankings, exacerbates the commodification of knowledge, stifling the development of emancipatory ideas.

While challenges such as inadequate funding, censorship, and the silencing of historical records significantly impact the production of knowledge about Kurdish women, it is equally vital to enquire what kind of knowledge has been produced in the face of these circumstances. This thesis not only examines the politics of knowledge production—how gender research on Kurdish women in the context of Turkey developed and evolved amidst the interactions between feminist grassroots movements, state actors, funding agencies, and international influences— but also conducts a critical review of the existing literature on gender and women’s studies in Turkey. It aims to demonstrate how theoretical approaches have transformed over time and to assess the extent to which certain perspectives succeed in or fall short of explaining the oppression and resistance of Kurdish women.

The first part of the thesis examines how feminist academia has been influenced by political developments and its engagement with grassroots feminist movements. The primary focus is on the evolution of approaches to the Kurdish issue. The theoretical approaches are broadly categorized into three distinct phases through interviews and document analysis based on secondary sources. The first period from 1980 to 2000 is marked by a predominantly middle to upper-middle-class feminist academia in Turkey, which was still in its nascent stages and largely unfamiliar with the Kurdish issue. During this time, feminist scholars engaged in a critical reassessment of Kemalism, with many dedicating their efforts to uncovering the history of Turkish women’s struggles. From the late 1990s onwards, with the rise of the Kurdish women’s movement, intellectual discussions and exchanges began to emerge between women in this movement, independent Kurdish feminists, and

Turkish feminists. Kurdish women emphasized their distinct experiences, asserting that the state violence and racism they endured set them apart from Turkish women. Despite the tension in grassroots relations, there were also shared struggles in peace movements and anti-militarist organizations. These interactions gradually permeated academia in the 2000s, leading to an increase in studies on Kurdish women and analyses of the Kurdish issue from a gender perspective. During this period, there was a growing body of academic work on nationalism and the limitations imposed on women's agency within nationalist projects, as well as on militarism and masculinities. However, themes such as colonialism, state violence, and institutionalized racism—topics Kurdish women and feminists had been articulating since the 1990s—were still largely neglected from a gender perspective. This second phase of increased political alliances roughly extends until 2015.

In 2015, with the breakdown of the peace process between the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê; Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish state, the resumption of conflict, and the state's military operations in Kurdish regions, coupled with rising authoritarianism, the bonds between the Kurdish women's movement and Turkish feminists began to drift away. In addition, many academics, including feminist scholars, opposing the state's violence against Kurds were targeted, prosecuted, and, in some cases, lost their jobs. This repression hindered the reflection of intellectual exchanges within grassroots movements in academic production. However, since the late 2010s, the number of gender studies focusing on Kurds has increased, particularly due to the contributions of a new generation of Kurdish researchers based in North America and Europe. This group has transitioned from focusing solely on Kurdish women in the Turkish context to a broader examination of Kurdish women and queers globally, now establishing Kurdish

gender studies as a field, facilitated by the establishment of networks like the International Kurdish Women's Studies Network (IKWSN), later renamed the Kurdish Gender Studies Network (KGSN) (Açık, Kutlay-Sarıkaya, Ghaderi, & Kılıçaslan, 2023, p. 270). The Rojava Revolution, in particular, has expanded the political influence of the Kurdish women's movement in Turkey, allowing their voices to reach a more international audience. As a result, the coalitions they form are no longer confined to the Turkish feminist movement. In fact, through this process, the Kurdish women's movement broke away from the political framework historically set by Turkish feminists and instead forged transnational feminist alliances.

After investigating the change in political conditions and how academics have positioned themselves in response, the second part of the thesis examines the impact of these shifts on feminist academic production. It highlights the theoretical approaches that have gained prominence over time by analyzing selected academic texts in gender and women's studies literature.

The first two group of these scholarly works fall within the domain of gender and nationalism, a field canonized by feminist scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Kumari Jayawardena, Deniz Kandiyoti, Floya Anthias, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Cynthia Enloe in the late 1980s and the 1990s.¹ The gendered nationalism scholars endeavored to demonstrate that both citizenship and nationalism are inherently gendered constructs and that gender is a critical element in how states and nationalist

¹ See Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (originally published 1986, reprinted 2016, Verso); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Zed Books, 1986); Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State* (Springer, 1989); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Pandora Press, 1989); Deniz Kandiyoti, *Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation*, *Millennium*, 20(3), 429–443 (1991); Deniz Kandiyoti (Ed.), *Women, Islam, and the State*, *Middle East Report*, 173, 9–14 (1991); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Vol. 4, Princeton University Press, 1993); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (Sage Publications, 1997).

movements engage in nation-building and state-building processes (Kaufman & Williams, 2011, pp. 1-2). Feminist scholars have analyzed nationalism through two primary lenses: first, by examining the participation of women in nationalist movements, and second, by creating sophisticated theoretical frameworks to explore how the nation is shaped around specific “gender identities and meanings” (Kaufman & Williams, 2011, p. 14). Particularly spearheaded by the works of Deniz Kandiyoti and Şirin Tekeli, this scholarship also developed in Turkey and examined the role of women in Turkish modernization, their political agency in forming the nation-state and nation-building. The subsequent scholars such as Yaprak Zihnioğlu, Yeşim Arat, Necla Arat, Fatmagül Berktaş, Nükhet Sirman, Nilüfer Göle, Ayşe Durakbaşı, Serpil Sancar continued to study modernization, nationalism, and the state by touching on the status of “women in Turkey.” They expressed certain distaste for all nationalist projects but specifically critiqued Kemalism, the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey, grounded on the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Although each scholar develops their own interpretation, their perspectives on Turkish nationalism converge on fundamental points. They argue that Turkish nationalism developed around tensions with Western modernity. It was characterized as post-colonial nationalism with a strong commitment to secularism and legal citizenship, while the Kemalist regime was considered to be secular authoritarianism. According to these scholars, despite women managing to carve a space for themselves in Kemalist nation-making, due to its secular character, they have been cast as the reproducers of the nation and relegated to traditional roles, particularly that of motherhood. Handling of the women’s questions by Kemalist modernizers for the scholars the suspicion that the discourse surrounding women’s political and legal rights was not earnestly pursued but rather was instrumentalized by nationalist elites

as a means to signal the measure of civilization (Berktaş, 2003, pp. 108-110; Çağatay & Nuhoglu-Soysal, 1995; Durakbaşı, 2000, pp. 91-92; Kandiyoti, 1991a; Sancar, 2012, pp. 180-181; Tekeli, 1981, 1991; Zihnioğlu, 2003, p. 149).

Furthermore, these scholars supposed that Kemalist cadres implemented impartial practices uniformly across Turkey according to their secular principles, and they contended that the Kemalist project of modernization aimed to create its *femina grata* (makbul kadın) by shaping all women according to these principles (Berktaş, 2003, p. 111; Durakbaşı, 2000, p. 93; Kandiyoti, 1997b, p. 125; Sancar, 2012, pp. 313-315). The present thesis argues that the underlying assumption here is that the state was *indifferent* to non-Muslim and non-Turkish women in its modernizing attempts, and it concludes that this perspective unwittingly perpetuates the silencing of the histories of Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, Alevi, and Kurdish women by marginalizing the genocidal assaults against them, carried out by successive Turkish governments at the beginning of the 20th century, in the gender history of Turkish modernization and nation-building.

Moreover, this thesis proposes that by denying the very existence of Kurds, some of these studies address Kurdish women as “rural women” living in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia and attribute their lack of citizenship rights and limited access to public services and the broader public sphere to the *incapacity* of Kemalist modernization in reaching and addressing the specific needs of rural populations (Ertürk, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1995 and 1997b). The *indifferent modernization* thesis shows up again in the case of Kurdish women. Proponents of this thesis assume that the state’s modernization project was insensitive to locally specific conditions in Turkey’s Southeastern regions, where the Kurdish population constitutes the majority. However, even official documents, such as secret reports prepared by

government officials in the 1920s and 1930s, may prove how the state has indeed pursued a social engineering that also targeted Kurdish women; in fact, women were the primary targets of the policies of assimilation. By disregarding this aspect of modernization, and thereby the racialized class division among women in Turkey, these scholars reduce the exploitation and oppression of Kurdish women to issues of rural underdevelopment caused by the failure of Kemalist modernization.

With the onset of the 2000s, the Kurdish issue began to be addressed as an “ethnic” matter. The studies conducted during this period by feminist scholars, including Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Pauline van Gelder (2000) and Handan Çağlayan (2007), built upon the theories of the first group. They incorporated a more rigorous consideration of ethnicity and ethnic differences than the previous scholarship in their analyses of nationalism. These accounts acknowledge the state’s repressive tactics against the Kurdish population, such as mass incarcerations or military operations and denial of identity rights. Furthermore, they describe how these oppressive actions affect Kurdish women’s lives. However, this second wave of scholars who study Kurdish women could not resolve the problem they inherited from the first wave: The ambiguity regarding the status of Kurds in Turkey. They discuss the themes of Turkish nationalism and Kurdish nationalism as well as the constitution of “Kurdish women” as a political identity (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000; Çağlayan, 2007), patriarchal dynamics in Kurdish society (Çağlayan, 2007), without addressing state racism which leads to the oppression and discrimination against Kurdish people on a daily basis. This leaves a lacuna in their account. In particular, Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder (2000) risk portraying Turkish and Kurdish nationalism on ostensibly equal footing by paying insufficient

attention to the significant power imbalances and ideological differences between them.

On the other hand, Çağlayan (2007) is more precise in elucidating the Kurdish freedom movement's political agenda. She clearly articulates that in contrast to early "aristocratic, religious and tribal" Kurdish nationalism, the PKK began its political journey as a Marxist movement that emerged precisely in opposition to the Kurdish ruling classes. She associates it with the popular resistance movements in Latin America, which draw strength from the urban and rural poor (pp. 94-96).

Hence, it can be asserted that Çağlayan unequivocally distinguishes the movement's political agenda from that of bourgeois liberal or revivalist nationalisms. However, she intriguingly concludes that Kurdish identity was formed not in opposition to an external other but "against the old Kurdishness, defined by traditional relations of sovereignty" (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 211). Accordingly, the themes of colonial encounter and institutional racism are absent in her gender analysis; thus, she could not effectively discuss the condition of Kurdish women within the state-party-family triangle. In fact, by embracing Kandiyoti's gender theory, she limits her analysis within a framework of an ahistorical understanding of patriarchy, that is, domestic/familial/tribal, and interprets feudal Kurdish family as the foremost obstacle for women's empowerment by isolating patriarchy from state violence and institutional racism (p. 69). In other words, the issue here is not her portrayal of the Kurdish family as a source of patriarchal dominance but rather her depiction of it as the sole source of this dominance. This approach becomes problematic because it implies that Kurds enjoy autonomous territorial sovereignty beyond the reach of the Turkish state. Consequently, issues such as sexual violence and the exploitation of Kurdish women are framed as internal problems within Kurdish society, viewed by

her as a closed community. This perspective disregards the broader systemic factors, including state violence and marginalization, that contribute to the oppression of Kurdish women.

This blind spot in her account is furthered by her treatment of class as mere demographic data, namely, an indicator of income when interpreting her empirics obtained from the field. Her empirical data reveals that most Kurdish women, deprived of formal education, represent the poorer segments of the working class in Turkey. They work in precarious conditions without social security as seasonal agricultural workers and house cleaners in middle-class urban households, and many are unemployed domestic workers within their own households. In addition, they live in poor conditions, such as houses without proper heating (Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 151-154). The “demographic data” alone could give us insights into how racialized capitalism subjects them to patriarchal domination and diminishes their capacity to resist it. However, Çağlayan (2019) missed the opportunity to cultivate the extensive data she collected from the field into a comprehensive theory that could have explicitly illustrated how institutional racism and colonial violence collectively impoverish Kurdish women, thus rendering them more vulnerable to patriarchal dominance.

More recently, academic studies on Kurdish women are evolving, thanks to the efforts of a new generation of gender scholars studying Kurds worldwide. This recent scholarship marks a significant shift in approach from earlier ones. This group represents a new wave of feminist scholarship, influenced by postcolonial and decolonial theory, Black feminist theory, Jineolojî, and intersectional perspectives scrutinizing the interplay between race and gender. The scholars began to analyze linguicide, militarist violence, forced migration, disappearances, and mass

incarceration within the framework of racism and the language of (de)coloniality. The theoretical perspectives in question enabled this third wave of scholarship to overcome the everlasting debates on colonialism, which eventually culminated in a conceptual impasse. They equipped Kurdish scholars with theoretical tools that helped contextualize the oppression against Kurds and enabled them to frame the Kurdish freedom movement as an anti-colonial liberation movement.

This third wave of scholars emphasizes that the experiences of Kurdish women cannot be fully understood without analyzing colonial state violence. They show how patriarchal dynamics have transmuted through the state's intrusion, how Kurdish men have been affected by colonial encounters, and how Kurdish women have faced compounded oppression due to colonial intrusion (Dirik, 2022; Işık, 2022; Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021; Üstündağ, 2023). Because they view Kurdish women as existing in a colonial condition, I find it fitting to employ Ronit Lentin's term "femina sacra" to describe their approach to Kurdish women. According to Lentin (2006, 2011), *femina sacra* is the equivalent of Agamben's (1998) *homo sacer*; she is at the mercy of the colonial sovereign: these women can be killed, raped, but not sacrificed due to their impurity; and they are permanently banned as the producers of future generations of the racially "inferior".

Despite being *femina sacra*, the third wave of scholars do not see Kurdish women as victims, but they celebrate their resistance to various authorities. They demonstrate how women have struggled against the state and how this struggle is inherently gender-based, and they illustrate how women's resistance against patriarchy is intertwined with their struggle against the state (Dirik, 2022; Işık, 2022; Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021; Üstündağ, 2023).

To sum up, this thesis traces a transformation from the 1980s to the present day in the approach to Kurdish women in feminist academic writing in Turkey's context. There is a continuity in scholars' theoretical underpinnings regarding nationalism from the 1980s to the 2010s. The first wave of feminist scholars addressed Kurdish women as *femina grata* of the Turkish nation by assuming that Kemalist modernization exerted a uniform policy of civilization. The second wave emphasizes the ethnic difference when they address Kurdish women but underemphasizes that Kurds are a stateless nation, lacking autonomy and engaging in a national liberation struggle against the Turkish state. In other words, this group focused on Kurdish women's status within the Kurdish nationalist movement, analyzing them as *femina grata* of the Kurdish nation without addressing institutional racism and its impacts on patriarchal dynamics. The third wave delineates that Kurds are subjected to colonial oppression and violence. Their employment of decolonial theory and transnational feminist theory represents a departure from the previous two groups. Racism and colonialism are comprehensively addressed, with these texts portraying Kurdish women as *femina sacra* at the mercy of the colonial sovereign. However, it is vital to note that this approach does not depict Kurdish women as victims; on the contrary, their resistances were celebrated by third-wave scholars.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Motivation

There are many reasons for embarking on such a research project. As a feminist who has long been involved in pro-Kurdish parties, the issues of racism and sexism in Turkish society have been the most pressing political concerns on my mind. In the early 2010s, when I first became active in organizing, the Kurdish issue occupied a significant part of my daily life. During the so-called “opening” and “relative freedom” period, I, along with many of my friends who were organized within pro-Kurdish socialist parties, became targets of the government’s repressive policies.

Even when I took a break from activism when I went to Boğaziçi University, although I was not as politically active as before, I still spent most of my time thinking about anti-racist and feminist politics. However, throughout my education at Boğaziçi University, I realized that, in stark contrast to the political nature of everyday life, we were mostly discussing “high theory” and reading very little about Turkey. Even at this institution, which is considered more “inclusive” in terms of Kurdish-related research compared to other universities, the syllabi include Kurds as case studies, and the theories produced by Kurds were never discussed. In contrast to this, my life was spent reflecting on this issue. This contradiction between academia and daily life was the first thing that pushed me to explore the politics of academic knowledge production.

I have never been naive enough to believe that academia produces purely scientific knowledge or knowledge for the people. I am aware that, like other institutions in the capitalist world, it reproduces ideology as an institution aligned

with the bourgeoisie. However, like other institutions, it is also a site of struggle, and not all ideas and theories are purely ideological (Bannerji, 2022, p. 6). Following the lead of Dorothy E. Smith, who advocates that critical understanding of reality should start “from the ground,” namely from scrutinizing “the individual experience in a daily and institutional sense” (Bannerji, 2022, p. 5), I also started with my everyday encounters and everyday problems which lie at the intersection of feminist and anti-racist struggle and academic knowledge production. In scrutinizing the social organization of knowledge, I dedicate myself to feminist epistemology because I understand knowledge as “socially situated and not politically neutral,” I aim to produce knowledge for people (Deitch, 2021, p.216; Smith, 2005).

2.2 Research puzzle and theoretical framework

My primary research inquiry is focused on understanding the evolution of the scholarly approach to Kurdish women in the feminist academic literature emerging within the Turkish context from 1980 to the present day. To find out how this transformation occurs, I planned to critically engage with feminist academic writing and interview senior academics. The texts to be analyzed are selected based on specific criteria. They include works produced by (i) feminist scholars engaged with the grassroots feminist movement, where their ideas may influence activism and, conversely, where the political agenda of grassroots movements can shape their scholarly perspectives, and (ii) feminist scholars who work with legislators or serve on the advisory boards of gender research centers, as their contributions could impact policy-making. We can also see that their works are widely cited.

As I engaged with the texts critically, I formulated specific questions to guide my analysis. In formulating these questions, I draw from Raewyn Connell’s

solidarity-based epistemology (2015). According to Connell (2014), challenging the universalized forms of oppression against women and the colonial gaze in Northern feminist thought, decolonial thought, Black feminism, and intersectionality have significantly impacted feminist studies for the past few decades (p. 518). Connell (2014) argues that critiques from feminist scholars in the Global South paved the way for a notable shift in feminist research, teaching, and theoretical writing in the North. As a result, there has been a proliferation of material from the Global South in North American and European curricula, publications on feminist issues in “the Arab world, India, Africa, or Latin America” in Northern journals, and courses on gender now emphasize diversity in the Northern academy (pp. 518-519).

Although Connell (2014) appreciates these changes as “great progress,” she highlights a fundamental problem with this type of scholarship (p. 520). She argues that knowledge production remains Northern-centric, with feminist thought typically perceived as originating from the global North. While the South does produce theory, it is often taken for granted that the South primarily provides data and cases rather than theoretical contributions. The global economy creates peripheries and metropolises, vast structures of marginality and centrality (Connell, 2014, p. 526). In today’s postcolonial world, the periphery is viewed as a “rich source of raw materials,” while the metropole is seen as the primary site for “theoretical processing” (Connell, 2014, p. 524). According to Connell (2014), the vast majority of feminist ideas addressing economic or cultural globalization on an international scale are “based on concepts and methods developed in the Global North” (p. 520).

Taking all this into consideration, Connell (2014) poses the following question: How should we understand “the foundations of feminist knowledge and the status of concepts ranging from ‘patriarchy’ and ‘identity’ to ‘gender’?” (p. 521). In

contrast to mainstream scholarship on economic and cultural globalization, which advocates for a unified epistemology, what should we do? Should we reject the universalized Northern understanding of gender altogether and pursue a different path, such as adopting Obioma Nnaemeka's mosaic epistemology or Fatima Mernissi's Islamic methodology for feminism? (Connell, 2014, p. 521). Should we, in other words, conceive of the world as a totality of "specific cultures, religions, languages, historical experiences, or fragments of identity," like the tiles in a mosaic (Connell, 2014, p. 522), and base our knowledge on these particularities without claiming universality?

In response to this question, Connell (2014) first rejects this dichotomy, arguing that we cannot speak of completely separate cultures in today's neocolonial world. In fact, viewing the world as consisting of distinct tribes and cultures is part of the colonial gaze, which claims to integrate all under its "universal" theory (Connell, 2014, p. 522).

Connell (2015) states that knowledge production in feminist scholarship—whether in universities, state agencies, or NGOs—is shaped by the dynamics of the neoliberal economy and the global division of labor (p. 51). According to her, research funding, academic positions, and vast data banks are all concentrated in the metropole (Connell, 2014, p. 524), and scholars from the periphery feel compelled to study local data using the conceptual frameworks of the metropole in order to gain recognition (by publishing their work in "top" journals, which are predominantly based in the United States or Western Europe) (Connell, 2014, p. 525). This is how the global economy of knowledge operates, and we cannot challenge it merely with mosaic epistemology. On the other hand, we must remember that the South does

produce knowledge rooted in social and political struggles, and we cannot separate this knowledge from those struggles (De Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 2).

The suggestion Connell proposes is a solidarity-based epistemology (2015, p. 59) as the principle of a worldwide counter-public, vast and heterogeneous, that is “constituted by social movement activists, academics, women’s organizations, and even state and development agency staff” (Connell, 2014, p. 538). Connell (2015) emphasizes that works produced on the ground of solidarity-based epistemology “require a practice of seeing gender *fundamentally* in the perspective of coloniality” (p. 60).² That is, our feminist epistemology requires taking racism and coloniality into account when we study gender. Similarly, Nnaemeka (2005) advises feminist scholars on producing intersectional knowledge. She argues that feminist solidarity will be based not on an abstract commonality of sex but on political actions that originate from intersections in women’s personal and collective histories (Nnaemeka, 2005, p. 63).

Embracing this decolonial perspective, which highlights the necessity of considering feminist concepts within their imperial/colonial history, I formulated my preliminary questions for analyzing the academic knowledge produced on Kurdish women in the context of Turkey. These questions include the following: How do these studies represent Kurdish women? To what extent and in what regards does their discourse of “Kurdish women” engage with the history of oppression and racialization of Kurds? Are Kurdish women’s knowledge, experiences, and stories seen as particular, immobile, non-transcendental, and non-transferable by the authors? Do these studies pay attention to similarities, connections as well as

² Here, Connell resonates with the critique of decolonial thinkers such as Lugones (2019), for whom gender as an analytical concept is also inherent to colonialism; namely, the category itself is a colonial imposition. Accepting gender as a neutral concept without question makes it difficult for non-white women to understand power relations (Lugones, 2019).

differences among women in Turkey? Do they conceive the world in fragments or see it in connections? More precisely, to what extent and in what respects do they observe a connection between women's lives?

Another part of this project includes interviews with senior academics and researchers to understand the dynamics of knowledge production in women's and gender studies. Before conducting interviews, I had read most of my primary sources, namely the academic texts I would critically engage in, giving me a rough idea of the field's transformation. I realized that until early 2000, the gender literature in Turkey (women's studies literature at the time) focused mainly on Turkish women's experiences, as criticized by various scholars (Altınay, 2000; Ekmekçioğlu, 2006; Yüksel, 2003 and 2006). My brief examination also revealed an apparent absence of Kurdish women in these accounts; at best, they were subsumed under the category of "rural women" (Ertürk, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1995 and 1997b; Tekeli, 1995) as Yüksel (2003) rightly notes (p. 50).

My preliminary scrutiny led me to ask the following questions: What do these critics of the gendered nationalism mean by "women" when they address "women in Turkey"? Can we find some implicit or explicit mention of non-Turkish and/or non-Muslim women, or are they absent? Does the absence lead to problems in the scholars' accounts of women's history? If so, what shortcomings does it cause? What are the authors' approaches if non-Turkish and/or non-Muslim women are addressed?

I was curious about the opinions of experienced academics in the field of gender studies regarding how academic knowledge about Kurdish women has transformed over the years. I wanted to consult with academics who work on Turks, Kurds, and Armenians. My goal was not only to reach out to gather their "expert"

opinions but also to understand how they position themselves in this transformation.

Specifically, I aimed to comprehend how the perspective on Kurdish women has evolved and how this change has influenced these academics themselves.

Considering the increase in studies about Kurdish women, especially in the last twenty years, I scrutinize how they observed the impact of these studies on the field.

For example, studies on women of color, postcolonial and decolonial theories, and intersectionality have significantly influenced universities in the Global North, at least in terms of increasing the focus on ethnic diversity and the experiences of women of color (Connell, 2014, pp. 519-520). Then, how could this shift impact the studies produced in the context of Turkey? Has there been any change in this regard? If the scholars observed such a change, what kind of transformation was it?

I thought that these questions could help me understand in what regards and to what extent the scholarly approach towards the Kurdish issue and Kurdish women has evolved from the period of silence to the present era of more nuanced and critical engagement. Also, through the guidance of questions I posed to senior academics and researchers, I aimed to learn about the analytical impact of studies on Kurdish women, as well as the influence of certain theories that focus on the category of race and the processes of racialization including critical race theory, intersectionality and decolonial theories on the field of women and gender studies within the context of Turkey.

2.3 Literature review

This thesis examines how the production of feminist academic knowledge in Turkey has evolved over the years in its approach to the Kurdish issue³ and Kurdish women. In this regard, it aims to contribute both to the academic literature on gender studies in Turkey and to Kurdish gender studies literature.

Because this thesis critically approaches the silencing of Kurdish women in academic writing, I also reviewed notable criticisms about the absences/silences of ethnic others in Turkey. Significant objections have been raised by scholars such as Bilge Fırat, Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, Shahrzad Mojab, Ayşe Gül Altınay, and Metin Yüksel in this regard. Altınay (2000) and Yüksel (2003) emphasize the ethnicity-blind approach of mainstream feminist academic writing, arguing that such a perspective fails to recognize the unique challenges faced by Kurdish women and other ethnic minorities within Turkey. This critique calls for a reevaluation of feminist scholarship to ensure that it encompasses a broader spectrum of women's experiences, reflecting the complex interplay of gender, ethnicity, and nationalism in Turkey. What they offer is “diversifying” feminisms in the context of Turkey. Altınay (2000) mentions Armenian women who fought for women's rights in the Ottoman Empire, and then she accentuates that these women have been silenced by feminist historiography in Turkey. Furthermore, she touches upon Kurdish feminists' objections to the racism perpetrated by Turkish feminists, suggesting that acknowledging differences among women can lead to the formation of inclusive political spaces where they come together (Altınay, 2000, pp. 29-31).

³ Following Göral (2017), I use the term “Kurdish issue” to denote “some common tendencies of and themes prevailing over Kurdish society,” such as the “refusal of the assimilation of Kurdishness under the rubric of Turkishness; the call for democratization, dissemination of political will and power; and the demand for decentralization and self-governance” (pp. 1-2).

Firat (2006) notes that authors who have shaped the literature on gendered nationalism are caught in a trap of methodological nationalism and methodological statism, so they produced normative identities such as “women in Turkey” and “Turkish women” (p. 133). According to her, their failure to recognize the ethnic, religious, confessional, and “class-based” differences among women stems from this analytical trap (Firat, 2006, p. 133). She argues that they limit their analyses to “the examination of law and legal documents,” focusing solely on women’s political agency regarding their participation in parliamentary life and elections. In this scenario, the state is portrayed as the primary agent of social change (Firat, 2006, p. 152). Consequently, their analyses tend to focus on the state’s top-down reforms without adequately considering how they are received, interpreted, and contested by various groups, including those who are politically disenfranchised (Firat, 2006, p. 153). To overcome this limitation, Firat advocates for an alternative approach that borrows insights from the anthropology of the state, suggesting a focus on the micro-level dynamics of daily life (p. 148). Ultimately, she proposes an anthropological approach to studying the state and nationalism as a way of overcoming methodological statism and methodological nationalism. She thinks that an anthropological approach is essential for a more detailed understanding of how state policies and national identities are experienced and negotiated by individuals, particularly women, within their specific socio-cultural environments (Firat, 2006, pp. 5-6, p. 157).

I agree with Firat (2006) that gendered nationalism scholarship from 1980 to 2000 suffers from methodological nationalism and methodological statism in certain respects, even if the scholars themselves are not necessarily nationalists. However, I find it very challenging to determine whether these scholars are entrapped by

methodological nationalism or if it was an ideological choice to leave out or sideline racism. Therefore, one should be cautious in assuming that an anthropological approach could serve as a “way out” of the perceived disregard for “ethnic and class differences among women from different subject positions in Turkey” (Firat, 2006, p. 139).

My suspicion of Firat’s deduction and solution is further reinforced by Ekmekçioğlu’s analyses (2006 and 2022). Here, I plan to give Ekmekçioğlu a broader space since she thoroughly discusses the issue of silencing. She extended the previous critique by pointing out the literature’s silencing of the genocidal and assimilationist policies enacted by the Ottoman Empire and its successor, the Republic of Turkey, against non-Turkish and non-Muslim women in the existing academic literature. Such policies significantly impacted the historical and social contexts within which these women lived, yet their stories remain marginalized in mainstream feminist narratives.

Ekmekçioğlu’s critique is in-depth and specifically focuses on knowledge production. Similar to her efforts to reveal the implications of the absence of Armenian women, I aim to uncover the absence of Kurdish women in this context. I think Ekmekçioğlu has made two notable critiques of feminist historiography in Turkey, one published in 2006 and the other in 2022. In her 2006 critique, she argues that feminist historical writing up to the 2000s used the terms “Ottoman women” and “Turkish women” interchangeably (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, p. 328) and failed to address the massacres, deportations, and population exchanges that occurred during the transition from empire to republic (p. 331). She emphasizes that this omission cannot be solely attributed to “the influence of Turkish nationalism” or “researcher oversight” but rather is a result of silencing within the archives, as described by

Trouillot (p. 334). Inspired by Trouillot, Ekmekçioğlu discusses various stages of silencing. The first stage of silencing is the diasporization of sources. Although the sources through which we can access the voices of non-Turkish and/or non-Muslim women, such as magazines, newspapers, programs, and propaganda materials of various women's organizations, novels, and journals, were produced in Turkey, it is difficult to access them in Turkey (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, p. 332). The second stage of silencing concerns the creation of archives. As sources are categorized in the creation of archives, irrelevant topics are sorted out and removed, and the information about those women could be sorted out at this stage. The third stage is the transformation of facts into narratives by researchers, but facts about non-Turkish women could not be created due to the silencing in the first two stages. The fourth stage is writing the historical text, which is constructed by creating retrospective meaning. As a result of all this, non-Turkish women are not mentioned in the larger narratives (e.g., women in Turkey) (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, pp. 333-334).

She discusses the changes that began in the 2000s, a period that indeed witnessed substantial critiques of the official Kemalist history by feminists from various political perspectives (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, pp. 334-335). While finding these developments noteworthy, she also cautions researchers against falling into liberal multiculturalism and stresses the need for a comprehensive treatment of the Armenian Genocide and genocidal violence in general, in terms of its significance for the “general history” and women's history of Armenians, Turks, and Kurds (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, p. 336).

In her 2022 article, Ekmekçioğlu this time reflects on the changes in the literature over the intervening years. She recounts the contributions of Armenian feminist researchers like herself who work on Armenian women and the “emerging

literatures on Greek, Kurdish, Jewish, Circassian, and Arab Ottoman feminists,” which have broadened the scope of women’s history in Turkey beyond that of Turkish and Muslim women (Ekmekçioğlu, 2022, p. 46). She also notes that many researchers still fall into multiculturalism when discussing non-Turkish and/or non-Muslim women, as she had warned in 2006. Ekmekçioğlu asserts that true feminist solidarity must go beyond the “add and stir approach” and can only be achieved by correctly understanding the hierarchies between non-Muslim and Muslim women (pp. 46-47). For example, how Turkish and Kurdish women have been complicit or remained bystanders to violence against Armenian women should also be narrated (Ekmekçioğlu, 2022, p. 49). In the end, she underscores the need for a paradigm shift in this field, advocating for a historiography that values “sisterly solidarity” and considers not only the commonalities/similarities among women but also their differences (Ekmekçioğlu, 2022, p.50).

I consider this study, in part, a contribution to and a reexamination of the analyses provided by Fırat (2006) and Ekmekçioğlu (2006 and 2022). To be more precise, I examine how the analytical approaches have changed regarding racialized women in Turkey in the field of gender and women’s studies. Nevertheless, unlike these scholars, I will center my analysis on the Kurdish women of Turkey.

As my primary aim is to analyze the scholarly works on Kurdish women in the context of Turkey, I investigated existing research that studies knowledge production on Kurdish women. Although Scalbert-Yücel and Marie (2006) do not specifically focus on the production of knowledge about Kurdish women or gender studies, they analyze the emergence and development of Kurdish studies by considering the influences of the state, universities, Kurdish studies centers, publishing houses, and various academic and non-academic actors. Their research is

broad in scope, extending beyond Turkey, yet it also provides in-depth analyses of the production of knowledge about Kurds within Turkey. The authors address different dimensions of silencing within this context.

According to Scalbert-Yücel and Marie (2006), in the early years of the Republic, scholars and universities in Turkey played a crucial role in consolidating and disseminating the official ideology of the newly established Turkish Republic. This ideology included pseudoscientific theories such as the Turkish History Thesis and the Sun Language Theory, which posited that Turks were the originators of great civilizations. Between 1935 and 1945, conferences held at Istanbul University and other venues were aligned with Kemalist principles. The state regularly reminded academics that their scientific work should serve the interests of the Turkish nation and the Turkish Republic. According to the official ideology, the existence of Kurds was denied, making it taboo to address the Kurdish issue as an ethnic matter. During the period referred to by Scalbert-Yücel and Marie (2006) as the “semi-liberalization” era, spanning the late 1960s and 1970s, newly established publishing houses and journals began to produce works that countered the Turkish History Thesis and aimed to present the history of the Kurds. Notable examples from this period include the anthropological studies by İsmail Beşikçi and the pioneering works on Kurdish history by Mehmet Bayrak. In the 1990s, research focused more on the ethnic and conflict dimensions of the Kurdish issue (Scalbert-Yücel & Marie, 2006, para. 64-67). By the 2000s, research began to address issues such as Kurdish poverty, social exclusion, and internal migration at institutions like Boğaziçi, Sabancı, and Bilgi Universities. Moreover, international organizations like the European Commission supported studies in this area, and think tanks such as the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), established in 1994,

promoted projects advocating for democratic reform, minority rights, and multiculturalism, thereby increasing research related to Kurds (Scalbert-Yücel & Marie, 2006, para. 68-71). Overall, the authors persuasively illustrate how the production of intellectual and scientific knowledge about Kurds is profoundly intertwined with political agendas. This is exemplified by the fact that much of the knowledge on Kurds has been produced and disseminated by non-academic actors, especially at the outset. While this study is crucial in mapping the transformation of knowledge on Kurds and the Kurdish issue and the political developments that shaped these changes, it falls short in incorporating a feminist lens and does not offer a comprehensive analysis of theoretical shifts, instead focusing primarily on the evolution of specific themes.

Mojab and Hassanpour's *Women of Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study* (2021) and Necla Açıık et al.'s *Contextualizing Kurdish Gender Studies: Decolonial Feminist Knowledge Production and the Genesis of the Kurdish Gender Studies Network* (2023) provide valuable quantitative insights into the body of work within Kurdish gender studies. The former stands as the most extensive feminist bibliography on women in Kurdistan to date, yet as a bibliography, it refrains from offering a detailed examination of the texts or addressing how approaches have evolved historically. Nevertheless, this thesis considers Mojab and Hassanpour's work noteworthy for avoiding methodological nationalism by addressing not only Kurdish women but also women from other ethnic groups in the same geographical context—a methodological approach this thesis seeks to adopt. The latter focuses primarily on the historical development of Kurdish gender studies as a field and, similar to the former, does not engage in a detailed textual analysis; instead, it remains a largely quantitative study with a decolonial perspective.

In contrast, while also adopting postcolonial and decolonial feminist frameworks, *Özlem Belçim Galip's Move Over? Feminist Reading of Academic Writing on Kurdish Women (2021)* diverges from Açıık et al. by offering a critical, in-depth analysis of texts on Kurdish women through feminist rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis. Galip (2021) critically examines how Kurdish women are represented and to what extent these works conform to or challenge hegemonic gender norms and traditional ideological or cultural hegemony. Her analysis concludes that while Orientalist literature often depicts Kurdish women as victims, texts portraying them as powerful combatants or militants fall into the trap of self-Orientalism. Despite offering an in-depth critique, Galip's work does not explore how these representations of Kurdish women have evolved over time.

While acknowledging the significance of the contributions and questions posed by these studies, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by examining how certain analytical approaches to Kurdish women have been influenced by discussions within grassroots feminist movements. Therefore, it is essential not only to consider what academic texts say or analyze but also to understand the conditions under which intellectual laborers produce this knowledge. Consequently, this thesis employs a different methodology for data collection and analysis. This will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

2.4 Interviews

I interviewed senior and well-known academics and researchers to understand the dynamics of knowledge production in women's and gender studies. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face and online interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted in Turkish language. In determining my sample,

I planned to include academics who study not only Kurdish women but also Armenian and Turkish women to avoid falling into the trap of methodological nationalism. I chose not to interview only Kurdish academics because I aimed to understand the theoretical impact of political developments related to the Kurdish issue and research on Kurds on feminist academic writing produced within the context of Turkey.

At the outset of my research, I contacted twenty people, including political scientists, historians, sociologists, and cultural critics from different backgrounds. However, the issue of methodological nationalism manifested itself from the start because most Turkish scholars I contacted told me that they did not have expertise in Kurdish women. These scholars have written about “women in Turkey” for years, teaching gender courses at universities and serving on the advisory boards of gender research centers and feminist journals. Some declined to participate in the study for this reason, while others agreed but often warned me that they were not “experts” on Kurdish women. I assured them that I was not merely seeking specialized knowledge on Kurdish women but their observations on how scholarship has changed over the years, considering the impact of research on Kurds and developments related to the Kurdish issue.

In general, the interview process was quite challenging for me. After about four months of effort, I could interview only six people. There was a lack of response or very late responses from the academics I contacted, and having to wait for up to two months to find suitable interview times for some interviewees. Considering the limited number of experienced academics conducting gender studies within the context of Turkey or studying Kurdish women living in Turkey, a sample size of six could be deemed sufficient. My six interviewees are prominent in their fields; I

anonymize their names by giving them pseudonyms because of the topic's sensitivity.

Sevgi is one of the first generation of feminist scholars whose work reflects a deep commitment to advancing understanding in gender studies and political science in Turkey. She is a distinguished scholar with her involvement in numerous editorial and advisory boards, including positions with prestigious journals and research institutions. She has taught a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses on topics related to gender, politics, and socioeconomic change. Her publications cover significant works on gender and political dynamics, including influential books and numerous articles on women's roles and political issues in Turkey. She has also contributed to various reports and working papers addressing political Islam and women's associations. Her professional affiliations include memberships in several academic and gender-focused organizations and roles as a jury member for notable awards. We had initially agreed to conduct an online interview, but due to her busy schedule, we switched to a written interview after receiving the approval letter from the Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbinarek).

Like Sevgi, Berrin is also from the first generation. Her research spans gender and sexuality, sociology of work, Muslim cultures, comparative sociology, and globalization. She holds degrees in sociology from both a university in Turkey and a university in the US. She moved to the US for graduate studies and is currently based there. Recognized for her academic contributions, she has received several prestigious awards and fellowships. She teaches courses on theory, qualitative sociology, and comparative studies in gender and work. While in Turkey, she

participated in the Perşembe group,⁴ which was formed in Ankara in 1987 by a group of women, and she was active there; but when she left Turkey, she lost close connections with Turkish feminist activism, becoming more of an academic than an activist.

Ayla was also a member of the Perşembe group and has since been active in feminist politics. Nevertheless, unlike Berrin, Ayla sees herself more as an activist than an academic. She has numerous essays, books, compilations, and translations on feminism and gender studies. In addition, she has also served on the editorial and advisory boards of women's organizations and journals specializing in gender issues. Similar to Ayla, Melda is not only an academic but also a well-known feminist activist. She is currently a professor at a university in Istanbul. She became acquainted with feminism through the magazine *Pazartesi*, which began publishing in 1995 and brought together many women who later formed what became known as the Pazartesi group. Since then, she has been actively engaged in feminist activism. While her academic focus is on women's labor, she has contributed to numerous compilations on a range of topics in gender and women's studies and has edited several books in this field.

Kiymet has been an activist in the Kurdish women's movement, having witnessed the political developments in Turkey and Europe over the past 20 years. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at a university in Germany and supports research projects on women's movements as an expert on the Kurdish women's movement.

⁴ To give a brief introduction to the Perşembe group: it organized the "1st Feminist Weekend," the first national feminist gathering in Turkey held in 1989. The group was formed when women who met at a lecture on "Campaign Against Domestic Violence and Women's Festival" at the Mülkiyeliler Association in Ankara began to gather regularly on Thursdays. During these meetings, women shared their experiences and concerns, discussed the significance of being a woman, and sought to understand, question, and transform the concept of "womanhood." The Perşembe group became a platform where women built their first feminist solidarity networks, collectively questioned patriarchy, organized street actions, conducted consciousness-raising meetings, and launched campaigns related to harassment and women's rights (Karakuş, 2023).

Her current research analyzes the contribution of the Kurdish women's movement to the empowerment of women by focusing on Kurdish women based in Germany. Another participant, Kadri, has also researched Kurdish women's movements and civil society, published in national and international journals, and has supervised theses on women's issues.

I conducted "problem-centered expert interviews" following Döringer's (2020) approach. This method began with an open-ended question to encourage interviewees to shape their own narrative. Subsequently, I employed "general" and "specific" explorations to deepen the inquiry. The general exploration allowed me to investigate "aspects" and "details" potentially relevant to my study but not yet mentioned by the interviewees. In contrast, the specific exploration elicited more focused insights into the interviewees' views. Additionally, I incorporated "ad hoc questions," introducing supplementary aspects or keywords, ensuring interview comparability. On the other hand, the dialogic-discursive nature of this interview technique highlights "the situational co-production of social reality by the interviewer and interviewee." Unlike narrative interviews, where the interviewer's role is mainly passive, the problem-centered interview method required me to shift from listening to guiding interviewees to address key thematic concerns (Döringer, 2020, p. 268). I also consulted a psychologist to ensure the pedagogical soundness of the interview questions, given the sensitivity of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

To illustrate, I began the interviews by asking how the participants initially developed an interest in gender studies. If the Kurdish issue did not arise in their narrative, I gradually directed them toward discussing whether they came to engage with the Kurdish question and Kurdish women. I also explored the challenges they encountered when attempting to study or when studying Kurds (if applicable), such

as state repression, shifts in the Kurdish issue within Turkey, academic freedom, and access to funding,⁵ and how they have observed these factors change over the years. I further examined their perceptions of how political developments, state pressure, and funding influenced their academic output.

Additionally, I inquired about their views on whether the dissemination of critical theories—such as intersectionality, decolonial, and postcolonial perspectives—has impacted knowledge production within gender studies in the context of Turkey. Specifically, I asked interviewees who focus on “women in Turkey” how theories that critically address “race” influenced their work and how the knowledge produced by Kurds from this critical perspective affected their intellectual output. Finally, I sought their opinions on how knowledge produced by Kurds has impacted the broader field of gender studies and what potential obstacles they observe in producing knowledge about Kurds within this field.

Acknowledging the invaluable contributions of my interviewees, many of whom have longstanding affiliations with feminist grassroots movements and are eminent figures within these circles, alongside others who, despite not being directly involved in activism, possess a profound knowledge of it, this investigation has been considerably enriched. These interactions have facilitated a comprehensive exploration into the transformation of research concerning Kurdish women within the Turkish context, tracing its progress and transformation amidst political developments.

⁵ Before I conducted interviews, I thought that the production of scholarly work on Kurdish women faced significant economic obstacles, notably the scarcity of funding, that can severely limit academic exploration, yet they were not identified by my interviewees.

2.5 Selection of the primary sources

In addition to interviews, my primary sources are academic texts in this thesis, as the present thesis focuses on the transformation of feminist academic writing. Therefore, I have included works by self-proclaimed feminist scholars and those who have engaged with grassroots movements, recognizing their significant influence on the development of the feminist movement. In this vein, I considered it effective to select compilations featuring essays by the most-cited feminist scholars. I also thought that they could represent the mainstream feminist positions of the time period in which they were published.

Initially, a more significant number of texts were selected, but they were later refined based on specific criteria, including recommendations from interviewees. The sample selection carefully considered the intertextuality between the texts. This involved closely examining how these studies, spanning from the 1980s to the present, engage in dialogue and build upon each other's analyses. After conducting an in-depth examination of interview data coupled with a preliminary review of academic literature, I decided to concentrate my analysis on the intersection of gender and nationalism. I also chose to focus on this topic because four of the six interviewees consistently referred to the Kurdish women's movement whenever I asked about Kurdish women, and the movement has been extensively discussed in scholarly literature under the category of gendered nationalism.

Furthermore, the interview data guided me in periodizing what theoretical perspectives were embraced in certain periods. I identified three periods reflecting three different perspectives: (i) The period marking the silence and unfamiliarity about Kurdish women from the 1980s to 2000. (ii) The period of discovering Kurdish women as political actors in the Kurdish movement in Turkey from the

2000s to 2015. (iii) The period during the Kurdish women's movement made international allies and built transnational communities as well as their epistemic delinking from the Turkish context.⁶

In light of this periodization, the texts are strategically organized to illustrate the theoretical shifts in analyzing Kurdish women and categorized into three sections according to the findings of the interview analysis; that is, the analytical shifts that divide the literature into these three sections are crystallized through the periodization and categorization provided by the analysis of the interview data.

First, I selected the most cited works in the field that were published from the 1980s through the 2000s. *1980'ler Türkiye'sinde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar* (Women from Women's Perspective In the 1980s Turkey) (1995), *Rethinking modernity and national identity in Turkey* (1997), *Cariyeler, bacılar, yurttaşlar: Kimlikler ve Toplumsal Dönüşümler*. (Concubines, Sisters and Citizens: Identities and Social Transformation) (1997); *Halide Edib: Türk modernleşmesi ve feminizm* (Halide Edib: Turkish modernization and feminism) (2000), *Tarihin cinsiyeti* (Gender of the History) (2003); *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti: Erkekler Devlet, Kadınlar Aile Kurar* (Gender of Turkish Modernization: Men Establish the State, Women Establish the Family) (2012) are my primary sources for this chapter. Although this first-wave feminist scholarship of gendered nationalism continued to be theoretically influential, as numerous studies in similar regard produced today, the works mentioned above represent the prevailing arguments in women's studies scholarship of the late 1980s and the 1990s.

⁶ When I applied to the ethics committee, the title of my thesis, related to this inquiry, was "A Critical Examination of Feminist Knowledge Production in Turkey from the 1990s to the Present." However, based on the new data I gathered; I changed the title to "From Femina Grata to Femina Sacra: Shifting Approaches to Kurdish Women in Feminist Academic Discourse".

My specific focus on the works of Şirin Tekeli, Deniz Kandiyoti, Serpil Sancar, and Fatmagül Berktay is not only because of their frequent citations but also due to their active engagement with feminist grassroots movements. Their ideas have been highly influential within the feminist movement in Turkey, and they have served on advisory boards of feminist journals and various women's and gender research centers.

Among these texts, *1980'ler Türkiye'si'nde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar* was translated into English as *Women in modern Turkish society* (1995); on the other hand, *Cariyeler, Bacılar, Yurttaşlar* (1997) is a compilation of Deniz Kandiyoti's featured essays initially published in English. Because this thesis is written in English, I preferred to use the English versions of these works. However, if the original work is published in Turkish and I find some nuances potentially lost in translation, I decided to use the Turkish version with my own translation. Moreover, I added some extra work from Kandiyoti and Tekeli to enrich my analysis by considering that they are the founding scholars of this canon.

Second, I planned to analyze major stances concerning Kurds and the Kurdish issue within Turkey's gendered nationalism literature in the 2000s. Because Lale Yalçın Heckmann and Handan Çağlayan were pronounced in my interviews, I decided to include their work. I aimed to discuss Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder 's *90'larda Türkiye'de siyasal söylemin dönüşümü çerçevesinde Kürt kadınların imajı* (*The Image of Kurdish Women in Turkey within the Framework of Transformation of Political Discourse in the 1990s*) (2000) because it is the first academic publication that analyze Kurdish women's politicization within the Kurdish movement. Also, I selected Handan Çağlayan's doctoral thesis, subsequently published as *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar* (2007), and its English edition, *Mothers, Comrades,*

Goddesses (2019) as not only Çağlayan but this work she authored was pronounced by two academics I interviewed. I decided to discuss the Turkish (2007) and the English (2019) editions of the book separately, with careful attention to their differences, given that there have been tremendous changes in the intervening years, and the latter might have gone through some revisions. In that regard, when I use Çağlayan (2019/2007), I will be referring to content or themes that are consistent across both the 2007 Turkish edition and the 2019 English edition. Moreover, when there are differences between the editions that are relevant to my analysis, I will cite them separately. I hope this preemptive clarification helps ensure that the readers understand the rationale behind comparing these two editions.

Third, the works I mainly focus in the third section consist of *The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice* (2022) by Dilar Dirik, and *The Mother, the Politician, and the Guerrilla* (2023) by Nazan Üstündağ, *Between silence and resistance: Kurdish women in colonial Turkish prison Diyarbakir military prison 1980-1984* (2021) by Berivan Kutlay Sarıkaya. All these texts are written and published in English.

2.6 Triangulation

In order to improve the reliability of research, I aim to enhance the reliability and depth of my findings through a triangulation strategy that employs both congruence and complementarity. Congruence, in this context, refers to the similarity and consistency across different data sources, while complementarity involves using one data set to expand upon, clarify, or illustrate another (Rhineberger, Hartmann, & Van Valey, 2005, p. 59).

To achieve this, I support the interview data collected from academics with various supplementary sources. These include documents such as journal articles, debate books, biographies of academics, books, online newspaper articles featuring interviews with academics, and video interviews available on platforms like YouTube. In addition, I draw from academic and non-academic writings to gather a comprehensive view of academic circles and validate and build upon the information provided by the interviewees. Additionally, I accessed certain archives to supplement my primary sources. For my analysis in chapter four, I utilized the *Roza* magazine archives from the Women's Works Library and Information Center Foundation.

2.7 Thesis structure

Chapter one serves as the introduction, outlining the main findings of the research. Chapter two details my motivation, research questions, and methodology. Chapter three summarizes the origins of the Kurdish issue and situates Kurdish women within the broader history of Turkish nation-building. In chapter four, drawing on interviews with senior academics engaged in feminist grassroots movements or knowledgeable about the intellectual discourse within these movements, as well as an extensive review of conference proceedings, feminist journals, academic publications, and online newspaper articles, I illustrate the transformation of feminist academic perspectives on Kurdish women. Chapter five traces changes in the theoretical approaches to Kurdish women in feminist academic literature over time in response to the political factors discussed in chapter four. The discussion is divided into three main sections, each evaluating the most influential texts in the field and categorized by their publication dates, spanning from the 1980s to the present. The first section of chapter five covers texts published from the 1980s through the late

1990s, the second examines works from the 2000s, and the third focuses on studies from the late 2010s to the present. While all texts under consideration are grounded in postcolonial theories, it will be particularly interesting for readers to observe the distinct differences in each group's approach to Kurdish women. However, it is important to note that these approaches, though divided into three parts chronologically, resist strict periodization. Namely, some perspectives, while representative of certain periods, have not been entirely abandoned. Finally, Chapter six concludes the thesis by engaging more deeply with the research findings, demonstrating why certain theoretical perspectives are more successful in explaining the condition of Kurdish women.

CHAPTER 3

SITUATING KURDISH WOMEN

IN THE HISTORY OF TURKISH NATION-BUILDING

3.1 Kurds as “savages”

An intriguing situation emerges when we go through the revisionist history of the Turkish state on the Kurdish issue. Unlike other racialized communities, the very existence of Kurds has been denied,⁷ and as Yeğen (1999, 2011) suggests, Turkish authorities in the Republican era reframed the Kurdish issue as a matter of backwardness, reactionism, or traditionalism. In this chapter, we see that the discourse of backwardness and savagery of Kurds reflects the Turkish state’s history of avoiding responsibility for crimes committed against both Christian communities and the Kurds in the eastern provinces.

The discourse of backwardness has its origins traced back to a period before the establishment of the Republic when the Ottoman state introduced modern technologies of power to control the nomad population through sedentarization. As Mardin (1973) noted, dealing with the nomads on the periphery was “endemic” for the Ottoman state, and Ottoman intellectuals conceptualized civilization through the lens of the urban-nomad conflict. For them, what they termed as civilization was seen as the struggle of urbanization against nomadism, and they despised everything nomadic (Mardin, 1973, pp. 170-171).

⁷ Naci İsmail Pelister (1893-1949) authored a pseudo-history of the Kurds, published under the title *Kürdler: Tarihî ve İçtimai Tedkikat* [Kurds: Historical and Social Inquiry], and attributed the authorship to a fictitious German scientist, Dr. Friç. This work was republished in 2014 by Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, featuring a prologue by Suavi Aydın and an epilogue by İsmail Beşikçi. In the epilogue, Beşikçi discusses how, during the March 1912 coup regime in the Military Court of the Martial Law Command of Diyarbakır-Siirt Provinces, the denial of Kurdish identity and language—asserting that those referred to as Kurds were in fact Turks and that Kurdish was merely a dialect of Turkish—relied significantly on the assertions made in Dr. Friç’s book (Adem, 2014, p. 212).

In their analysis, Gündoğdu and Genç (2013) explain the issue of backwardness by investigating *ıslahat layihaları* (the state's reform reports) prepared by the Ottoman ruling elites between the 1880s and 1913. According to the authors, the Ottomans had difficulty dealing with nomadic groups from the early modern period for various reasons. These nomads, lacking a fixed location, were perceived as a threat to a sedentary society, and the state found it challenging to tax them regularly. The power of tribal leaders, distinct from that of the Ottoman ruler, made administration more complicated. To control the nomads, the Ottoman state sometimes imposed mandatory settlement rules (Gündoğdu & Genç, 2013, p. 16).

In the 19th century, centralizing reforms intensified to convert nomadic tribes to a sedentary lifestyle. The Ottoman government aimed to collect taxes and control tribes that were living in the regions that were mainly beyond the reach of the state. Measures taken included the resettlement of tribes to prevent solidarity, the education of tribal children to instill loyalty to the state, the elimination of conflicting beliefs, and the replacement of collective identity with loyalty (Gündoğdu & Genç, 2013, p. 17). These efforts bore fruit in the first half of the 19th century. In 1826, the Anatolian nobility was subjugated to a great extent, the power of the Kurdish rulers was restrained through subsequent military campaigns, and the state seized control in the hands of the central treasury. In 1835, the policy of centralization was extended to Libya, and military measures and cooperation with local emirs were used for control in the Hijaz region. Depending on the region, the state pursued policies oscillating between direct intervention or persuasion. Some tribes adapted quickly, while others resisted and gradually established dominance after military campaigns. The tribes of central Anatolia adapted more quickly, while the harsh geographical conditions in regions such as Çukurova and Dersim necessitated military action.

The settlement policy for nomadic communities, while initially resorting to coercion, progressed towards an Ottoman colonial model, aiming at assimilation through the establishment of formal institutions. Traveling preachers and imams were sent out to spread Hanafi Islam, and schools were opened for the pledging of allegiance to the Ottomans (Gündoğdu & Genç, 2013, pp. 18-19). Layihas, in particular, served an important function for the state by providing information on regions facing various administrative difficulties. Dersim was characterized as a region inhabited by “rebellious” and “wild” tribes; thus, it acquired a special position as a target of the centralization policies of the Tanzimat period. Addressing the social, cultural, economic, and religious structure of the region, the layihas propose solutions such as “civilization,” “removal of primitivism”, and “faith correction” to assimilate the tribes defined as “disobedient people” (Gündoğdu & Genç, 2013, p. 13).

The center-periphery relations, as well as the contempt against nomads, transformed and took different degrees and shapes at different times. The state’s intrusion into eastern provinces, which traces back to the mid-19th century with the Tanzimat reforms (Suciyan, 2021; Üngör & Polatel, 2013, p. 21), has held sway during the Republican era. The Ottoman state’s efforts to modernize the empire and “consolidate its integrity against internal and external pressures” significantly impacted the relationship between Kurds and Armenians in the region. By dismantling relatively autonomous Kurdish emirates in the 1840s, the Ottoman government aimed to strengthen its control over the eastern borderlands. However, this action fractured the Kurdish power structure, leading to increased tribal conflicts and instability. This fragmentation affected the Armenian community as weakened

Kurdish tribes often harassed and exploited Armenians amidst the ensuing chaos (Üngör & Polatel, 2013, p.21).

With the introduction of the Tanzimat reforms and new regulations such as *Arazi Kanunnamesi* (the Land Code 1858), the colonization process of Armenian lands was officially commenced. When Armenians attempted to register the lands, they had used for centuries in their own names, their ownership was instead transferred to local Kurdish aghas and beys. These laws turned Armenian peasants into serfs under Kurdish aghas by leaving them as outcasts, protected by neither the state nor their own community. This situation subjected Armenian peasants to continual assaults and harassment, such as the plundering of their crops and the killing of their livestock, resulting in increased impoverishment. As Suciyan puts it, during the Tanzimat era, the Ottoman state turned the Armenian peasant's own village into an "open-air prison" (Danzikyan, 2020, para. 15).

The prohibition against Christians bearing arms made them more vulnerable and defenseless against harassment and plundering (Mayersen, 2014, p. 24). While they were not allowed to possess arms, many Kurds were "armed to the teeth" (Üngör & Polatel, 2013, p. 20). In this period, Armenian women faced kidnappings, forced conversions to Islam, rapes, and other abuses perpetrated by Kurdish tribes (Suciyan, 2021, pp. 34-35). Suciyan (2021) provides compelling examples of how these practices affected patriarchal relationships in the eastern provinces. She presents cases from the reports of Bishop Hovhannes Muradean, pertaining to the villages of the Muş Plain, written between mid-May and mid-July 1864. For instance:

Kurds from Motkan kidnapped the bride of Kre, from the village of Musheghen. They offered her to the Sheikh and Kurdified her.

Another case states:

An Armenian woman from the village of Hunan was kidnapped by the Kurds along with her valuables. Father Mkhitar found her. However, the Kurds had stolen her heart and had her declare that she was a Muslim (dajik). Father Mkhitar took the case to court and rescued her.

In the village of Ardvots, an Armenian man, after letting his wife go, took another woman together with his uncle as a common wife for both. They adopted the Kurdish tradition. (Muradean, 1915, pp. 59-64, as cited in Suciyan, 2021, pp. 34-35)

According to Suciyan (2021), this constituted an intrusion into the family organization of Armenian society, given that destitute Armenian women were forced to violate Armenian ecclesiastical law, which strictly prohibited practices such as being a “common wife” or a second wife (p. 35).

On the one hand, the Armenian community entered a period of enlightenment from the 1700s onwards, and the community founded its own schools in the mid-1800s. Armenian literature developed during this period, and activities such as journalism increased. When Armenian intellectuals who studied in Europe and Istanbul returned home and saw the situation of the Armenian community, the injustices they were subjected to had a striking impact. According to Mayersen (2014), these hardships, which Armenians had previously accepted as their fate, became a source of unrest for them along with their enlightenment, and Armenian nationalism began to flourish in this period (p. 26). Armenians, who had long been become targets of violence, dispossession, and harassment by Kurdish tribesmen, began to organize for their own defense and succeeded in attracting the attention of European elites to their cause, especially from the 1860s and 1870s onwards (Üngör & Polatel, 2013, p. 21). Worsening economic conditions, coupled with political instability that threatened the unity of the empire, exacerbated intolerance and exploitation of Armenians, as their growing prosperity and education led to feelings

of resentment in other inhabitants of the empire who were experiencing economic hardship (Mayersen, 2014, p. 27).

As a rather vulnerable minority subject to legal discrimination, Armenians were already perceived as an “outgroup” in many respects. However, the genocidal turn arguably began in the aftermath of the Russian victory against the Ottoman Empire in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, particularly with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin. According to Mayersen, the treaty’s stipulations regarding the improvement of living conditions for Armenians, guaranteeing their security against attacks by Circassians and Kurds, ensuring that all individuals, irrespective of religion, could enjoy civil and political rights, access public employment without religious discrimination or allegations of inadequacy, and have the right to testify in courts, were seen by the *Sublime Porte* (Ottoman Government) as the first significant threat to the integrity of the empire (Mayersen, 2014, pp. 27-31).

The idea of granting privileges to Armenians made the predominantly Kurdish Muslim elites in the region concerned for the strength of their political power. Sultan Abdul Hamid wanted to take advantage of the conflict between Kurds and Armenians and formed irregular militias from Kurdish tribes. This group of around 1,200 men called themselves the “Hamidiye Regiments” after the Sultan. Anyone who dared to resist the Kurds was deemed to be in rebellion against the sultan. The Hamidiye Regiments, together with Kurdish bandits and local actors, carried out a series of massacres against Armenians between 1894-96 (Üngör & Polatel, 2013, pp. 20-22; Matossian, 2022, p. 20; Meyerson, 2014, p. 41).

Considering the eastern provinces, there were extensive massacres, especially in Sason and Erzurum. Villages were burned, thousands of Armenians were massacred

without discrimination of age and gender, and others were tortured and raped (Meyerson, 2014, pp. 41-44).

The Ottoman government asserted control over the eastern provinces, and this control was enforced through strategic manipulation of ethnic groups, for example by leveraging the Muslim communities like Circassians and Kurds against the Armenians, thereby empowering Muslims while diminishing Armenian influence. As Üngör (2011) rightly suggests, this shows the fact that nation-building processes require inclusion and construction as much as exclusion and destruction (p. 52). Interactions between states and social forces can be mutually advantageous, i.e., increasing the state's power and certain social groups cooperating with it. The cooperation of local power groups, such as Circassians and Kurds, played a significant role in the colonization and persecution of indigenous communities. As we can see from the above discussion, this collaboration also affected the patriarchal power dynamics among these communities. It led to a situation where Muslim men were granted *carte blanche* and impunity and consequently reinforced their masculinity. In contrast, Armenian men were disempowered and emasculated, undermining their roles and status within their own communities.

Our discussion also reveals that despite apparent state involvement in these events, the state denied responsibility for their actions by either justifying them as an "Armenian provocation" or shifting the blame entirely onto the Kurds. According to Gölbaşı (2018), officials and military commanders, when referring to systematic attacks by the Hamidiye regiments on Armenians, portrayed these acts as the actions of "ignorant" and "savage" Kurds. This demonstrates how the state used the discourse of savagery and ignorance to avoid accountability for mass murders and other crimes.

3.2 Kurds and the Young Turks

Inheriting these policies, the successive governments later introduced an ethnic hierarchy that favored Turks over Kurds and Kurds over Armenians (Üngör & Polatel, 2013, p. 81). It is important to recognize that the genocidal practices of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) against the Armenian population, which later expanded to target all non-Muslim communities in eastern provinces, became dangerously effective through the collaboration of the local Kurdish elite.

When comparing the rule of the CUP and the Kemalist regime, we can see that the latter carried on the population policies implemented by the former. According to Üngör (2011), a series of successive homogenization policies led to the gradual exclusion and oppression of non-Turkish groups, starting in the imperial period and continuing into the Republic. This continuity is evident in the use of various methods of power, such as physical destruction, forced mass displacement, and cultural assimilation before and after the establishment of the Republic. It can be observed that the Kemalist regime undertook projects initiated by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) cadres aimed at Turkifying the population and economy.⁸

As extensively noted by numerous scholars, the rise of nationalist ideology culminated in the proliferation of nationalist upheavals within the Empire, and especially the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan wars consequently paved the way for pan-Turkism, or Turkish nationalism, which was embraced by the Young Turk cadres over Ottoman nationalism (Akçam, 2004, pp. 95-96; Göçek, 2011, p. 18;

⁸ For this reason, following Üngör (2011), I explore the period between 1913 and 1950 as the Young Turks period. Üngör's formulation of the timeframe of 1913-1950 as the Young Turk era is based on Erik-Jan Zürcher (1992).

Mayersen, 2014, p. 75; Üngör, 2011; Ünlü, 2019, p. 118).⁹ As Üngör (2011) demonstrates, the assumption that their adopting the ideology of Turkism was a natural consequence of most of the population in the remaining lands being Turks would be a poor argument at best. Üngör (2011) argues that Turkish nationalism was constructed by exclusion and violence; in other words, the nationalist cadres decided on what the nation is *not* before what the nation is. Thus, when the Kemalist cadres were shaping the national boundaries in the 1920s and 1930s, there already was a consensus that Armenians were not part of the nation. Exclusion came to determine the extent of inclusion and created a value system based on negative prejudices and scapegoating towards ethnic and religious others. Fear, feelings of vengeance, and victimhood combined and legitimized violence later (Üngör, 2011, p. 53). Turkish nationalism, influenced by Ziya Gökalp and Yusuf Akçura, was erected on the trauma of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, especially with the territorial losses after the Italo-Turkish War (1911-12), Balkan Wars (1912-13) and World War I (1914-18). Starting from 1913, Turkish nationalism was solidified as the cornerstone of the state's ideology (Yadırgı, 2017, pp. 156-157).

Yadırgı (2017) proposes that the idea of forming the Turkish national bourgeoisie emerged in 1913 as Gökalp and Akçura, two prominent theoreticians of the CUP, adopted an economic model of national economy (*milli iktisat*), as they thought that laissez-faire economics would not function in an unindustrialized

⁹ For instance, Akçam (2004) notes that the entire army was encouraged to take revenge for their sullied honor after the defeat of Balkan wars. The soldier would go to lessons every day with the song 'Turkish honor was sullied in 1328 (1912), ah. Ah, ah, ah, revenge!' The soldier returning to his village would plant the seeds there by singing this song. On the day that the Great War broke out, every Turk in whose heart burned the fire of revenge for the bitter pain of the Balkan disaster sensed that the day had come in which he would have the opportunity to redeem his lost honor. (p. 96).

country (p. 156-7). The founding Kemalist cadres thought that modern Turkey's social, economic, and political consolidation would be possible by Turkifying the population and economy.

In 1914, as the Ottoman Empire plunged into World War I, it found itself in conflict with Russia over territories heavily populated by Armenians. Following a devastating defeat in the winter campaign of 1914-15, the Ottoman ruling elite sought to deflect blame for their military failures by scapegoating the Armenian community. By spring 1915, the CUP, led by Mehmet Talat, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Cemal, seized the opportunity presented by a world embroiled in war to launch a calculated campaign aimed at eradicating the Armenian presence from Ottoman territory (Cohan, 2005, p. 336).

According to Üngör (2011), the Russian advance towards Van in March 1915 caused significant panic among the leadership of the CUP. The possibility of Armenians collaborating with the Russians heightened fears that Anatolia would be invaded by the Allied Powers (p. 61). In response, Talat Pasha appointed Mehmed Reşid, a staunch anti-Christian who blamed Christians for the empire's disintegration, as the governor of Diyarbakır (p. 62). Reşid harbored a deep-seated paranoia that Armenians were plotting to establish an independent state and betray the empire. To "resolve" the "Armenian question," he formed a committee of the locals, including aristocratic Kurdish families, such as the Pirinçizades (p. 63). Reşid initiated a brutal campaign in Diyarbakır to punish "deserters," demanding the surrender of weapons and the capitulation of alleged traitors. He prosecuted and imprisoned Christian political elites and clergy in Diyarbakır (pp. 67-68). By May, the violence had spread to villages, resulting in the first large-scale massacres. According to Üngör, properties were seized, homes were burned, and women were

subjected to sexual violence (p. 69). By late June, following Talat's infamous three-word directive to Reşid, "burn, destroy, kill," the attacks escalated into a genocidal campaign (p. 71). The deportees were driven into the Syrian desert, facing exhaustion, hunger, and thirst along the way, and massacres continued throughout the forced march. Not only the gendarmes in charge of the deportations but also Turkish and Kurdish civilians along the migration routes participated in these atrocities. Following the deportations and massacres, rapes continued, and the sexual enslavement and forced Islamization of Armenian women marked the genocide process (Derderian, 2005, p. 2)

Examining the gender dimensions of genocide, Derderian (2005) argues that genocide is an attack on the social and biological reproduction of targeted groups, manifested in measures such as preventing births and assimilating children (p. 3). She also states that sexual violence in public spaces and in front of loved ones was an act to dehumanize and subordinate Armenians. Dehumanization occurred not only when women were raped but also when they were forced to undress, which further endangered the bodily integrity of women and significantly reduced their chances of survival (Derderian, 2005, p. 8). For Derderian (2005), another practice that reveals the gender dimension of the genocide included brutal acts such as beating pregnant women and stabbing their bellies. Women who could not withstand these harsh conditions were forced to give their children up for adoption or abandon them altogether (Derderian, 2005, p. 9). Moreover, children were also victims of the massacres, and many Armenian girls and women were enslaved in Turkish, Arab, and Kurdish Muslim families or sent to orphanages (Derderian, 2005, p. 12).

Derderian (2005) agrees with other scholars that sexual assaults during this period were about asserting the power of the perpetrator. Such practices aimed to

dismantle potential Armenian resistance and strengthen solidarity among perpetrators (Derderian, 2005, p. 9). Specifically targeting influential Armenians or suspected potential rebels, these attacks aimed to destroy the traditional male role as the protector of the family. Sexual violence was thus used to break community bonds, weaken resistance, and secure political dominance (Derderian, 2005, p. 5).

The genocidal policies against Christians were taken over by the Kemalists in the Republican era to subjugate the Kurds and prevent potential Kurdish independence.¹⁰ When we reach the second Young Turk period, which began with Mustafa Kemal's rule, we can see the founding cadres of the Turkish nation-state "refashioned the Sèvres Treaty" and turned it into a syndrome (Göçek, 2011, p. 120). The Sèvres syndrome refers to the anxieties caused by foreign powers and local minorities (Nefes, 2018, p. 4). The fear of loss of power, territory, and cultural dominance, by creating a sense of vulnerability and insecurity, reproduced two symptomatic responses: (1) The fear of losing autonomy and being subjected to the dominance of external powers, (2) and the fear that ethnic minorities might cooperate with these powers (Göçek, 2011, p. 121).¹¹ According to Göçek (2011), these fears positioned minorities as internal enemies within the nationalist discourse of the Turkish Republic (p. 121). In the case of the Kurds, these fears intertwined with the

¹⁰ This is not to say that Kurds were not targeted by the CUP. In effect, the violence extended beyond Ottoman Armenians to other ethnic groups in the province of Diyarbekir, the center of the deportation. Diyarbekir witnessed some of the worst massacres of 1915, affecting not only Armenians but also Kurds. Just as it would be untrue to say that the perpetrators were exclusively Turkish, it would also be inaccurate to emphasize that the victims were exclusively Armenian. While Kurdish tribal chiefs, Arabs, and Circassians also participated in mass killings, Yazidis, Assyrians, and Kurds were also persecuted. The first villages to be subjected to large-scale massacres were Assyrian villages in Diyarbekir. Some Kurdish sub-tribes and prominent families were deported to central and western Anatolia, where many died of starvation and disease. While Armenians and Assyrians were not the only victims, these groups nevertheless faced almost total annihilation (Üngör, 2011, p. 101).

¹¹ That resembles the "stab-in-the-back" myth (Dolchstoßlegende) which propagates that Germany's defeat in the first World War stemmed from the betrayal of the Jews (Weisband, 2018, p. 343). For a comparison of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, you may see Melson (1992) who discusses the causes of both events in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*.

constructed image of Kurds as “savage” and “backward.” The portrayal of Kurds as savages reinforced a sense of collective victimhood among the Turkish population and emphasized the need for a strong, unified national identity to counter the perceived security threat they represented. Simultaneously, the depiction of Kurds as “backward” and “reactionary” served to legitimize the atrocities committed against them, framing these persecutions as part of a broader struggle against the “Ottoman past,” which symbolized reactionary Islam. Zafer Yörük, agreeing with Yeğen (1999), argues that the Kurdish issue has been expressed through signifiers belonging to the rhetoric of combating religious extremism, backwardness, or external powers and imperialism in the official state discourse (Yörük, 2008, pp. 321-322). So, were the Kurds really backward, and were the Kurdish revolts reactionary? We can answer this by looking at the Kurdish revolts during the Republican era and the state's policies of suppressing these revolts and various assimilation policies.

The Republic rejected the multi-religious and multi-ethnic heritage of the Ottoman Empire, legislating this principle in the 1924 constitution. According to this constitution, the Republic of Turkey was not a multinational but a nation-state. Although this constitution recognized the existence of ethnic groups other than Turks, it did not give them any legal status or recognize their cultural rights based on their ethnic identity. This constitution encouraged everyone to become a Turk (Yeğen, 2011, pp. 229-230). In the making of modern Turkey, Kemalists’ taking the path of centralizing power to strengthen the political and military greatly disturbed the Kurds, who had historically enjoyed a degree of relative autonomy during the Ottoman era. The abolition of the Caliphate (1924) severed the last remaining ties between the Kurds and the state since it symbolized the idea that all Muslims were brothers regardless of their ethnic origins, guaranteeing a social unity based on the

ummah. The government's lack of response to the Kurdish demand for autonomy exacerbated the growing mistrust and pushed them to the breaking point (Yeğen, 1999, p. 559).

The first major Kurdish resistance to these policies was the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion. As the name implies, the uprising was initiated by Sheikh Said, the sheikh of the Naqshbandi order. The religious component of the discontent among Kurds towards the Kemalist regime was undeniable, yet religion cannot be taken as the sole or the main reason for the conflict. The Sheikh Said uprising was portrayed as a reactionary rebellion within the state discourse. However, scholars demonstrated that the motivation behind the resistance is much more complex (Bruinessen, 1992, p. 281; Üngör, 2011, p. 124; Akçam, 2023).

Akçam (2023), in one of the most recent studies examining this uprising, demonstrates that what is often regarded as a Sunni Kurdish rebellion was, in fact, an uprising in which Alevis and Armenians also participated. We can see that aspirations for independence began aligning Armenians and Kurds as early as 1924. For instance, in 1924, a secret agreement was drafted in French between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation–Dashnaktsutyun and the Kurdish Teali Society. The agreement emphasized the necessity for both peoples to unite their forces in the struggle against a common enemy, namely Turkish imperialism, to liberate their respective lands (Ulugana, 2024). The Sheikh Said rebellion was, in fact, spearheaded by Azadi, a clandestine nationalist organization that was comprised of a group of Kurdish officers in the Kurdish army with a secular education, and Azadi apparently chose the sheikh, who had a wider influence among Kurdish people, for leadership (Strohmeier, 2005, pp. 88-89; Yeğen, 2021, p. 315). According to Ulugana (2024), the dissolution of Azadi after the Beytüşşebap uprising in 1924 had

politically isolated an important figure like Sheikh Said, forcing him to resort to sharia discourse. That is, while Sheikh Said initially participated in a more nationalist struggle, the pressures he encountered and the lack of broad support compelled him to use his religious authority and lean on Sharia discourse as a tool for mobilization.

The Sheikh Said rebellion, in which five thousand armed militants participated, was decisively defeated after three months (Ünlü, 2019, p. 178).

Although there were armed people, most people participated unarmed, and it was an uprising forced from outside and started prematurely (Kahraman, 2004, p. 102).

Yeğen (2021) suggests that the primary reason for the defeat was its failure to gain support from urban Kurds, as well as the lack of backing from Britain and the USSR, both of which were not in favor of an independent Kurdistan (pp. 314-315). After this defeat, Kurdish resistance was met with martial law, mass executions, and long-term military operations aimed at pacifying the region. Turkish nationalist ideology, which brought about the dispossession and massacre of the predominantly Armenian, non-Muslim population, ultimately affected the Kurds, justifying the Armenian saying, “Turks had Armenians for breakfast, they are having Kurds for lunch” (Kricorian, 2019, para. 3).

Mustafa Kemal demanded the violent suppression of the rebellion. For this reason, Prime Minister Fethi Okyar, who favored more moderate measures, was removed from office through a vote of no confidence in parliament. In his place, İsmet İnönü, who supported a more aggressive approach, was appointed as the new Prime Minister to crush the rebellion. İnönü was regarded as the right man for the job due to his stance on violence (Kahraman, 2004, p. 112). After hours of secret meetings in the assembly, the moderate faction was silenced, and the majority sided with those advocating force. As a result, the decision was made to establish the

Independence Courts, granting them the authority to “discipline” and “suppress” the uprising. These courts, endowed with extraordinary powers, began their duties. Legal education was not a prerequisite for those serving as judges in these courts, nor was it important whether they were military or civilian; loyalty to the regime was the primary qualification. It was reminded to all governors of the Kurdish provinces that martial law had been declared, granting them authority to suppress the uprising. Many civilian politicians and military officers sat side by side, conducting trials without oversight and issuing death sentences. There was no right to appeal to higher courts, and the tradition of submitting death sentences to parliament for approval was abolished. The courts were also granted the authority to carry out the executions immediately (Kahraman, 2004, p. 113).

Sheikh Said, along with 46 other convicts, including Cibranlı Halit Bey, was executed in Independence Tribunals. In addition, 5,010 people were put on trial (Aslan & Dündar, 2014, p. 35). While there has been little research on the Eastern Independence Courts, the existing studies primarily focus on the trial narratives of men, particularly Sheikh Said and Cibranlı Halit Bey. In effect, a number of women were also charged with aiding and abetting men during the rebellions. The 1927 records of the Eastern Independence Court contain testimonies of women who were tried that year (Ertüren, 2018; Kumbuzoğlu, 2016). However, in the volumes published by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, only court verdicts and minutes have been transliterated; thus, we have little knowledge about the testimonies of women defendants.

By examining one of these cases, we can see how the court treated these women. One of the female defendants, Zeliha, was not only facing trial for aiding and abetting her husband, who was prosecuted for participating in the Sheikh Said

uprising, but also accused of immorality. From Zeliha's statement, it appears that during his imprisonment, her husband frequently bribed the sergeant and, on some nights, illegally visited the home with the help of the sergeant. During some of these visits, drinking parties were held, and her husband escaped during one of these gatherings. Because it could not be proven that Zeliha directly assisted in her husband's escape, she was acquitted. However, it was decided that she should be placed under surveillance and scrutiny by the moral police of Elaziz province due to concerns about "her morality". In other words, her crime was allegedly preparing an alcoholic feast at her home to seduce the sergeant who arrested her husband, thereby facilitating her husband's escape. Thus, Zeliha was ironically accused of both aiding a religiously reactionary uprising and unchastity (Kumbuzoğlu, 2016, p. 1269).

Aside from this unique case, we see that many women, including some with children who had not yet reached the age of one, from the Koçuşağı tribe of Dersim were sentenced to exile in Kayseri (Kumbuzoğlu, 2016, p. 2345). Similarly, influential and powerful Kurdish tribes, such as the Cemilpaşazade and the Azizoğlu, were exiled to western provinces (Üngör, 2011, p. 140). These families were systematically subjected to exile, resulting in widespread destitution and poverty (Diken, 2014, p. 87).¹²

In addition to being deported, women were also brutally killed during military raids on Kurdish villages, which resulted in widespread burning and destruction. According to sociologist Yusuf Ziya Döger, himself from the village of Guew, a village of Bingöl which also suffered a massacre, 1927 was a year of mass killings for the Kurds, based on testimonies from local people of Bingöl. Döger notes that 1927 is referred to as "Serê Vaşnayış" in the Zazaki/Kirdî dialect and "Sala Şewatê"

¹² For the stories of the women exiled from these families, see Diken (2014).

in the Kurmanji dialect, both meaning “the year of burning” (2022, p. 98). According to the testimonies of local people, while the men were generally gathered and bayoneted to death away from the village, women, the elderly, and children were locked inside homes or barns and burned alive (Döger, 2022, p. 112).

With the enactment of the “Law on the Maintenance of Order,” a period of fear began not only for the Kurds but for all opposition groups. The law’s scope was broad and open to wide interpretation by its enforcers (Kahraman, 2004, p. 115). According to Kahraman (2004), the uprising served as a justification for the establishment of a dictatorship and the implementation of racist policies, and the denial of Kurdish identity and the prohibition of their language were outcomes of this period, marking the first step toward making the Turkish nation-state (p. 115). With the introduction of 1925 Şark Islahat Planı (the 1925 Report for Reform in the East), it was decreed that Kurds did not exist, and the use of the Kurdish language was banned (Kahraman, 2004, pp. 115-116). In provinces and districts with a Kurdish majority, anyone who spoke “a language other than Turkish” in government offices, schools, or markets would be punished. This led villagers to communicate with customers using hand gestures to avoid fines and beatings when selling their goods in the markets (Kahraman, 2004, p. 116).

Similar to many other practices of the Ottoman period, the secret report tradition continued in the Republican period. Although the Kurdish issue has been expressed as a problem of backwardness in the official discourse, it should not be inferred from this that the state did not racialize Kurds. Yarkin (2019) argues that contrary to the state’s official discourse denying the existence of Kurds, the terms “Kurds” and “Kurdish” are frequently used in secret reports. As historian Mehmet Bayrak rightly points out, while the state was denialist in the official context, it

adopted a confessional stance in secret documents. This tacit acceptance of the truth contrasts with the public dissemination of lies (as cited in Yarkin, 2019, p. 7). Moreover, the explicit expression and confirmation of treating Kurdish lands as “colonies” or “colonized territories” are found in these reports prepared during the Republican era by various authorities such as governors, ministers, and the general staff. These documents, including the 1925 Report for Reform in the East, overtly promote the establishment of a colonial administration in the East, the consolidation of military authority, the creation of a colonial governorship endowed with unique powers referred to as general inspectorate (*umumî müfettişlik*) thus endowing state officials with exceptional prerogatives not specified in the official Turkish Constitution. The reports endorse intensive military interventions, the suppression of Kurdish nationalism, and the assimilation of Kurds into the Turkish identity through mandatory resettlement programs and boarding schools. Additionally, they detail the resettlement of Anatolian Turks and immigrants in Armenian and Kurdish villages, harsh repercussions such as execution, imprisonment, and forced exile for Kurds who engage in speaking Kurdish, participating in Kurdish nationalist movements, or dissenting against the Turkish state. These reports also discourage the employment of locals as civil servants (Yarkin, 2019, p. 6).

The province of Dersim became the focus of a series of ethnographic studies starting in 1925. High-ranking officials, including Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, Speaker of the Assembly Abdülhalik Renda, Chief of General Staff Fevzi Çakmak, and Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya, along with senior bureaucrats, civilian, and military officers, began to examine this issue. They submitted their findings and analyses to the government as reports, which proposed plans addressing the region’s ethnic, political, and socio-economic structures. By 1935, a comprehensive reform

program had been initiated, part of which included a “civilization project.” In 1936, the Fourth General Inspectorate was established in Dersim, and Lieutenant General Abdullah Alpdoğan was appointed with extraordinary powers to facilitate these “reforms.”

The military operation, planned to begin in 1935, was triggered by a local tribal rebellion following the rape of a local girl by a soldier in 1937. During the operations, 13,806 people from a population of 60,000 to 70,000 in Dersim lost their lives. Women and children who sought refuge in caves were killed with chemical gas. In addition to the massacres, which reached genocidal proportions, another genocidal policy involved the Turkification of surviving children after the massacres (Türkyılmaz, 2016, pp. 165-167). The persistent Kurdish resistance made Kemalists consider that they needed to accelerate assimilation policies in the eastern provinces (Üngör, 2011, p. 191). In June 1937, Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya issued a directive ordering children over the age of five to be educated in boarding schools located outside of Dersim, in areas where Turks were the majority, as part of the reform movement. Kaya believed that Kurdish women, having less contact with the outside world than men, could not teach their children Turkish, which posed an obstacle to Turkification (Türkyılmaz, 2016, p. 168). From this, we can see that Kaya accurately identified Kurdish mothers’ crucial role in resisting assimilation.

3.3 The assimilation of the Kurds

The Elazığ Boarding School, established in Elazığ in 1937 by the Fourth General Inspectorate, began operating with the goal of Turkifying girls from Dersim (Türkyılmaz, 2016, p. 167). As one of the first institutions founded for assimilation, this school had two primary objectives: to save Kurdish children from the “savagery”

of tribal life and to erase all aspects of Kurdish identity, raising them as civilized Turkish citizens loyal to national and moral values (Üngör, 2011, p. 206). Especially after Sıdıka Avar was appointed as the headmistress, the boarding school was transformed into what was referred to as a “civilizing factory” by the governor of Karlıova, Muhtar Körükçü, who remarked that "the most primitive and savage young girls" were gathered from the villages and civilized there, comparing the process to how a cow enters a factory and comes out as sausage (Üngör, 2011, p. 208).

According to Üngör (2011), the children’s transition from “savage” to “civilized” was symbolized by the cutting of their hair and changing their clothing. Their hair was cut under the pretext of preventing lice, but this act carried deeper significance: for the civilizers, long hair represented savagery, while for Kurds, long hair symbolized beauty and femininity. For the Kurdish girls, having their hair cut made them look like boys and caused them to feel humiliated. In addition to the haircuts, their traditional şalvar (baggy trousers) were replaced by school uniforms.

Furthermore, speaking Zazaki or Kurmanji among the children was strictly forbidden, and all lessons were taught in Turkish (Türkyılmaz, 2016, p. 176). Upon their arrival, the girls’ Kurdish names were immediately and forcibly replaced with Turkish ones (Üngör, 2011, p. 208). According to Avar, these girls not only lacked knowledge of Turkish but were also unfamiliar with hygiene, so the first lessons focused on hygiene and the Turkish language. Once these “basics” were learned, the curriculum included subjects such as basic mathematics, citizenship, and national security, as well as domestic skills like cooking, childcare, housekeeping, and sewing, aimed at preparing the girls for housework. The assimilation policies did not stop there; in fact, they extended further as the graduates of the school were expected

to return to their villages and continue the “civilizing” and “Turkification” project (Türkyılmaz, 2016, pp. 173-179).

When we examine all these policies, we can see that assimilation was preceded by foundational violence. First, military operations were carried out, leaving the region utterly devastated, followed by attempts to Turkify the local population. While military operations and forced exiles deeply affected the lives of women, they also became primary targets of assimilation by the colonizers. In particular, Dersim women were subjected to genocidal policies. Considering all of this, it becomes clear that the process of “transforming” Kurdish women into *makbul* (acceptable) citizens significantly differs from that of Turkish women. Turkish modernization rendered Turkish women subordinate to Turkish men, yet they were still considered citizens, whereas Kurdish women were seen as animals “in the deep sense of ‘without gender,’ sexually marked as female but without the characteristics of femininity” (Lugones, 2014, pp. 69-70).

3.4 Kurds as “backward” and “underdeveloped”

The portrayal of Kurds as “savages” has gradually shifted to a discourse focused on the “underdevelopment of eastern and southeastern Anatolia.” Examining the reports submitted by Necmeddin Sahir Sılan between 1939 and 1953—first to the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; Republican People’s Party) and later to the ruling DP (Demokrat Parti; Democrat Party)—reveals how the state’s social engineering efforts in Çapakçur (Bingöl) and Dersim (Tunceli) were intertwined with developmental programs (Toprak, 2012, p. ix). During the Republican period, the state aimed to assimilate this region, which had been relatively autonomous and physically difficult to access during the Ottoman era. The focus was particularly on the development of

transportation and infrastructure services. Therefore, Sılan's reports contain detailed data about the region's geography as well as various proposals for development, including the provision of healthcare services and electricity (Toprak, 2012, pp. xvii-xxi). In addition, Sılan's reports included a range of gender-based issues, from bride abduction to female suicides, along with proposed solutions and analyses (Toprak, 2012, p. xvi). Sılan was not the only state official concerned with those issues. In a 1936 speech at the General Inspectors' Conference, Abidin Özmen proposed an assimilation program to counter the Kurdish movement. One of the plan's measures suggested was "intermarriage between Turkish, Kurdish, and Alevi families, and the settlement of soldiers and civil servants from the West who would marry Kurdish girls and be allocated land in the region" (Yeşiltuna, 2006, p. 103).

As the assimilation policies were developed, the struggle with tribes increasingly became not only a matter of national integration but also an issue of development. In addition to policies aimed at breaking the power of the tribes, there were also efforts, similar to those in the Ottoman era, to reconcile with them (Toprak, 2012, p. xii). The clearest indication of this was the lack of land reform, which meant that a large portion of the land remained in the hands of wealthy landowning families, leaving the majority of the population landless (Yadırgı, 2017, p. 196).

According to Yadırgı (2017), various analyses—whether modernist, dependency theory, or Marxist—viewed the existence of tribes as an explanation for backwardness but did not directly explain why tribes were considered a cause of backwardness. Yadırgı (2017) oppugns these accounts essentializing the backwardness of the predominantly Kurdish "Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (ESA)" and finds them ahistorical. According to him, it is untenable to treat the Kurdish society as characterized by a fixed tribal identity "devoid of wider processes

of nation-building, capitalistic property relations, urbanization and transborder relations with other Kurds situated in neighboring states.” As Yadırgı rightly suggests, we should not consider tribes to be explanans since “they themselves need explaining” (Yadırgı, 2017, p. 47).

Yadırgı’s work (2017) provides us valuable insights into the consequences of successive governments’ nationalist policies, which resulted in the impoverishment of the ESA following the rise of the CUP and their control over the country’s internal affairs after the 1913 coup. Kemalists furthered the CUP’s plan of establishing a national economy after the Izmir Economy Congress (Yadırgı, 2017, p. 166). According to Yadırgı, the Kemalist regime feared that the economic development of the ESA would cause the Kurdish national consciousness to awaken, so they followed a particular economic plan in the region (2017, p. 167). The forced deportation of Kurds from their homeland, their assimilation into Turkish identity, and the economic “de-development” of predominantly Kurdish areas were the three main lines of this plan (Yadırgı, 2017, p. 168).

As Yadırgı asserts, during the 1930s, the CHP government embraced statism as its guiding economic principle. Concurrently, it drew inspiration from the social engineering strategies employed by Nazi Germany. In alignment with these influences, the CHP government undertook efforts to Turkify Kurds, notably through the implementation of the 1934 Settlement Law (pp. 179-180). This legislative act represents a significant instance of state-led assimilation policies aimed at altering the demographic and cultural landscape of the region. This plan was based on the principle of forcibly resettling Kurds to the west and relocating non-Kurdish Turks to areas predominantly inhabited by Kurds. Throughout the 1930s, approximately 25,000 Kurds were resettled to western provinces, while non-Kurdish Muslim

peasants from Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Syria were specifically settled in Diyarbakır and Elazığ (p. 183). Relying on substantial empirical data, Yadırgı (2017) concludes that Turkification of the ESA population through the resettlement of Turkish and/or Turkophone migrants in the land left by Armenians and Kurds led to unproductivity and poverty because the newcomers could not manage to use these properties efficiently (Yadırgı, 2017, p.161). Yadırgı's study demonstrates that the impoverishment of the ESA is not a matter of underdevelopment, which was taken for granted by previous accounts, but rather a consequence of plunder that resulted in the impoverishment of the region.

According to Yadırgı (2017), state policies in the region generally served two purposes: to ensure political control and to address the country's economic needs. The economic aspect primarily concerns energy requirements. With the advent of neoliberal policies in Turkey, the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP) was initiated to exploit the region's natural wealth and resources. Originating from the hydroelectric power and irrigation plan developed by the Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (Devlet Su İşleri, DSI) in 1977, GAP officially emerged in 1989 as a development project aimed at alleviating the region's underdevelopment and poverty (Yadırgı, 2017, p. 254).

As part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), the Multi-Purpose Community Centers (ÇATOMs), established in 1995, targeted women and claimed to aim for a "gender-sensitive" development program by adopting the neoliberal development discourse of the time (Sözer, 2004, pp. 44-45). According to Sözer (2004), this project was not arbitrarily adopted but rather created a conceptual framework that "contributed, supported, and enhanced" the historical perception of the region's so-called backwardness (Sözer, 2004, p. 44). In this discourse, the tribes

in the region were seen as the greatest obstacle to development and women's empowerment (Sözer, 2004, p. 64).

A study organized by ÇATOM on the status of women investigated various aspects, including whether women were officially married or had religious marriages, the persistence of bride price traditions, whether women engaged in consanguineous marriages, polygamy, and their age at marriage, as well as whether marriages were voluntary or not. According to Sözer, these studies only addressed women within the context of family and family relations, attributing the issues of women's underdevelopment—such as lack of knowledge about birth control, early marriages, frequent pregnancies, heavy workloads, and lack of schooling—to “tradition” (2004, p. 67).

Against the “backwardness” resulting from the persistence of traditional structures, ÇATOMs were presented as saviors of Kurdish women. Documents prepared by ÇATOMs claimed that social programs teaching “hygiene, tailoring, home economics, and Turkish literacy” would enable women to participate in public life (Sözer, 2004, pp. 74-75). According to one of the field supervisors from ÇATOMs, Kurdish women find Turkish classes unnecessary. This field supervisor says that programs such as embroidery courses are used as a means to attract women to Turkish courses. Another field supervisor also states that income-generating programs are actually a means to facilitate participation in health and Turkish courses (Sözer, 2004, pp. 131-132).

These programs, which seem to be a continuation of previous assimilation policies, are harshly criticized by Kurdish feminists (Ceylan, 2019, p. 98). In addition, the fact that these centers encourage birth control is seen as a racist policy aimed at reducing the Kurdish population (Ceylan, 2019, p. 99).

As all these debates show, the discourse of Kurdish women being savages was replaced by the underdevelopment discourse along with the neoliberal policies. The deprivation of women's access to social rights and the labor force is thus again addressed within the vocabulary of development, while the impact of violent policies such as massacres and plunder and racist policies such as the ban on Kurdish identity on women is glossed over, and the main reason for the underdevelopment the preservation of the feudal structure.

In this chapter, we have overall observed that the discourse of savagery and backwardness has been instrumental in obscuring the state's racialized violence against racialized others of the region, from the Ottoman era to the Republic. We have also highlighted that Kurdish women have been specific targets in the state's assimilation project, with policies tailored specifically for them. In the following chapters, keeping this historical background in mind, we will address the debates among Turkish feminists, Kurdish feminists, and the Kurdish women's movement and the reflections of these debates in the mainstream feminist academic discourse.

CHAPTER 4

SHIFTING APPROACHES TO KURDISH WOMEN THROUGH GRASSROOTS INTERACTIONS

In this chapter, I explore how the political developments and the major discussions within feminist grassroots interactions regarding the Kurdish issue and Kurdish women impacted epistemic shifts. Drawing from a diverse set of sources, including memoirs, interviews, newspaper archives, and personal interviews I conducted with six academics, detailed in chapter two, this analysis aims to shed light on the politics of knowledge production on Kurdish women. Initially, the chapter outlines the primary concerns that dominated feminist academic discourse and tracks how these concerns evolved as Kurdish women began participating in the Kurdish freedom movement and became political figures in Turkey. This shift not only changed the dynamics of feminist activism but also influenced the academic landscape. By examining changes in these academics' political and ideological stances, this chapter seeks to illuminate the epistemological shifts and continuities in feminist academic discourse concerning Kurdish women from the 1980s to the present. This historical perspective aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of knowledge production on Kurdish women in Turkey's context.

4.1 Distancing from Kemalist ideology

The emergence of gender and women's studies in Turkey, like in other places, resulted from the intersection of at least three chronologically distinct yet interrelated influences: the actions of women's movements, the epistemological and analytical challenges posed by feminism to academia, and the global establishment of standards

and mechanisms for gender equality facilitated by the United Nations (UN) system and major international efforts (Kandiyoti, 2010, p. 166). The 1975 UN World Conference on Women significantly impacted feminist scholars in Turkey. It paved the way for a process in which Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) was institutionalized "as an interdisciplinary field at universities in Turkey" (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019, p. 3).

Most importantly, establishing GWS in Turkish universities was a product of a newly emerging feminist movement in the 1980s (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019, p. 3). The movement brought much energy and started many projects to help the institutionalization of women's movements. In 1990, a Women's Library (Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı) was opened in Istanbul. This library collects books and articles written by women or about women's issues. At the same time, women began publishing magazines and journals to talk about important topics related to women. From 1980 to 1990, 44 of these magazines were published; between 1990 and 1996, that number grew to 63. Universities in Turkey have also begun to pay more attention to "women's issues" and have started research centers and programs in women's studies. Some of the participating universities include Istanbul University, Marmara University in Istanbul, Ankara University, Middle East Technical University in Ankara, 9 Eylül University in Izmir, and Çukurova University in Adana (Diner & Toktaş, 2010, p. 46). This was a big step forward for feminist movements in Turkey.

The foundations of this movement were laid by a group of middle to upper-middle-class women intellectuals (Şirin Tekeli, Gülnur Savran, Stella Ovaída, Zeynep Avcı, Yaprak Zihnioğlu, Feraye Tınç, and Gülseli İnal), some of whom were

educated in Northern institutions.¹³ In 1981, as part of a project to prepare a series of magazines and books organized by YAZKO (a cooperative of writers and translators), this small group began translating Western feminist literature while also attempting to create a feminist vocabulary (Özdemir, 2020, pp. 22-24). This effort to create a feminist language resulted in consciousness-raising meetings that eventually paved the way for them to become ardent feminists (Özdemir, 2020, p. 25). The principles of the independent feminist movement of the 1980s in Turkey were shaped within this process (Özdemir, 2020, p. 29); as more women joined the group, their ideas spread to a wider audience (Özdemir, 2020, p. 39).

Notably, the movement's development coincided with the post-1980 coup period. Despite the weakening of civil society under the junta regime, feminists who strategically focused on issues like sexual harassment and violence against women, which were considered to be non-political issues by state authorities, succeeded in engaging in activism without facing political sanctions during Turkey's politically sensitive post-coup years (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019, p. 3). Deducing from this that feminists of the time collaborated with or were unconcerned with the regime, as the socialist left did, would not be appropriate.¹⁴ On the contrary, the authoritarian and anti-democratic nature of the military regime, which widely liquidated revolutionary socialist groups, suppressed trade unions and ended university autonomy and freedom of the press (Arat, 1994, p.243), impacted women's lives as well. Osmanağaoğlu Bilmiş (2006) says that it was indeed difficult for feminists to engage in politics in the depoliticized atmosphere that was created after the coup due to the silencing of all opposition in Turkey.

¹³ You may find more biographical information about them in Esen Özdemir's master's thesis (2020).

¹⁴ In her reading of *Kaktüs*, which is the first socialist feminist magazine of Turkey, Hülya Osmanağaoğlu Bilmiş (2006), shows us feminists' responses to accusations made by the socialist left that feminists were "apolitical," "bourgeois corruption," and that feminists were dividing the left.

Feminist scholars of the post-coup era were key contributors to and actively engaged with the feminist grassroots, and they took a stand against the coup. For instance, Şirin Tekeli, a pioneer of the feminist movement, resigned from her position at Istanbul University following the establishment of YÖK (Council of Higher Education), a coup-established institution responsible for supervising universities (Tekeli, 2017, p. viii); since then, she has been an advocate for an empowered civil society in Turkey (SU Gender Grants, 2017).

Feminist scholarly circles from this generation also adopted a critical approach to Kemalism. Selin Çağatay (2017), who has offered one of the notable critiques of this generation of feminist scholars in recent years, states that social sciences in the post-1980 period emerged in a political context where the primary opposition in Turkey was depicted as between the Kemalist state and civil society. She argues that a conceptualization in which Islamism and the Kurdish issue stand in opposition to Kemalism leads to a failure to understand Kemalism with its complexity, and she contends that “post-Marxist and post-structuralist/deconstructivist” accounts perceive Kemalism as “the main obstacle for Turkey’s democratization”. According to her, they harbored a “desire to get rid of Kemalism as soon as possible” due to these circumstances (Çağatay, 2017, pp. 13-15).

She identifies that the post-coup feminist scholars were a part of this tradition; hence, for her, they considered the Kemalist modernization project as “the primary source of gender inequality during the republican period” (Çağatay, 2017, pp. 14-15). Çağatay’s main concern with these scholars is their dismissal of Kemalist feminism altogether, as they find Kemalism intrinsically anti-feminist and consequently overlook the feminist agency of Kemalist women. Çağatay (2017) is

quite right in asserting that their critique of Kemalism was likely influenced by the political climate in the aftermath of the 1980 coup (pp. 11-12). Their reaction is quite understandable, considering that the junta regime promoted Kemalist ideology as part of a widespread campaign to prevent “societal polarization” among the right and the left, which was prevalent in Turkish society before the coup (Altınay & Bora, 2008, pp. 150-151).

On the other hand, I cannot take their anti-Kemalism for granted; I indeed observed that they have harbored ambivalent sentiments towards Mustafa Kemal and Kemalism, and it can be noted that their perspectives on Kemalism have undergone significant transformation over the years. For instance, in the seminal volume *Women in Turkish Society* (1981), edited by Nermin Abadan Unat, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Mübeccel Kıray, to which Tekeli contributed, the introduction commences with expressions of gratitude to Atatürk (Abadan-Unat et al., 1981, pp. 1-3). At that time, Tekeli was unaware of the existence of an organized women’s movement prior to the Republic (Tekeli, 1991, p. 107); and she characterized the 1926 adoption of the Turkish Civil Code¹⁵ as a monumental step in advancing women’s status in Turkey in the perceived absence of feminist grassroots (Tekeli, 1981, p. 294). In parallel with this, Tekeli’s life is replete with narratives corroborating this perspective. For instance, her father was a bureaucrat for the CHP, while her mother, an educated woman, attended university “in the 1930s during the era of Kemalism’s women’s revolution” (Tekeli, 2017, p. 89). Given that Tekeli witnessed not only her mother but also privileged women from the previous generation receiving education, it is understandable that she might perceive Kemalism as having spearheaded “a women’s revolution”.

¹⁵ The code was adapted with minor modifications from the 1912 Swiss Civil Code.

Berrin's story, as a member of the post-coup generation of feminist scholars, illustrates how Kemalist reforms empowered subsequent generations of Turkish secular women. She recounted being raised in a secular family with an independent mother. Both of her parents belonged to the first generation of the new Turkish Republic and considered themselves as "children of Atatürk." She described growing up in an environment dominated by strong women and emphasized that the Kemalist project of raising secular and modern individuals profoundly influenced her and her siblings. Her family's strong emphasis on education and their dedication to cultivating women who adhered to Atatürk's principles paved the way for her feminist development. She also highlighted her family's open-mindedness, sharing an example of how her mother accepted her atheism without objection (Berrin, personal communication, December 8, 2023).

The faith in Kemalism seemingly fades away after the emergence of new information about the Ottoman Women's movement was provided by historians such as Zafer Toprak (1986) and Serpil Çakır (1991). Çakır (2021/1994) translated the *Kadınlar Dünyası (Women's World)* magazine, which was published by women from 1913 to 1925, from Ottoman Turkish to modern Turkish and analyzed it alongside the developments of that time period. Toprak (1986), on the other hand, unearthed the process of the closure of the Turkish Women's Union by the Kemalist government in 1935, during the single-party period. The research on Ottoman women revealed that they struggled for their rights just like Western women, and their demands were much more comprehensive than the Republican regime granted (Öztürkmen, 2013, p. 256). The impact of these works on this generation of feminist scholars could be materialized in the following words of Tekeli, from an interview she gave to Ruşen Çakır and Levent Cinemre (1991):

Atatürk grants these rights from above, but there is no reason for such top-down imposition. This is because, in fact, during the late Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Second Constitutional Era, there was a very lively and effective women's movement in Istanbul, Thessaloniki, and other cities. These women fought for their rights and established a number of associations and publications that we cannot match today. My generation of social scientists do not know old Turkish, so we couldn't learn about this movement from its original sources. However, within the resurgence of the women's movement, young historians who know old Turkish have begun studying that period. For example, a recent doctoral thesis has been completed... In her doctoral thesis, Serpil Çakır conducted an in-depth analysis of this magazine [Kadınlar Dünyası]. Astonishingly, all the questions about women's oppression and its causes that are on today's feminist agenda were debated back then. Solutions were sought, and measures were taken that today's women's movement has not been able to implement. (Tekeli, 1991, p. 107, own translation) (See Appendix B, 1)

Thanks to some historian friends, certain documents that we couldn't read ourselves because we don't know old Turkish have been uncovered. For example, a few years ago, Zafer Toprak published a document that revealed something we hadn't known until then. What were our beliefs back then? Despite being top-down, a progressive leap was made: Women entered politics, and 18 female deputies were elected, which is the highest number we have seen. But what was the price of this? The significant cost was the suppression of the women's movement, which had been developing as a civil society movement since the beginning of the century. (Tekeli, 1991, p. 111-112, own translation) (See Appendix B, 2)

These words reveal that the feminist scholars of Tekeli's generation felt deluded by the official historical narrative, which claimed that Kemalism liberated women, as they discovered the suppression of the women's movement by the Kemalist single-party regime. This sentiment highlights a profound disappointment as well as ambivalent feelings towards Kemalism.

Another academic I interviewed, Kadri, described the impact of historians' discoveries about the Ottoman women's movement with the following words:

Professor Serpil's (Serpil Çakır) work on the Ottoman Women's Movement had a shock effect on Kemalist women. For example, Şefika Kurnaz studied women's publications during the Ottoman period and received heavy criticism for "undermining the Republic." According to the modernist paradigm, it was the Republic that liberated women and brought them absolute freedom. Anything outside of that was perceived as a threat. (Kadri, personal communication, October 20, 2023) (See Appendix B, 3)

During these years, Turkish women began to explore their own history, including the Ottoman Turkish women's movement, as Şirin Tekeli and Kadri suggest. Melda, one of the Turkish feminist academics I interviewed, told me that she learned Ottoman Turkish during this period. While working on this movement, she knew that the discussions there referred to Muslim and Turkish women, but the emphasis on Muslim identity and Turkishness did not bother her at that time. In fact, discovering the women's movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries alone was already exciting for her. Melda expressed that during this period, Turkish feminists had criticisms of socialist organizations¹⁶ and Kemalists, but these criticisms were always made "from the outside." She said that self-reflexivity, which also constitutes a feminist method of approaching oneself with critical eyes, was not present during this time (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023).

Therefore, my scrutiny of post-coup feminist scholarship demonstrated a different picture than the analysis of Çağatay (2017) since these scholars' "desire to get rid of Kemalism" during the post-coup years did not result from their approach to the Kurdish issue. In effect, these scholars did not have substantial knowledge of the Kurds and the adversities they had been enduring in the 1980s and the early 1990s. The first generation of feminist scholars of the post-coup era are generally from

¹⁶ Additionally, another academic I interviewed, Ayla, mentioned that during the period when she became a feminist, the main issue was class. For her, the prevalent debate was whether feminism would divide the class or not and whether one could address class issues while also being a feminist. These discussions took place after the significant defeat of the leftist movement following the September 12 coup. She noted that while the Kurdish movement flourished during that period, it had not progressed enough to occupy their minds or to establish a connection with gender and feminist issues. According to her, at that time, a visible Kurdish women's movement had not yet emerged (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023). Berrin's description of the post-coup years tells a similar story. She mentioned that, like many women of her generation, she was initially a Marxist before becoming a feminist. Her interest in studying sociology was rooted in her Marxist commitment to societal change. When asked why she chose to study sociology, she often responded, echoing Marx, that "to change society, one must first understand it." However, she observed that many women from her generation distanced themselves from Marxist movements due to male dominance and the patronizing treatment of women as mere sisters within these circles (Berrin, personal communication, December 8, 2023).

petty-bourgeois Turkish families who were trained in bourgeois institutions, and this privilege might have led them to overlook significant issues in Turkey and to confine their view of Turkish history to the bounds of the official narrative. This fact is strikingly revealed in the following words from Yeşim Arat during an interview where she recounts her experience studying economics and political science at Yale in the 1970s:

I really struggled there, always receiving poor grades. Those Vietnam wars... I entered political science classes, and while high school [Robert College] taught me to read and write, it was very apolitical. We truly were unaware of anything. I didn't even know there were Kurds, let alone the Kurdish issue. The Armenian issue, the Kurdish issue... These were not things taught to us. (Medyascope, 2021, 17:10, my translation) (See Appendix B, 4)

However, when the body of literature this generation of feminist scholars authored became visible, and its most significant works emerged, in the 1990s, the Turkish public was neither distant from the Kurdish nor the Armenian issue because Armenians and Kurds had long been raising their voices for recognition. Armenians, especially those in the diaspora, had begun to speak up for the recognition of the Armenian genocide by 1965, and from this date onwards, it was featured on Turkey's agenda (Nefes, Gürpınar, & Kaymak, 2023, p. 883). While there had previously been a strong consensus regarding the denial of the genocide, starting in the 1990s, the topic began to be discussed more frequently among intellectuals within the frameworks of "new pluralism" and "multiculturalism." In these discussions, "nostalgia for the bygone cosmopolitan Istanbul" was prevalent (Nefes et al., 2023, p. 888).

These same years also coincided with a period of intensified conflicts between the PKK and the Turkish state. According to Bozarslan (2001), most human rights violations recorded between 1984 and 1999 pertained to these conflicts. According to the figures available at the time Bozarslan wrote his article (2001),

more than 37,000 people, including over 5,000 civilians, had been killed in the conflict. In Kurdish cities, thousands of villages and settlements were damaged or destroyed, approximately three million people were forcibly displaced, and tens of thousands were detained over these 15 years, including Kurdish journalists, writers, and parliamentarians (Bozarslan, 2001, p. 45).

Considering that the 1990s witnessed heated political and intellectual debates surrounding the Armenian and Kurdish communities' demands for recognition, the gender literature, established by supposedly anti-system feminist scholars (Çağatay, 2017), has remained deadly silent in their scholarly works (Yüksel, 2003, p. 50).

According to my interviewee, Kadri, the discussion of Kurdish identity, particularly in the early 1990s, was a subject shrouded in taboo. Kadri recounted a particularly poignant incident that underscored this cultural and political climate. In 1991, when the People's Labor Party (Halkın Emek Partisi, HEP) secured representation in the parliament, Member of Parliament (MP) Mehmet Ali Eren delivered a landmark speech that acknowledged the presence of Kurds, Armenians, and Bosniaks within Turkey. He highlighted the nation's diverse linguistic and ethnic tapestry, an act that was met with significant hostility, almost culminating in physical violence against him. Kadri emphasized that Eren's speech became a focal point of substantial discussion during that time. He further observed that in the years 1992-1993, journalists willing to refer to the Kurdish issue explicitly were exceedingly rare, with many avoiding the subject altogether. He noted the considerable bravery required to engage in research focused on Kurdish women in this era, suggesting that the academic environment of universities did not foster, and had not fostered for an extensive period, a culture of liberal and open inquiry (Kadri, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

An anecdote shared by Metin Yüksel regarding the well-known compilation *1980'ler Türkiye'sinde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar* (1990)¹⁷ also demonstrates that the criticism of Kemalism brought by feminists in the 1990s developed independently of the Kurdish issue. This book is compiled by Tekeli from papers presented at a symposium organized by her in Germany in 1989.¹⁸ Yüksel shares a memory of Nühket Sirman, one of the academics who presented at the symposium. According to Sirman, a woman attending the symposium expressed that the oppression experienced by Kurdish women was different from that experienced by Turkish women. Sirman recounted that all the Turkish women present in the symposium vehemently objected to this woman's statement. They asserted that the oppression of all women was common, regardless of nationality (Yüksel, 2003, p. 48).

It is telling that Turkish women, who were trying to demonstrate to their Western counterparts that Turkish women could also be feminists, reacted angrily to this dissenting voice from their own "East." In the introduction to the book published one year after the symposium, Tekeli says that Turkey had lost its religious diversity of the Ottoman era during the process of nation-building, however it succeeded in cultivating a new "cultural mosaic" in the 1990s. According to her, this complex tapestry includes the coexistence of "Mediterranean culture", Alevi/Sunni

¹⁷ It was later translated to English as *Women in modern Turkish Society* (1995).

¹⁸ The story of this book actually dates to 1986, when Şirin Tekeli met Ayla Neusel, who had recently been elected as the deputy rector of Kassel University, at a seminar on women in Turkish society at the same university. According to Tekeli, this meeting surprised both women. For Tekeli, it was astonishing that a Turkish academic like Neusel had achieved such success in the German academy, demonstrating that the professional achievements of a small elite group of women in Turkey had transcended national borders. For Neusel, who had been living abroad for years, it was surprising to learn about the development of the feminist movement and feminist consciousness in Turkey. To showcase this development to the German audience, these two academics organized a "Turkish women" symposium at Kassel University again in 1989. The symposium included participants like Nühket Sirman, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Yakın Ertürk. The presentations from this symposium were reviewed, and selected papers on women living in Turkey were compiled to form this book (Tekeli, 1995, pp.2-3).

interpretations of Islam as well as “secular European, and atheist socialist subcultures;” and these coexisting cultures branched out by integrating with local and regional cultures (Tekeli, 1990, p. 24). Tekeli’s effort to show that Turkey had promising prospects for civil society culminated in conflating the development of civil society with democracy. Consequently, she unwittingly depicted early 1990s Turkey as a conflict-free society with a naïve faith in a possibility of establishing multicultural democracy in a neoliberal era. In terms of demonstrating the perception of diversity and solidarity of Turkish feminists during that period, I find Melda’s words significant:

There was a slogan, “We are together with our differences.” This was quite ordinary. How does that matter? We are together with our differences. However, for Kurdish women, Kurdish feminists, it meant something else. It was about inviting to a different way of thinking. They emphasized that Kurdish and women's identities cannot be separated from each other. For us, this was something very new because [according to us] all women were oppressed, all women were exploited by patriarchy (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023). (See Appendix B, 5)

On the one hand, we can see that their rediscovery of their own feminist history and learning that Mustafa Kemal and the Kemalist government of the 1930s had dismantled the independent women’s movement, along with witnessing the repressive policies of the 1980 junta regime with a Kemalist character, gradually led these women to distance themselves from Kemalism. On the other hand, we can observe that the post-coup generation of feminist scholars was not as severely affected by the oppressive environment of the time as other leftist groups, such as Kurdish and Turkish socialist groups of the 1970s. They were influenced by Marxism during their university years, yet they eventually established their own politics by distancing themselves from the gender-blind socialism of the time. They had their own political agenda when criticizing Kemalism and any sort of authoritarianism, and the Kurdish issue could not find a place in this agenda for a

long period of time. In the next section, I aim to show that they gradually became more aware of the problems Kurdish women experienced at the end of the 1990s and in the 2000s as they became involved in platforms that brought Turkish and Kurdish feminists together.

4.2 Feminist grassroots encounters

The historical trajectory of the political engagement of Kurdish women during the Republican era extends back to the Revolutionary Democratic Women's Association (DDKAD), founded in Diyarbakır in 1977. The establishment of this organization marks the first Kurdish women's association, following the Kurdish Women's Emancipation Society, founded in 1919 (Alakom, 2020, p. 14). This association, led by leftist-socialist women, was founded as a women's organization affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi, KİP) and Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association (Devrimci Demokrat Kültür Derneği, DDKD). Parallel to the split between the Turkish and Kurdish left, it emerged as a response to the need for an independent organization distinct from Turkish socialist women (Alakom, 2020, p. 16). While women associated with DDKD occasionally demonstrated collaboration with Turkish women in their struggles, they concurrently undertook efforts to preserve the Kurdish language and culture by calling on Kurdish women to teach their children their mother tongue (Alakom, 2020, p. 21).

On the other hand, many women participated in the march against feudal lordship (*ağalık*) and the March 8th events organized by the Association (Alakom, 2020, p.19). This illustrates that the women from DDKAD, despite distancing themselves from feminism as such due to the influence of gender-blind Marxist approaches of the time, were successful in mobilizing women against both feudal

patriarchy and challenging the assimilationist policies of the state. Their struggle against feudalism, manifested as dowries and polygamy, had its roots in the emergence of “the Eastern Question” from the 1960s onward, particularly the Eastern Rallies of 1967 initiated by the socialist Kurds within the ranks of the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TİP).

With the 1980 coup, socialist women’s associations as well as socialist movements, faced severe repression. DDKAD was shut down, and subsequently, in 1982, women like Methiye Özhal, the association’s treasurer, and Rahime Kesici, the head of the Diyarbakır branch, were arrested and imprisoned for long periods. Rahime Kesici, Halide Dünder, and many other women activists endured significant oppression and torture in prisons (Alakom, 2020, pp. 21-22).

Women within the PKK also demonstrated resistance to the authorities; the infamous Diyarbakır Prison witnessed resistance of women prisoners to torture and sexual violence committed against them. Women have been involved in the party from its inception, but their significant mass mobilization occurred during the uprisings (*serhildans*) that began a week before Newroz in 1990 in Nisêbîn (Nusaybin) following the deaths of several guerrillas in clashes. Their mobilization was driven by two key factors: defending their lives threatened by state violence and drawing inspiration from women guerillas, which inspired them to challenge their submissive roles within families and confront state persecution (Dirik, 2022).

While the violence caused by the war continues with all its intensity, Turkish and Kurdish women started to come together through peace initiatives or around demands for peace. In the 1990s and 2000s, women established various peace initiatives spearheaded by feminist activists and the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği, IHD). Among the earliest examples of these initiatives are

the Saturday Mothers/People, who began seeking justice in 1995 for their relatives who forcibly disappeared in custody; the Peace Mothers, founded in 1996, and the Women's Initiative for Peace, established under the umbrella of the IHD in the same year. *Bariş İçin Kadın Girişimi* (The Women's Initiative for Peace) emerged during the "low intensity" conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK, advocating for an immediate end to the war and the application of international laws related to warfare. The initiative addressed issues such as the condition of women under extraordinary conditions, war, and forced migration, the cultural consequences of war, and the incidents of rape by soldiers and village guards, aiming to develop its own discourse on war and peace (Eralp, 2020, p. 308).

As women began to mobilize within the Kurdish freedom movement, certain women's magazines in the late 1990s adopted a dissenting stance towards Kurdish political parties and advocated for an independent Kurdish women's movement. They frequently highlighted the suppression or neglect of women's issues by Kurdish male political figures. These years also mark the period when heated debates between Turkish and Kurdish feminists began to emerge as Kurdish women voiced objections to the Turkish feminist movement by accentuating Turkish feminists' insensitivity towards the specific problems faced by Kurdish women and their tendency to perceive all women in Turkey as a homogeneous group (Çaha, 2011; Özcan, 2011).

We can gain more insights into the debates of the time through Melda, who has been actively engaged in feminist politics since 1995. She mentioned that starting in 1997 and 1998, Turkish feminists began to contemplate the specific problems Kurdish women faced due to 'their identity' and therefore required a different feminist politics. Melda recounted the discussions between Turkish and Kurdish

feminists of the time by focusing on the interactions between the Pazartesi group¹⁹ led by Turkish feminists and the Kurdish feminist circles around Roza and Jûjin magazines. She stated that the emergence of magazines such as Roza (1996-2000) and Jûjin (1996-2000), published by Kurdish women, caused great excitement at that time. According to her, she and other Turkish feminists became aware that Kurdish women were oppressed in different ways thanks to the polemical essays published in the Roza magazine. For instance, she emphasized that she gained awareness of the impact of state violence on Kurdish women through these debates (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023).

One of the most notable polemics from that period, which Melda remembers, was the establishment of the ÇATOMs in 1995.²⁰ She said that, at the time, this issue was discussed in Pazartesi magazine and referenced Ayşe Düzkan's²¹ article on this subject on Roza (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023). Looking through the April 1998 issue (number 37) of Pazartesi magazine, I saw that it extensively covers opinions on ÇATOMs. Around that time, Düzkan personally visited and inspected these centers on-site to learn about their purpose and significance for Kurdish women (Pazartesi, 1998, p.1). This issue provides ample space for Düzkan's observations and assessments. It includes interviews with the manager of Anakültür Cooperative, established in 1996, and collaborating with the GAP Regional Development Administration and administrators of ÇATOMs. Melda noted that while Düzkan underscored the detrimental aspects of these centers, she also highlighted certain positive elements, such as the centers' providing Kurdish

¹⁹ Pazartesi group refers to the feminist circle around the monthly feminist magazine Pazartesi, which was published from 1995 until 2005.

²⁰ For more information about ÇATOMs, see the Section 3.4.

²¹ Ayşe Düzkan is a prominent Turkish feminist writer and activist; she was among the founders of Pazartesi magazine.

women with Turkish language education, which could facilitate their access to public services. Melda said this sparked a debate between Pazartesi and Roza (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023).

In her essay, Düzkan initially criticizes the project as an effort to make Kurdish women forget their native language and integrate them into the global market as cheap labor. However, she later acknowledges that learning Turkish could help Kurdish women gain some independence from the patriarchal control of Kurdish men by enabling them to access the public sphere without a male intermediary. Despite being a form of capitalist exploitation, she also argues that this shift from unpaid domestic exploitation to paid labor could give them a small degree of “breathing room” (Düzkan, 1998, p. 3).

In her essay published in Roza, Fatma Kayhan raises significant objections to handling this topic in Pazartesi. She finds it biased that Pazartesi did not include the perspectives of Kurdish women’s organizations on this matter. According to her, it is problematic not to consider the views of Kurdish feminists on an issue that directly concerns them (Kayhan, 1998, pp. 5-6). She emphasizes that the centers are a continuation of state-supported assimilation projects, similar to boarding regional schools and public education centers, and argues that since previous projects failed, the state is now attempting assimilation differently through women’s organizations and developmental foundations in cooperation with the state.

Kayhan warns that these institutions are promoting sterilization and birth control, a colonialist policy previously used against Black women. She underlines the insidious nature of these efforts, highlighting the colonial undertones and the ongoing attempt to control and assimilate Kurdish women under the guise of development and empowerment (Kayhan, 1998, p. 4).

My interviewee, Melda, on the other hand, clearly articulated her stance on ÇATOMs. According to her, it was a domestication project. She contended that this was an assimilation project akin to the efforts of Sıdıka Avar in the 1940s. This initiative sought to erase the native language, enforce Turkish literacy, and promote birth control, which was met with profound distress by Kurdish women. According to her, ignoring the native language, establishing something new after villages were emptied and schools were gone post-war, leaving people entirely uneducated, was “definitely assimilation”. This was followed by the introduction of birth control along with questions about why they were having many children (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023).

Furthermore, Melda pointed out another debate in the late 1990s: the contentious March 8th events in 1998. She specifically advised me to examine the preparation process for these events and what transpired afterward. The 13th issue of Roza magazine shed light on the eventful March 8 celebration of that year. Divisions began to emerge from the preparation phase of the planned events in Istanbul. Fatma Kayhan, one of the most prominent figures behind the magazine’s publication, recounts what happened in the preparation process in her evaluation of the March 8 celebrations. According to her, independent women’s groups, along with women from ÖDP and DİSK, organized a rally titled “No to War and Violence Against Women.” Meanwhile, Kurdish women’s groups, alongside Turkish socialist women’s circles, organized a rally called “Freedom is in Organized Power.” Kayhan states that the Roza group wanted to participate in the first group’s event as it was planned to be open solely to women while there would be men among the People’s Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP) participants. In addition, they valued that Turkish feminists were organizing a March 8 event that addressed the

war for the first time, so they wanted to join the first group. However, the first group's organizing committee meetings witnessed disagreements over using Kurdish slogans. Some Turkish feminists felt that Kurdish feminists were 'imposing' the use of Kurdish slogans and did not want them to be used. Consequently, the women from Roza concluded that Turkish feminists had not yet developed anti-racist feminism and meaningful solidarity with Kurdish feminists and decided to join the rally led by HADEP (Kayhan, 1998, p.9).

Kayhan (1998) argues that despite knowing that the police would only permit one rally, Turkish feminists applied for a rally on the same day as the Kurdish feminists in a different location. The Kurdish rally was banned, while the Turkish one was permitted. The police attack and detention of many women during attempts to organize rallies in Diyarbakır and Taksim by women associated with HADEP, while Turkish feminists enjoyed a festive atmosphere during the Independent Women's Platform (Bağımsız Kadın Platformu) rally in Şişli, heightened tensions between the groups. As a result, two Turkish feminists resigned from ÖDP (Kayhan, 1998, pp. 10-11). Kayhan also gives a space to their resignation letter at the end of her essay. In their resignation letter, these two feminists criticize the platform for organizing another rally instead of attending this one, knowing that Kurdish women's rallies were banned due to "security concerns." They view it as a move that weakens solidarity between the two groups. They conclude the letter with these words:

We come full circle to the same point. It is necessary to recognize that the feminist movement in Turkey is experiencing a serious blockage in the country's conditions. The '98 March 8th demonstrates that this issue stands as an existential problem for the feminist movement. In the Kurdish issue, feminism must transcend a middle-class sensitivity that merely assists oppressed women. Unless the feminist movement undergoes this introspection, it will not move beyond being an opposition movement that the

system depicts as harmless. (Kayhan, 1998, p. 16, own translation) (See Appendix B, 6)

It is ironic that while Kurdish women were subjected to police violence in Taksim, Turkish women were able to hold their “No to War” themed rally in Şişli without any state intervention. However, Kayhan is not pessimistic about feminist solidarity between these groups. She thinks that this event paved the way for a process where some Turkish feminists engaged in self-criticism, became aware of their mistakes, and took responsibility. We can see that Kurdish feminists cared about their collaboration with these organizations and stressed that their criticisms were “constructive”. This sentiment is clear in the opening message of this issue of Roza as they suggest that their criticism would not harm their ‘friendly cooperation and joint actions’ but would, in fact, help feminists go beyond simply distancing themselves from the state and strengthen feminist politics which effectively confront the official ideology (Roza, 1998, p.1).

Alongside their involvement with magazine circles, Turkish and Kurdish feminists also connected through civil society organizations and women’s groups. Ayla, another interviewee, emphasized that her relationships with Nebahat Akkoç and Gültan Kışanak were instrumental in raising her awareness of Kurdish women’s issues and their activities within the Kurdish movement. Through Akkoç’s establishment of KAMER, a non-governmental organization founded to fight against violence against women, they began frequently visiting Diyarbakır, and her association with Kışanak, then deputy co-mayor of Bağlar Municipality, led them to question their own perspectives on the specific aspects of women’s issues in Turkey. We can say that these encounters marked the beginning of an arduous transformation process for Turkish feminists.

Reflecting on a significant gathering in Diyarbakır in 1995, Ayla recounted how emotionally intense those two days were for her:

We had two very impactful days there. For me, it was eye-opening and unsettling because, although I had never identified as Turkish and believed I was not nationalistic or concerned with such matters, I [realized] it was not that simple. I was forced to confront the issue of Turkishness because so many personal experiences were shared. It is generally easy to discuss these issues on a theoretical and political level, but I saw that it is not as easy in personal relationships. (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023) (See, Appendix B, 7)

In a similar vein, Melda emphasized the significance of another organization when I inquired about her relations with Kurdish feminists. This was the Democratic Free Women's Movement (Demokratik Özgür Kadın Hareketi, DÖKH), founded by Kurdish women in 2003, an independent women's organization with organic ties to the Kurdish freedom movement. DÖKH not only strengthened the peace struggle but also facilitated the interaction of Kurdish and Turkish feminists (Eralp, 2020, pp. 308-309). According to Arı (2018), DÖKH intended to foster solidarity among women in the Middle East by establishing a platform that transcended ethnic and national boundaries. Founded on the premise of addressing gender inequalities, it provided a common ground for women from diverse backgrounds, including political parties, municipalities, and grassroots organizations, to collaborate on issues of mutual concern. This collaboration was instrumental in promoting a shared agenda of gender equality and women's rights across various levels of governance, particularly within local municipalities (Arı, 2018, pp. 151-152).

Melda recalls attending meetings during the formation of this organization, where she began contemplating the distinct aspects of Kurdish women's struggle at that time. In her own words:

Well, I remember the establishment of DÖKH as well. We had gone to Diyarbakır... I think there was a large assembly. It was not about tension with DÖKH women... Feminists, I mean, we didn't have a goal to transform

society. However, there was something palpable in the undertones of DÖKH women's speeches. For instance, there were questions hovering about whether it resembled feminism, and we weren't obligated to view it similarly, but I remember returning with question marks about feminism, thinking differently about it in the same way. (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023) (See Appendix B, 8)

As observed, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed Turkish feminist academics, who were involved in autonomous feminist organizations, encountering the Kurdish women's movement and the issues faced by Kurdish women for the first time.

During the period of the peace process between the PKK and Turkey, the contact and cooperation between Kurdish women and the feminist movement significantly deepened from 2013 to 2015, as ever before. During this crucial time, Kurdish women and their contributions to feminism became much more prominent, and these women began to play an increasingly active role in the peace process. Women from diverse backgrounds, including different ethnic identities, religious beliefs, and left-wing political views, united under the peace movement. This coalition became notably influential post-2010, marking a period of heightened collaboration and mutual support (Özkazanç, 2018, p. 31).

These encounters prompted Turkish feminists to question the possibility of different feminisms and the specific problems faced by Kurdish women and to reflect on their own positions. From the mid-2000s onwards, the phase of initial acquaintance had been surpassed, and discussions on how to formulate joint political strategies commenced (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023). This period also led to the first theoretical discussions bearing fruit.

4.3 Theoretical interactions

When we return to the dimension of academic knowledge production, some scholars observed that the 2000s witnessed a period of "relative freedom" of expression

compared to the past. The AKP, advocating for a “conservative democracy,” came into power when Turkey’s potential EU membership was a critical consideration. The abolition of the death penalty and the ceasefire with the PKK created a relatively liberal setting that encouraged research on Kurds and the Kurdish issue, which had been considered taboo (Değer, 2019, pp. 22-23).

Both women and gender research centers affiliated with private and state universities and independent ones located in Turkey have aimed to generate data on Kurdish women. Through the funding provided by international agencies like CORDIS (Community Research and Development Information Service), Heinrich Böll Foundation, and Chrest Foundation and local ones like TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey), the Vehbi Koç Foundation and the Sabancı Foundation, qualitative and quantitative research on Kurdish women have been conducted so far.²²

When I asked her about the impact of the AKP government’s period of “relative freedom” on knowledge production about Kurds in the field of gender studies, Ayla informed me that there was not a period of academic freedom in Turkey, and this so-called “relative freedom period” did not lead to a significant change nonetheless rather allowed these kinds of taboo topics to be discussed in limited ways. For instance, students who were curious about Kurdish studies were more encouraged or allowed to study them compared to the past (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

We can say that the solidarity strengthened among the Kurdish women’s movement, independent Kurdish feminists, and Turkish feminists, which began in the 1990s and gained momentum in the relatively freer atmosphere of the 2000s, has

²² For example, a list of research projects conducted by the academic faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Sabancı University can be found here: <https://conf.sabanciuniv.edu/en/projects>.

been reflected in academic production to a certain extent. A closer examination of the intellectual contributions of the Amargi Women's Cooperative (2001-2016), founded by prominent feminists and academics, including Pınar Selek and Aksu Bora, which brought together Turkish and Kurdish feminists, may provide insightful perspectives on the theoretical discussions of the late 2000s and early 2010s concerning the Kurdish issue and Kurdish women. The Amargi Debates, conducted in two series over several weeks in 2011 and 2012 and later published as a book, epitomize these discussions among feminists of different ideologies during this period. These debates reveal that Turkish feminists engaged with the Kurdish issue primarily through the context of the peace struggle and anti-militarism since the early 2000s.

However, as Ayla rightly suggested, it does not seem possible to speak of a time when intellectual production was freely conducted. The state can also delineate the boundaries of studying Kurds, profoundly affecting the theoretical interactions of these feminist intellectuals. Pınar Selek's life and struggle could be an adequate example of how the state may intervene and undermine these interactions. Selek, as the leading feminist intellectual within these political lines with her focus on militarism and her commitment to the peace struggle, ultimately became the state's target. Due to her interviews with high-ranking PKK commanders and her subsequent refusal to disclose their names, she was subjected to severe torture. She was prosecuted based on fabricated evidence related to a 1998 explosion in Istanbul. Despite being tried and acquitted of all charges three times (in 2006, 2009, and 2011), she was sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment in 2013. In 2014, the 9th Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation overturned this sentence on procedural grounds during the appeal hearing. However, on June 21, 2022, the General Criminal

Assembly of the Court of Cassation overturned the latest acquittal decision, asserting that Selek should be sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment (*Birgün*, 2023).

According to her lawyer, this case has persisted since 1998 because Selek has been asking, “Why couldn’t we achieve peace?” and bringing attention to the issues of the marginalized. These range from women’s rights and the LGBTQ+ movement to Kurdish and Armenian issues, as well as street children and migrant policies (*Bianet*, 2023).

Selek, in her book, *Barişamadık* [*We Couldn’t Reconcile*] published in 2004, continued to speak up about the possibilities of peace and reconciliation by underlining that the purpose of her study is to remind what Turkey needs for peace. To elaborate, she argues that issues such as the Armenian issue and the Kurdish issue, which are still taboo and forbidden to discuss, need to be addressed. She recounts that the massacres against Armenians began in the 19th century and intensified during the years of World War I (1914-1918) and that the young republic was founded on the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, and the Turkification of their properties. She further explains that Kurds initially participated in massacres against Armenians but later shared a similar fate with Armenians during the Republic era, being massacred and expelled from their lands. She asserts that without confronting this history, peace is not possible (Selek, 2004, p. 87).

For Selek, reconciliation also meant confronting Turkey’s racist history. In fact, Turkish feminists began to critically examine the history of marginalized communities in the mid-1990s. Yelda, who was among the first feminists to raise this issue, highlighted the need for such a confrontation in her books on racism among Turkish intellectuals. Yelda (2000) questioned Turkish authorities who denied the Armenian genocide, asking where the Armenians supposedly deported in 1915 had

gone and called for the opening of archives (cited in Kayhan, 2007, p. 35). This call for confrontation found resonance in the academic community, notably with Ayşe Gül Altınay. Altınay, referencing Yelda's *Çoğunluk Aydınlarında Irkçılık* (Racism Among the Majority Intellectuals) (1998), emphasized that the history of women in Turkey includes not only Turkish and Muslim women but also Jewish, Assyrian, Greek, Kurdish, Turkish, and Romani women. She argued that, despite the limited information about the struggles and contributions of these women during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic, it is incorrect to label the feminism of that period as exclusively Turkish feminism (Altınay, 2000, p. 29). However, while Yelda highlighted the concept of racism, Altınay did not address the issue of racism in this particular piece of writing. This omission persisted in her subsequent works (Altınay, 2004, 2019).

The emphasis on peace and anti-militarism is also evident in sessions of the Amargi Debates, such as the panel "Anti-Militarism and Feminism," which featured Altınay as one of the speakers. When considering militarism discussions within feminist academia, her contributions to militarism and masculinity stand out. She recounts how she was influenced by the increased reports of disappearances and torture during the so-called "low-intensity war" between the Turkish army and the PKK during the period of 1992-1993. She mentions that they were engaged in numerous discussions on feminism, nationalism, and violence at the time. As a group of feminists, they even published a newspaper ad declaring that they were "ashamed to be citizens of this country" (Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2011, p. 153). We can see that Altınay's intellectual and political curiosity developed within this context, and she ended up studying military service. Altınay reflects on this period by saying:

I began by asking questions like, "How is it that someone who could be my brother or friend finds themselves fighting in the East, becoming agents of

this war? How can military service be an unquestioned process?”. (Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2011, p. 153, my translation) (See, Appendix B, 9)

These discussions in the 1990s that Altınay mentions eventually bore fruit in the form of an anti-militarist feminist movement, exemplified by the first declarations of female conscientious objection in Turkey in 2004. Within this context, the feminist academics, often examined the Kurdish issue through the lenses of nationalism and militarism; more precisely, they concentrated on how militarism in Turkey constructs hegemonic masculinity and militaristic citizenship. Challenging the militaristic tradition of the Turkish Republic and becoming a conscientious objector, risking being labeled as a traitor, undoubtedly required courage. However, these discussions did not advance to the point of analyzing the sexual and gendered dimensions of the state’s militarist violence against Kurds or the exploitation and oppression of Kurdish women within the context of colonialism and/or systemic racism.

When I asked Melda why institutional racism against ethnic and religious others in Turkey has not been addressed in Turkey’s feminist academic knowledge production and has instead been substituted by concepts such as “Turkish nationalism” and “militarism” even though many Kurdish women and Kurdish feminists who write in magazines such as *Roza* and *Jûjin* had been frequently calling attention to the racism and sexism Kurdish women face in their everyday lives since the 1990s, she was initially baffled. After a moment of silence and hesitation, she said:

When we look at *Roza* and *Jûjin*, when we remember, they actually emphasize [racism]. Although I do not remember if racism was mentioned within the framework of *Jineolojî* discussions, they similarly talk about the discourse produced by Turkish feminists being the dominant discourse... This [racism] is something we have not heard. Transforming it into a different form, or ignoring it, not accepting it as such, calling it by another name... Yes, it is said, “Because they are Kurdish, they are being subjected to different forms of oppression,” but this does not articulate that what is being done, what is pointed out, is racism. Perhaps a confrontation is needed. When

you say Turkish nationalism, it is softer. In terms of [academic] literature, you can discuss the material at hand better when you say “nationalism;” you are not entering into dangerous waters. But when you say “racism,” you need to include yourself in it. (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023) (See Appendix B, 10)

When I asked the Kurdish researcher Kiymet the same question, she emphasized the importance of scholars’ responsibility in research by underlining the necessity of self-reflexivity. She noted that Kurdish feminists in Roza magazine explicitly discussed racism, not just as dry propaganda but as a lived reality. She mentioned that if we examine the issues of Roza, we will see that they translated articles by Black feminists like bell hooks, and they expressed their feelings and experiences through these theories because they resonated with their own realities as feminists experiencing racism. She added that Kurdish women and feminists were very much aware of the theory of racism since the 1990s. According to Kiymet, it is the responsibility of academics to listen to these voices. Drawing on an example from accountability in anthropological research, she argued that a researcher studying Kurdish women should illuminate their knowledge rather than obscure it. In

Kiymet’s words:

If you ignore or render something invisible, you need to engage in self-reflection. Seeing women’s experiences and acknowledging their scholarly contributions requires you, as an academic, to critically reassess the knowledge you have imparted so far. This is an academic responsibility. You should not be satisfied with just an interview; the interview should also transform you as an academic. One of the biggest handicaps of Western feminism, in my opinion, is that academics are not in a position to engage in this self-critique because assuming this position brings with it many different responsibilities and necessitates a new perspective (Kiymet, personal communication, December 28, 2023). (See Appendix B, 11)

Another Kurdish academic, Kadri, also informed me that the habit of interpreting the Kurdish issue through a “modernist paradigm” still persists in feminist academic writing. As a result, theories addressing racism, such as intersectionality, have not significantly influenced gender studies in Turkey. He noted that applying

intersectionality to the Turkish context would immediately bring to mind groups such as Kurds, Armenians, and Romani people and would have been enlightening in explaining their experiences (Kadri, personal communication, October 20, 2023).

Besides the silence about institutional racism, the possibilities for advancing feminist politics through women's participation in armed struggle have been an evaded topic in Turkish feminist circles. For instance, discussions on militarism in the context of the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK revealed an effort to conceptually separate Turkish militarism from its imperial past and racialization practices. Altınay emerged as a prominent academic figure representing this approach. As evident in her contributions to the Amargi Debates and the newspaper articles she wrote for *Bianet*, she articulated a clear stance against both the militarism of the Turkish state and the PKK. She argued that self-defense is fundamentally different from joining a hierarchical, obedience-based organization that teaches the use of weapons, legitimizes, and even glorifies violence for a cause. For her, such practices are incompatible with feminist ethics (Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2011, p. 181). She compares the figures like Sabiha Gökçen, Mustafa Kemal's adopted daughter and female pilot who joined the Dersim Operation, which ended up as a massacre, and PKK woman guerilla Zilan, who committed the first suicide attack targeting Turkish soldiers, and asserts that feminist struggle should oppose both (Altınay, 2010; 2011; Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2011, p. 157).

In the same session of the Amargi Debates, another feminist academic, Begüm Fırat, proposed a different approach and underscored the necessity of separating antimilitarism from anti-violence stances. She highlights the peril inherent in adopting a "neither army nor guerrilla" approach, which risks depriving feminists of viable strategies for combating violence. Furthermore, Fırat contends that an

overly simplistic aversion to violence may preclude the exploration of nuanced engagements with the Kurdish movement (Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2011, p. 166).

It seems that disagreements on the issues of anti-militarism, racism, nationalism, and the place of violence in feminist politics resulted in political separations, as debates on these topics within the Amargi Cooperative became a breaking point in 2012. Some feminists declared their departure, arguing that the organization had become depoliticized. They deplored that anti-militarism was narrowly defined as unequivocal opposition to violence, making it impossible to discuss groups within the organization that included violence as a form of resistance. They criticized the organization for adopting “concepts and expressions of liberal politics,” reducing matters such as “embracing diversity,” “pluralism,” “opposing all forms of violence,” and “not engaging in politics of anger” to mere slogans without genuine debate or discussion (Kaos GL, 2012). This demonstrates that a significant portion of feminists have been showing solidarity with the Kurdish women’s movement. To put it differently, alongside feminists who are entirely opposed to violence in any form, there is a visible feminist politics that focuses its anti-militarist efforts on addressing the violence perpetrated by the Turkish military and other law enforcement agencies against Kurds, and that approach the women’s armed struggle considering the colonial conditions.

The situation dramatically changed after the end of the ceasefire process in 2015 between the government and the PKK, with government operations resulting in civilian killings, destruction of houses, and numerous other serious human rights violations committed from July 2015 until December 2016 in southeast Turkey against Kurdish citizens (OHCHR, 2017).

On January 11, 2016, over 1,400 academics and researchers from Turkey and around the world signed a declaration titled “We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime,” calling for an end to violence and curfews in Kurdish regions and the initiation of peace talks (Tunç, 2019, para. 7). In their statement, the academics demanded the cessation of state violence against citizens by asserting that they would not remain silent and be complicit in what they termed as a massacre and that they were committed to continuing their advocacy until their demands were met (para. 9-11). Following the declaration, a backlash ensued by the AKP government as well as various fascist groups. On January 12, the pro-government newspaper *Yeni Şafak* labeled the signatories as “accomplices of the PKK” on its front page. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the signatories, calling them a “gang of so-called academics” and “traitors” (para. 9). This culminated in a widespread smear campaign against the signatory academics. The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) also issued a statement criticizing the declaration and announcing that necessary actions would be taken within legal frameworks (para. 10-11).

Prominent fascist figures, including MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli and the head of a criminal organization, Sedat Peker, attacked and threatened the signatories. Various universities initiated disciplinary and legal actions against the academics who had signed the declaration, resulting in some getting expelled or forced to resign. Despite the intense pressure, the academics stood behind their stance (para. 13-20). President Erdoğan continued to denounce the signatories as “collaborators of terrorists” and urged the prosecution to take action. On the same day, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office initiated investigations for alleged crimes, including “insulting state institutions” and “making terrorist propaganda.” Several academics were detained, though some were released shortly after (para. 21-23).

By the end of the petition campaign on January 21, the academics faced continuous investigations, detentions, public targeting, dismissals, forced resignations, and smear campaigns. Support for the persecuted academics came from numerous national and international organizations advocating for academic freedom and freedom of expression rights. Due to these persecutions, many academics sought refuge abroad, receiving assistance from organizations like Scholars at Risk (SAR), Scholar Rescue Fund (SRF), and the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), as well as various international universities in Europe, the US, and Canada (para. 27-29).

The AKP government became increasingly authoritarian after declaring a state of emergency on July 21, 2016, following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, orchestrated by Fetullah Gülen's Islamist organization. The government extended the initial three-month state of emergency seven times until 2018. During these two years, Turkey grappled with significant restrictions on democracy and fundamental rights. More than fifty thousand people, including members of the Gülen organization and the pro-Kurdish HDP leaders such as Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, as well as other deputies and members of HDP, were arrested. According to the Human Rights Association (IHD), in 2017, over 5,000 individuals reported having been tortured, and there were eleven cases of forced disappearances. Over 130,000 people were dismissed from their public sector jobs. Additionally, numerous newspapers, TV channels, agencies, and radio stations suspected of "having ties to terrorist organizations" were shut down (OMCT/SOS Torture & IHD, 2022).

The state of emergency led to the dissolution of the aforementioned wide-ranging coalitions among feminists. Together with the severe war conditions in the

Kurdish regions, particularly between 2015 and 2016, the demand for peace even diminished among Kurdish women (Eralp, 2018, p. 167). Under the conditions of the state of emergency, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation organized a conference about feminist solidarity and coalitions, where a prominent feminist academic, Alev Özkazanç, gave a talk about women's movement in Turkey and intersectionality. Özkazanç's response to a participant who asked a question regarding the possible grounds for solidarity between the feminist movement and the Kurdish women's movement demonstrates how damaged the previously constituted relationships after the ceasefire and the declaration of the state of exception.

This participant, who posed the question to Özkazanç, was an academic involved with Pazartesi magazine and later worked with the HDP. She first reflects on her personal transformation concerning the Kurdish issue. This transformation occurred during an enlightening journey that commenced in Van and spanned various settlements in the Kurdish region. Throughout this journey, every encounter with local women underscored a poignant plea: They wished for “Western women and mothers”²³ to comprehend the gravity of their suffering and the oppressive forces, particularly state-sponsored oppression, that they endure. These interactions vividly illustrated the local women's earnest endeavors to forge a unifying platform for shared struggles despite their marginalized voices. The participant says that this revelation profoundly altered her academic perspective on witnessing and participating in these realities. Reflecting on the present context, she draws attention to the alarming situation where most mayors in the Kurdish region, a majority of whom are women, along with their co-chairs, find themselves incarcerated. She emphasizes the responsibility of scholars who have neither been imprisoned nor

²³ Here, “Western” refers to the western part of Turkey.

expelled from their academic positions, as well as the broader women's movement, to delve into these matters. Recalling Marx's proclamation that the true challenge lies not merely in interpreting the world but in aspiring to alter it, she returns to Özkazanç and asks for her opinion about possible concrete ways for fostering solidarity between Kurdish, Turkish and women from different ethnicities (Özkazanç, 2018, pp. 43-44).

In her response, Özkazanç laments the current situation, where state oppression intensifies, eroding the very foundation of mutual support and making any public discussion of political strategies or solidarity dangerously precarious. She indicates that the current climate, characterized by increased criminalization, hinders robust public discourse on these crucial issues. In her own words:

Unfortunately, in Turkey, we are not at a point where political strategy debates related to the period I described can be conducted openly in public. There is a trend of high-level criminalization, among other factors like feeling demoralized. Therefore, while these issues are crucial, we are not exactly in such a moment. We cannot discuss many things. Throughout the 2000s, the EU accession process had an impact during the first two terms of AKP assuming democratization, and then during the peace process. Before Gezi, we saw that this liberal thing was a very unexpected kind of radical populism. So, previous democracy discourses became more authentic from Gezi onwards. This also happened during the HDP process. However, now we are in a very harsh defeat. Therefore, it is obvious that we need to think about it. As I said, the time and the environment are not suitable for profound discussions. (Özkazanç, quoted by Berber, 2018, pp. 46-47, own translation) (See Appendix B, 12)

In a similar vein to this participant, when I asked Ayla about how grassroots discussions reflected in academic production and the role of academics in this context, she echoed Özkazanç's sentiments. Ayla noted that we are currently not in a period where we can freely discuss or produce academic work on these topics. She mentioned that just as Kurdish and Turkish feminists were beginning to come together, a significant disruption occurred, leaving them, in her words, "in disarray." She further stated that intellectual reflection necessitates more time, as theory is often

produced after an extended period of activist solidarity and extensive discussions. She emphasized that for something to establish a solid paradigm, a larger collective effort is required, but unfortunately, we are not in such a period right now due to the increased state oppression against Kurds and academics who show solidarity with Kurds (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023). Additionally, toward the end of the interview, Ayla expressed her uncertainty about being the right person for my research topic because she had not supervised any theses on the subject and had not conducted any research herself. She mentioned that her knowledge was limited to what she had learned from coalitions at the level of activism. In response, considering that she is an intellectual who had written extensively about women living in Turkey, I objected to her by stating that “Kurdish women also live in this country, though.” She then replied, “I am not even sure we inhabit the same country sometimes.” (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

Similarly, the Turkish academic Sevgi also told me that she has limited knowledge of Kurdish women. When I asked about the influence of the significant works on Kurds within the context of gender and/or women’s studies on her own academic pursuits, she told me that thanks to the studies on Kurdish women,²⁴ she felt “enlightened” and “educated” about the various dimensions of intersectionality within the women’s movement. She also mentioned that these studies enabled her to learn a great deal about both the Kurdish political movement and Turkish political life and added that she has used these studies in her classes and research. However, she did not explain how she used them in her classes and research; she just emphasized that the existing studies on Kurdish women expanded the boundaries and

²⁴ She identified several influential works in this regard, including: Handan Çağlayan’s book *Analar Yoldaşlar Tanrıçalar* (2007); Nadire Mater’s book *Mehmedin Kitabı: Güneydoğu’da Savaşmış Askerler Anlatıyor* (1999), and the articles of Çağlayan (2012); Şahin-Mencütek (2015); and Göker’ book chapter (2016).

the scope of the existing gender literature. (Sevgi, personal communication, December 18, 2023). Her emphasis on “expanding boundaries and the scope” shows that the knowledge produced about Kurdish women is viewed by her not as a contribution that transforms the gender literature in Turkey, but rather as an addition that diversifies the literature by incorporating Kurdish women’s experiences.

Melda also approached the issue from a feminist solidarity perspective, noting how her relationships with Kurdish women and Kurdish feminists had influenced her activism and political views when I asked whether her academic work was influenced by the development of Kurdish gender studies or ideas produced by Kurdish feminists. Melda told me that:

I can only say the following about it: I have worked on women’s labor... So, I actually supported the Kurdish women’s movement as an activist. Have I done anything academically about it? I just signed the “We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime” declaration. Apart from that, academically, I supervised two theses. I was involved in the Peace Initiative for Women (Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi, BİKG) (2009), and I tried to show solidarity when the *Jineolojî* journal was published. Besides these, I introduced Gültan Kışanak’s book, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics*, (*Kürt Siyasetinin Mor Rengi*) (2018). (Melda, personal communication, December 22, 2023) (See Appendix B, 13)

From these interviews, we can see that Turkish feminist academics do not view the knowledge produced by Kurdish feminists and the Kurdish women’s movement as analytically connected to their own intellectual work; rather, they tend to particularize the experiences of Kurdish women. The demands from Kurdish women to recognize their specific conditions—facing difficulties not because they are women but because they are Kurds—might have put Turkish feminists in a challenging position, making them maintain a distance from imagining common grounds for political action.²⁵

²⁵ The distancing, in its extreme form, could be reminiscent of how progressive men have historically evaded responsibility regarding gender issues by approaching it as if it is “women’s issues,” and by showing “respect” for women’s experiences and struggles.

As Ayla's words suggest, some may question whether Turks and Kurds truly "inhabit the same country," signaling their different political imaginaries and agendas. I believe that this departure has been perpetuated by state oppression and ongoing colonial violence, which have further severed the political ties between Turkish feminists and the Kurdish women's movement. While these coalitions have weakened in Turkey, the Kurdish women's movement has found new international allies and has begun to establish its theory based on the long years of experience of Kurdish women in struggle. This led to the departure of Kurdish gender studies from feminist politics within the Turkish context and facilitated the delinking of their epistemology from mainstream feminism, which has historically been defined by Turkish feminists.

4.4 Theoretical departure

The history of Kurdish gender studies indeed dates back further. Kurdish students, activists, and intellectuals deported to Europe between the 1950s and 1970s played a foundational role in shaping Kurdish studies through their intellectual endeavors in host countries (Açık et al., 2023, p. 262). Kiymet elaborated on the evolution of the Kurdish studies in our interview. She explained that since the 1980s, particularly after the military coup in Turkey and the *serhildans* (uprisings) in the 1990s, there have been significant migration movements. Due to various massacres, genocides, and oppressions, Kurds have migrated from Turkey, Iraq, and Iran to other countries. The children of these immigrants started taking up positions or pursuing education in European universities, which, in turn, increased the visibility of Kurdish studies in Europe.

She mentioned that since the 1990s, there have been studies on Kurds conducted by non-Kurdish Western academics, who actually laid the foundation for Kurdish studies. These were scholars who, for various reasons, had come to Ottoman Kurdistan²⁶ in the late 19th century and conducted research on various communities there. However, these were mostly orientalist studies on Kurds. Research on Kurdish women began to emerge in the 1990s. In the development of Kurdish gender studies, it is essential to acknowledge the pioneering role of Professor Shahrazad Mojab from the University of Toronto. Kiymet noted that the International Kurdish Women's Studies Network (IKWSN) was established in 1996 through Mojab's initiative. She said that this network organized various events, such as workshops and networking efforts with activists researching Kurdish women across different European countries. She pointed out that these studies in the 1990s were largely carried out not by Kurdish academics but by Western scholars. In many European countries, these were mostly individual and scattered efforts (Kiymet, personal communication, December 28, 2023).

Since the 2000s, establishing Kurdish studies centers in Europe and North America has also facilitated research on Kurdish women and gender studies. Particularly, with the Kurdish women's movement forming anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist alliances in the Middle East and Europe, the number of Kurdish women researchers has increased (Açık et al., 2023, p. 264). According to Kiymet, especially since the 2000s, Kurdish academics working outside of Turkey, particularly in Europe and North America, have become acquainted with decolonial theories, queer theory, and other emerging theoretical frameworks. This has enabled

²⁶ In this thesis, following Işık (2014), I use the term *Ottoman Kurdistan* since it was used by the empire institutions and Kurdish intellectuals especially from the mid-19th century to the foundation of the Republic.

them to re-examine the Kurdish issue through different conceptual lenses. She emphasized that the application of critical race theory, critical whiteness theory, and various postcolonial and decolonial theories to the Kurdish issue has led to a significant leap in Kurdish studies (Kiyem, personal communication, December 28, 2023). The founding of the Kurdish Gender Studies Network (KGSN) in 2021, again initiated by Shahrzad Mojab, was a crucial step toward institutionalizing Kurdish gender and sexuality studies. This initiative was in response to the overlooked cases of sexual harassment within the Kurdish Studies Network, addressing an urgent need for a dedicated focus on these issues. According to Necla Aık et al. (2023), this network embraces a decolonial feminist perspective and actively engages in “struggles against oppression, marginalization, and silencing,” engaging in “the politics of recognition” (p. 277).

The 2012 Rojava revolution, led by the PYD and its armed wing YPG, has significantly increased academic attention on Kurdish women. This heightened interest can be attributed to the central role of women’s liberation in the revolution and to the formation of the YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Women’s Defense Units) in 2013, which later played a key role in the fight against ISIS.

In this context, the adoption of Öcalan’s ideas by the PYD, YPG, and YPJ has led the Kurdish women’s movement in Turkey to diverge from the feminist politics traditionally framed by Turkish feminists and has given them the opportunity to introduce their perspectives to an international audience. The institutionalization of knowledge established by the Kurdish women’s movement, known as Jineolojî (the science of women and life) since its inception in 2011 and its expansion with the establishment of Jineolojî academies in Rojava in 2017, has furthered scholarly

production on Kurdish women and the LGBTQ+ community (Açık et al., 2023, p. 265; Diyarbakır Women's Academy, 2021).

When I asked about her thoughts on Jineolojî and its contributions to feminist knowledge, Ayla said that the most exciting aspect of the Kurdish women's movement is their practical experimentation with certain theories. She remarked that while they discuss intersectionality and postcolonialism like many feminists do, they approach these concepts in a grounded way, and she can see the results of their application in reality. For example, she recalls participating in discussions about co-chairing before the system was implemented. In her opinion, these discussions should have a place in world literature because they were innovative and actively implemented. She was impressed by how Kurds were both implementing these ideas and simultaneously observing their outcomes. On the other hand, regarding the debates on Jineolojî, although she said that she respects their efforts, she could not observe a unique theoretical contribution there (Ayla, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

However, the co-chairing and quota system that ensures women's representation, which Ayla pointed out, takes place on the agenda of Jineolojî activists (Al-Ali & Käser, 2020, p.12). Kiymet, however, argues that Jineolojî is a theory that emerged precisely from the accumulated experiences of the Kurds over many years. Then, she started to recount the origins of the theorization of Kurdish women's experiences under the name of Jineolojî. She noted that for a long time, Kurdish women did not prioritize the women's struggle over the national struggle. Women who joined the Kurdish movement initially did not prioritize the women's struggle. However, she emphasized that from the moment a woman stepped into the struggle—whether it was women fighting on the mountains or ones engaged in legal

battles—they were, in fact, developing a gender struggle, even if it was not labeled as such initially. Kiymet pointed out that this struggle was described in various forms over time, first as *cins teorisi* (sex theory), then as “rupture theory” (*kopuş teorisi*), and later as the agenda of women’s liberation, culminating in the theorization of *Jineolojî*. She firmly stated, “No one can say this is not a theory.” This theory, rooted in their experiences, has various outcomes, evident in the Kurdish women’s movement through parliamentary formation, transnational connections, and what is now termed “the democratic confederal women’s struggle” (Kiymet, personal communication, December 28, 2023).

Kiymet observes a similar process in the emergence of *Jineolojî* and transnational theories, emphasizing that this struggle should be waged by women worldwide, not just women from the Global South. However, she insists that true solidarity must be centered on the struggle of the Global South, as only then can genuine transnational solidarity be achieved. Another premise of the transnational solidarity envisioned by *Jineolojî* is its stance against liberal feminism. According to Kiymet, *Jineolojî* does not engage with feminism, which does not have an anti-capitalist agenda; it instead collaborates with feminist projects and feminisms that aim to transform society. While there may be differences in how this transformation is achieved, finding common ground is essential, and this cannot happen with liberal feminisms. For instance, she places particular importance on the partnerships formed with women’s movements in Latin America, noting that the discussion held on international platforms revealed many commonalities between the experiences of Latin Americans and those of Kurds. During our interview, she frequently highlighted transnational solidarity, warning that without it, the struggle will

“marginalize itself,” “remain limited to itself,” and “not yield positive results for anyone” (Kiymet, personal communication, December 28, 2023).

From Kiymet’s statements, it is clear that the desire to establish international decolonial connections has begun to overshadow the ambition to engage in joint struggles with Turkish feminists. Their effort to have Turkish feminists recognize their ideas and experiences gradually gave way to a quest for international recognition. As a researcher influenced by decolonial approaches, Kiymet answered my questions about intellectual sharing with Turkish feminists with considerable reluctance. However, her tone conveyed excitement when she discussed interactions between the Kurdish women’s movement and women’s liberation movements from Latin America.

One reason for this departure, as previously mentioned, can be the repressive regimes in Turkey, which have prevented Turkish feminists from forming genuine connections with the Kurdish women’s movement. For instance, discussing issues such as racism and colonialism or considering the forms of violence-based struggle like armed resistance as a possibility for women’s emancipation could be challenging under repressive conditions. Thus, focusing on peace-oriented policies and theories has become a relatively safer way to build feminist solidarity while avoiding the Turkish state’s wrath. This conversation with Kiymet made me realize that a call for solidarity within the framework of peace efforts may no longer generate much enthusiasm among Kurdish women and could just be a matter of necessity to catch a breath under the harsh conditions of war.

4.5 Discussion

Evaluating these discussions reveals that feminist politics and feminist academic knowledge have developed in tandem in Turkey. The feminist movement in Turkey during the 1980s, characterized by its elitist nature, comprised many members who were either sympathizers of Marxist movements or born into Kemalist families. These feminists shaped their agenda through a rupture with these ideologies. Although they show explicit distance from Kemalism, they were privileged to a certain extent by Kemalist reforms. Also, they were largely unaware of state oppression against Kurds and the political activism, and subjectivity of Kurdish women. This is shown in academic works by scholars from this post-coup feminist generation since they studied Kurdish women under the category of “rural women from eastern Turkey” in the 1980s and the early 1990s.

Kurdish women, though, have long been waging their anti-patriarchal struggle within the socialist movement from the 1970s onwards. They articulated their specific experiences, differentiating themselves from both Kurdish socialist men and Turkish socialist women, and organized marches against patriarchy and state oppression. Many faced severe persecution by the junta regime, were imprisoned, and demonstrated unforgettable resistance to their prison guards and the state, which subjected them to torture and persecution. In contrast, the post-coup feminists were unaware of this resistance, as they were preoccupied with their own agenda of introducing feminist ideas to Turkey, institutionalizing Turkish feminism in universities, and discovering the history of the Turkish women’s movement.

In the advent of the 1990s, the significant mobilization of the Kurdish women’s movement, along with the inception of Kurdish feminist publications, facilitated the creation of dialogues between Turkish and Kurdish feminists. These

interactions were primarily focused on the advocacy for peace, most notably manifesting in the formation of antimilitarist coalitions during the 2000s. Such developments had a perceptible impact on the theoretical tendencies of feminist academic literature during this period, particularly highlighting the ways in which the Kurdish issue was approached by feminist scholars, with an emphasis on the themes of nationalism and militarism. Yet, it is hard to argue that grassroots connections substantially influenced feminist academic discourse from a theoretical standpoint, particularly in terms of integrating insights from Kurdish feminists or, more precisely, from the knowledge generated by autonomous Kurdish feminists and the Kurdish women's movement. This becomes apparent when we consider that there is a well-established body of academic work on gender and nationalism, whereas studies on gender and race remain fragmented and underdeveloped, with no comprehensive compilations available.

We can see that several factors may contribute to this, and every one of them is ideological. One reason for this gap is the adherence of Turkish universities to the foundational principles of the Republic of Turkey, specifically to the ideology of a nation-state built upon the tenets of a single state, a single religion, and a single language. This founding ideology has been perpetuated by successive authoritarian governments, which have consistently curtailed academic freedom. Despite the growing influence of the Kurdish women's movement and their interactions with feminist academics, the oppressive political climate hindered the visibility of the theories produced by Kurdish feminists and the Kurdish women's movement. The repression of dissenting voices and limited space for academic freedom prevented a more comprehensive and inclusive feminist academic discourse from developing.

The erosion of feminist solidarity between Turks and Kurds, coupled with the lack of academic freedom, has led to a significant detachment of Kurdish gender studies from the Turkish context. This detachment has intensified particularly with the Rojava revolution, the institutionalization of Jineolojî in Rojava and the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and North America, and the establishment of decolonial and transnational connections. Consequently, the rupture in grassroots movements is reflected in knowledge production as a delinking from Turkey's feminist episteme.

So, what kind of feminist knowledge is produced on Kurdish women in the face of these changing conditions, and what transformation could we observe in the academic literature? The next chapter attempts to answer these questions by exploring the feminist academic discourse surrounding nationalism and women, and analyzing how this scholarship has developed over time. This exploration will be informed by conversations with scholars, offering a roadmap of academic texts to examine and angles to consider. My approach to selecting texts is strategic. Through these texts, I aim to present the transformation of analytical approaches indicated in this chapter by tracing Kurdish women in gender and nationalism literature rather than trying to cover every available piece exhaustively. Nonetheless, the sample can be considered representative of the discussed time period due to the high influence of the texts, as evidenced by citation counts, and as some of them were referred to by academics during our interviews.

The research questions for the literature analysis have been revised based on the valuable perspectives gained from the interviews. After contemplating the interview data, I came up with the following questions to scrutinize the transformation of academic knowledge on Kurdish women: Considering the encounters, collaborations, and separations within grassroots movements, how do

these dynamics influence the production of knowledge? Specifically, how did the period before the late 1990s, marked by a lack of awareness about Kurdish women in feminist circles, shape scholars' understanding of women and nationalism?

Additionally, how do the interactions and collaborations between autonomous Kurdish feminists, the Kurdish women's movement, and Turkish feminists resonate in the academic discourse on Kurdish women during the 2000s? Furthermore, what theoretical shifts have occurred in response to political developments such as the YPG's declaration of autonomy in Syria, the cessation of peace negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish state, and the intensification of state violence against Kurdish citizens, particularly in the Kurdish region in 2015-2016?

CHAPTER 5

SHIFTING APPROACHES TO KURDISH WOMEN IN FEMINIST ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

5.1 Kurdish women as “femina grata” of the Turkish nation

The findings from the previous chapter have led me to begin my inquiry by analyzing the scholarship established by post-coup feminist academicians, who confronted Kemalism from the gender perspective for the first time. Given that they represent the first wave of feminist critiques of nationalism, I refer to them briefly as “the first wave”. The first wave, born as a critique of the Jacobin nature of Kemalism with its top-down reforms, culminated in a critique influenced by postcolonial thought. Their work has come to be deeply informed by and has later contributed to the theorizations of postcolonial scholars who assert that nationalism cannot be fully understood without recognizing the impact of gender and the central role of the women’s question in nationalist projects (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989; Chatterjee, 1993; Jayawardena 1986/2016).

5.1.1 Turkey as a post-colonial country

Tekeli was the first to challenge Kemalism within feminist academic circles. According to Tekeli (1981), Mustafa Kemal granted women their civil rights *de jure* and, to some extent, enabled their participation in public life; yet this was a mere strategy for him to prove the democratic nature of his single-party regime against the accusation of his being a dictator. Tekeli adds that Mustafa Kemal wanted to distance of his regime from European fascist regimes of the time (p. 298). Her argument was subsequently discussed, widely acknowledged, and received contributions from

feminist researchers (Arat, Z., 1994; Arat, Y., 1997; Berkday, 2003; Göle, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1987, 1991c; Sancar, 2011, 2012).

However, Tekeli (1981) does not fully inquire into the crucial role that women's questions played in Turkish modernization. Specifically, she does not explain why Mustafa Kemal singled out the issue of women's rights from a range of issues in the name of proving his regime's divergence from the fascist regimes of the time and portraying it as fundamentally democratic. Deniz Kandiyoti subsequently fills this lacuna in Tekeli's account. Kandiyoti is one of the first scholars who introduced the postcolonial critique in women's studies in Turkey. Her work could be read as an effort to incorporate postcolonial perspectives into studies of Turkish modernity and gender.²⁷ Although she acknowledges that Ottoman Turkey was not subject to direct colonial rule by European powers, she suggests that employing postcolonial theory can help us adequately present the tensions between Turkey's desire to "catch up with the West"—like those in previously colonized countries—and its desire to preserve cultural distinctiveness (Kandiyoti, 2002, p.3). Owing much to postcolonial thinkers, particularly Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the "resolution of women's question" in India, she explains how Turkish nationalist elites used women as measures of civilization (Kandiyoti, 1997a).

Partha Chatterjee (1993) argues that Bengali cultural nationalists successfully resolved the women's question in the face of cultural domination of the colonizers although this resolution was accomplished mainly by denying women a voice. Chatterjee (1993) contends that Indian nationalists became successful in their endeavors because they adopted the material techniques of Western modernity to counter European domination without compromising the spiritual essence of Indian

²⁷ Kandiyoti (2002) acknowledges her contributions to postcolonial scholarship in her discussion of post-colonialism in the context of the Middle East (p. 282).

culture. In other words, according to him, those nationalists believed that the East was superior in the spiritual realm and, therefore, it was necessary to preserve this spiritual core while selectively adopting aspects of Western life. This strategy allowed the nationalists to modernize Indian society without erasing the cultural distinction between East and West (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 120–121).

According to Chatterjee, the women's question was central to the modernization project of the nationalists, who used the identity of the "new woman" to balance modernization with traditional values. On the one hand, they allowed women to enter the public sphere and promoted gender-based reforms in the public sphere, such as women's education and participation in social movements, to showcase progress and modernity. This strategy aimed to counter colonial criticism of women's backwardness and demonstrate women as an image of progress. In effect, these reforms were carefully designed to fit traditional cultural norms, ensuring they did not challenge the established social order. In contrast, the private sphere, including the family and domestic roles, was primarily preserved according to traditional values. The "new woman", on the one hand, should embrace "spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on"; on the other hand, these roles do not impede women from entering into the public sphere, in contrast, the image of women as "goddesses" or "mothers" enables to erase their sexuality facilitates their stepping out of the private sphere (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 131). It is interesting to see that Chatterjee (1993) emphasizes that it would be a mistake to call this kind of nationalism conservatism (p. 121).

As Bannerji (2001) rightly points out, Chatterjee's analysis of nationalism dangerously oversimplifies the complex dynamics and different nationalist projects between colonial and indigenous social reformers. In praising Hindu revivalist

nationalism, Chatterjee casts aside liberal-nationalist and national liberation movements as derivative of colonialism or Western-inspired (Bannerji, 2001, p. 61). By labeling these nationalist projects as a derivative of colonialism and positing Hindu cultural nationalism as the only legitimate model of anticolonial nationalism, Chatterjee reinforces the modern east-traditional west divide. We now have the enlightened West and the traditional, spiritual East, and all other distinctions seem to be erased.

Although Kandiyoti says that the combination of post-structuralism and postcolonialism allows going beyond binary oppositions such as “East/West,” “traditional/modern,” and “native/foreign,” this seemingly led to an opposite impact both in her analysis and analyses of the subsequent gender scholars who adopt a post-colonial framework. For instance, Sirman (2004 and 2005), with the inspiration of Hall (1996), reads the process of Turkish nation-making from a post-colonial perspective because, for her, Turkey is a country born from the Ottoman Empire, “the sick man of Europe” that subjected to various imperial desires of European powers (Sirman, 2005, p. 150). She articulates her thoughts in this regard as follows:

Defining the colonial both as ‘a system of rule and power, and exploitation, and... as a system of knowledge and representation’, Hall refuses to locate the post-colonial in particular space, that is, in societies that have been colonized... [I]n spite of the fact that Turkey has never been formally colonized, it can be argued that social practices, especially those related to the position of women in society, are assessed and rendered meaningful only in relation to those in the developed West. (Sirman, 2004, p. 40)

Another example could be Serpil Sancar (2011 and 2012), who distinguishes between colonial and post-colonial nationalism by associating the former with the development of industrial capitalism. When discussing nationalist projects, she utilizes Chatterjee to establish a dichotomy between colonial nationalisms and the nationalisms of Third World societies under the threat of colonization. According to

this dichotomy, Third World nationalisms emerge as efforts to build modern states that can compete with the “material-technical-scientific reality developed by Western science and technology” while simultaneously striving to preserve their spiritual values and traditions (Sancar, 2012, pp. 46-47). Within this framework, she argues that, unlike the early industrialized countries, modernization in Turkey was framed not by capitalist industrialization but by “Turkish nationalism”, which stood against Western colonialism (Sancar, 2011, p. 69). In this regard, she compares Turkey and India, emphasizing their shared history of opposing colonial domination, and discusses the women’s question of the early Republic within the context of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle (Sancar, 2012, p. 74).

Instead of challenging the established binaries between modern and traditional, these approaches often reinforce them. The dichotomy between East and West was perpetuated, with the West characterized as early industrialized, embodying Enlightenment values such as rationality, calculation, and democracy, while the East was portrayed as late industrialized, grappling with existential threats from Western imperialism, and characterized by sentimentality, authenticity, intuition, and spontaneity. Within this division, Turkey is categorized in the latter group. Post-colonial thought provides a potential resolution to the impasse that Tekeli left for subsequent scholarship regarding the motivations of Kemalists in their approach to women. However, this approach may also introduce certain challenges. For example, while Tekeli suggested comparing fascist Europe with Turkey, the post-colonial perspective often juxtaposes Turkey with post-colonial states such as India. Scholars who view Turkey through a postcolonial lens often miss the continuity from its imperial past, focusing instead on its less industrialized economy compared to the West and its vulnerability to other imperial powers. It is now

important to study how applying postcolonial theory within the Turkish context presents specific problems.

5.1.2 Defining “femina grata”

Similar to her fellow postcolonial scholars, Kandiyoti (1997a) was critical of the “abstract” concept of patriarchy that widely dominated Western feminist discourse. Her dissatisfaction grew after conducting comparative research across the Middle East, Southern Asia, and Africa, where she noted that the forms of male dominance varied significantly between regions. Consequently, she argued that a proper understanding of women’s agency and their strategies of subordination and negotiation requires an appreciation of the specific contexts in which they are situated. In her analysis of Islam and patriarchy, Kandiyoti argues that viewing Islam as an “obvious” and “monolithic” category, as traditionally done by Western feminists, hinders a nuanced understanding of the complex, locally specific dynamics that affect women. Similarly, she seeks to show that patriarchy is neither abstract nor homogeneous by criticizing the characterization of male-dominated relations in Muslim countries under the umbrella term “Muslim patriarchy” (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 24). For instance, in her pioneering book *Women, Islam, and The State*, Kandiyoti (1991b) addresses the complexities between nationalism and Islam and demonstrates that we should take the varying political consequences of the tension between nationalism and Islamism in various nation-building processes in Middle Eastern societies seriously. Her analysis was considered as a significant contribution to scholarship by outlining how Kemalism differed from other nation-building projects in the Middle East. Kandiyoti (1991b) conceptualizes the ethos of Kemalist nationalism in the following words:

In Turkey where the process of secularisation went furthest, the shift from a multi-ethnic empire to an Anatolia-based nation state involved a progressive distancing between cultural nationalism and Islam and culminated in Kemalist republicanism. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk not only dismantled the central institutions of Ottoman Islam by abolishing the caliphate and secularising every sphere of life, but took measures to heighten Turkey's "Turkish" national consciousness at the expense of a wider Islamic identification: the compulsory romanisation of the alphabet, the new dress code and an elaborate rereading of Turkish history stressing its pre-Islamic heritage were elements of the cultural mobilisation in the service of the new state (p. 4).

The abrogation of the *shari'a*, the adoption of a secular Civil Code in 1926 and the enfranchisement of women in 1934 became part of a broader struggle to liquidate the institutions of the Ottoman state and establish a republican notion of citizenship. (p. 10)

According to Kandiyoti (1991a), the adoption of the 1926 Turkish Civil Code, which prohibited polygamy and granted equal rights to both spouses for divorce and child custody, and granting suffrage rights to women (in 1930-local and 1934-general elections) were a part of the large-scale struggle to dismantle the remnants of Ottoman rule. She states that their anti-imperialist stance restrained Kemalists from adopting Western-style modernization to the core, and the Republic built upon a peculiar form of nationalism (p. 432). For her, secular modernist elites of Republican Turkey strived to reconcile modern values with traditional ideologies over the status of women. In this respect, the formation of *femina grata* (makbul kadın) was the concomitant of the nationalist discourse, which synthesizes and transforms modern values with authentic cultural ones (Kandiyoti, 1997a).

In their project of creating *femina grata*, instead of underpinned Islamic values in their nationalist projects, Kemalists aimed to construct a new national consciousness firmly rooted in a Turkish identity free from religious associations and to nourish a new sense of unity and belonging among the citizens of the Republic. They thought this would help them avoid the anti-modernist complaints about preserving national identity from contaminating foreign influences. In this regard,

they attributed modern norms to the pre-Islamic way of life and revitalized pre-Islamic Turkic culture in contrast to what were perceived as the backward elements of Ottoman society. Bringing out the myth of pre-Islamic egalitarian Turks provided a way for the Kemalists to out of the tensions between Islam and Western civilization²⁸ (Durakbaşı 2000, p. 121, Göle 1996, p. 47, Kandiyoti 1997b, pp.127-128, Sancar 2012, p. 121); and enabled them to purge all manifestations of religion from public life (Kandiyoti, 1991c, p. 38). In Kandiyoti's words:

From Islamists who advocated a return to the unadulterated application of the Shari'a to Westernists who favored a radical break with Islam, all used the condition of women as an indicator of the moral health of society. Cultural nationalism created a new discursive space by appropriating women's emancipation in the name of *pre-Islamic Turkish egalitarianism*²⁹ and condemning certain aspects of Ottoman patriarchy (such as polygyny and the seclusion of women) as a corruption of original Turkish mores. The republic adopted this approach to women's emancipation as an item of official state ideology. (1997b, pp. 124-125)

According to Kandiyoti (1991c), it was not Gökalp's sociology that played a central role in shaping Turkish nationalism, but it was indeed physical anthropology, eventually bearing the Turkish History Thesis as its fruit (p. 40). She says that Mustafa Kemal's was an attempt to prove Turks' being "the true heirs of their Anatolian homeland" and to "claim their rightful place in the development of world civilization" (p. 40) in his reinvention of Turkish nationalism based on elements perceived as origination from pre-Islamic Turkic culture (Kandiyoti, 1997b, pp. 124-125).³⁰ Accordingly, they promoted the nuclear family over the "traditional"

²⁸ Discovering pre-Islamic Turkish roots was originally the idea of Ziya Gökalp. Nilüfer Göle (1996:44-47) explains very well how his envision of nationalism consisted in the pre-Islamic Turkish culture and built the "ideal woman" accordingly. Yet, as noted by Kandiyoti (1991), Kemalism upgraded this idea by abandoning Gökalp's Durkheimian sociology in favor of physical anthropology (p. 40).

²⁹ My emphasis.

³⁰ Mustafa Kemal indeed shifted focus from sociology to anthropology by leaving Gökalp's sociology aside and investing in physical anthropology, which was on the rise at the time. He personally sent his adopted daughter Afet İnan to study physical anthropology under the supervision of Eugene Pittard in Geneva. The aim of this project was to prove that Turks are from the superior white race. He

extended family. They advocated that marriage should not be arranged but rather based on the free choice of spouses and companionship (Kandiyoti, 1991c) and that children would be “scientifically” raised by mothers trained in child-rearing and household techniques (White, 2003, p. 146).

They also underpinned indigenous values by promoting a motherly, patriotic, self-sacrificing Anatolian woman over a Western woman who symbolizes moral corruption and unchastity (Berktaş, 2003; p. 110; Kandiyoti, 1997a, pp. 22-23; Sancar 2012, p. 121). This was not mere nationalist propaganda but a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. In other words, Kemalists included women in the nation-building project only if they complied with these authentic yet modern roles. For this reason, the first-wave scholars condemned nationalist elites for, once again, banishing women to the subordinate position by reproducing traditional roles in modern forms (Arat, 1994; Berktaş, 2003; Kandiyoti, 1997a; Sancar 2011, 2012). In this respect, Fatmagül Berktaş (2003) states that:

...upon closer examination of the era’s perception of women, it is clear that there is no fundamental distinction between the traditionalist and modernizing stereotypes concerning gender roles. The idealized “new woman” envisioned by Kemalist men “embraced familial, societal, and national responsibilities, living primarily for others”. The most prominent qualities attributed to women were self-sacrifice and relinquishment on behalf of others. (p. 108, own translation) (See Appendix B, 14).

In this regard, Serpil Sancar (2011) argues that countries like Turkey established a nation-state not through industrialization but through nationalism standing against Western colonialism. According to Sancar, since industrial capitalism did not develop in Turkey, the demand for women’s participation in the workforce was low,

established the Turkish Historical Society to focus on these topics and appointed Afet İnan as co-chair at a young age. Afet İnan’s research was a large-scale study conducted with 64,000 people from all over Turkey, with state resources dedicated to her work. This theory, supported by the Turkish Historical Society and its research, sought to place the Turks at the pinnacle of the racial hierarchy, asserting that they were a “white” race with a profound influence on early civilizations (Toprak, 2015).

so women did not break away from the family and kinship-oriented community culture. Sancar (2011) criticizes Kemalists as they made use of this circumstance in support of their nationalistic goals in the following words:

...the understanding of modernization, shaped by a desire to establish a state, has assigned men to establish the state and women to establish modern families... Emphasizing the role of the “modern mother” as the educator of the nation and promoting the image of the “strong woman” overshadowed the debates about what women’s rights are, and the idea of gender equality could not penetrate the dominant mentality sufficiently. (p. 69, own translation) (See Appendix B, 15).

For the first-wave scholars, on the one hand, the Kemalist regime granted civil rights to women *de jure*; on the other hand, they did not give women equal opportunities to participate in various aspects of social life. Far from aiming at transforming the cultural norms associated with gender relations, the regime embraced and disseminated cultural nationalism that would undermine women’s liberation (Kandiyoti, 1987; Durakbaşı, 2000). Moreover, Turkish nationalism contributed to the repression of women’s sexuality; for instance, women were desexualized or masculinized under the Kemalist rule (Arat, 1997, p. 105; Berktaş, 2003, p. 110; Göle 1996, p. 79; Durakbaşı 2000, pp. 27-28; Kandiyoti, 1988; Sancar 2011, p. 142). They were unable to achieve full individuality to the same extent as men (Berktaş, 2003, p. 107) as their societal roles did not go beyond being “good mothers and wives,” “chaste Republican girls,” etc., in the project of cultural nationalism that brought together modernization and conservative, puritanical sexual morality (Durakbaşı, 2000, p. 27; Kandiyoti, 1997b, pp. 126-127). As a result, Kemalist modernization failed to improve women’s status, which had been inferior to that of men (Arat, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1987, 1997a; Sancar, 2012; Berktaş, 2003; Zihnioğlu, 2003).

Despite this wave of scholars being very much critical of Kemalism, it is safe to say that most observed substantial progress in the Kemalist project. Here, Kandiyoti's interpretation of Turkish nationalism as "progressive" might lie in the presupposition that the anti-imperialist sentiment regarding the West in the case of Turkey did not culminate in religious revivalism. To elaborate, Kandiyoti was well-informed about the implications of colonial intervention in a society ruled by political Islam, particularly concerning its consequences for women. For instance, this concern can be understood by considering the example of Pakistan. In *Women, Islam, and The State* (edited by Kandiyoti), Jalal (1991) discussed these destructive effects. According to Jalal, the social conservatism that prevailed in the domestic sphere was reinforced by the imposition of the British Raj. The Islamic cultural response to the colonial threat, in fact, was willing to accommodate, even "desire", a compromise with the colonial masters on the condition that the British colonial administration did not interfere with the established norms of the private sphere. The question of allowing the colonial state to amend Sharia was out of the question, particularly because it affected the family structure, and women's education had to start and end within the safe walls of the home. Limiting women's education to household chores and religious teachings isolated them from the corrupting influences of the public sphere (Jalal, 1991, pp. 80-81). According to Kandiyoti (1991b), constructing an Islamic identity through regressive laws that primarily targeted women was "a logical step," considering that "the control of women and their appropriate conduct had long been used to demarcate the identity and boundaries of the Muslim community" (p. 6).

Taking this into account, the fact that Kemalist cultural nationalism is based upon secular values rather than religious ones might have been conceived as

something positive for Kandiyoti to a great extent when she talks about “the progressive distancing” of Kemalism from Islam (Kandiyoti, 1991c, p.4). It is widely acknowledged in the first-wave literature that women have been granted equal citizenship rights with men since the 1930s (Ağduk-Gevrek, 2000, p. 305), and Kemalism, to some extent, improved the status of women by encouraging them to participate in the labor force and education (Berktaş, 2003; Kandiyoti, 1987). Which women’s status was improved, and which women were excluded from the nationalist imaginary? In the next section, I elaborate on this issue.

5.1.3 The resolution of women’s question and “other” women of Turkey

The effectiveness of the Kemalist reforms cannot be explained just by the regime’s imposition from the top; it is also the result of women’s active participation and taking advantage of the opportunities given. Drawing from Jayawardena (1986), the first-wave scholars emphasize that women were not passive victims of nationalist projects and that they were able to carve out spaces for themselves in the realm of politics (Berktaş 2003:111, Durakbaşı, 2000, p. 93; Kandiyoti, 1991a, p. 440; Sancar 2012, pp. 178-179).

Kandiyoti (1987) concedes that the Kemalist reforms were “class-biased” as they benefited urban bourgeois women. According to her, the overall female university students are from a higher “socioeconomic status” whereas the Kemalist reforms have not yet penetrated the rural areas to fully integrate them into the national economy. She states that because the integration is not that successful, rural communities favor religious ceremonies over civil marriage, allowing for polygamy; they maintain traditions such as early marriage for girls and bride price and refuse girls’ education (pp. 322-323). Despite all, Kandiyoti concludes that women in

Turkey were emancipated, although they were not liberated (Kandiyoti, 1987, p. 324). It conveys a sense of relief in the prevalence of Turkish cultural revivalism over the possibility of an Islamic revival, suggesting that this path was ultimately better for women.

Berktaş (2003) furthers this “emancipation” formula of resolution of women’s question with the following words:

Of course, “Ottoman feminism” was not limited to Muslim-Turkish women. In this respect, it is enough to prove this fact by emphasizing that some of the Muslim-Turkish women’s associations are open to women of “all nationalities,” let alone that recent studies have shown the associations and activities of women of various nationalities. However, I believe that there is an internal connection, both empirical and theoretical, between Turkish nationalism and Turkish feminism, which rose in parallel with the acceleration of the disintegration process of the empire. Therefore, while I find the warning not to make invisible the struggles of “other women” (Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Assyrian, Circassian, Kurdish, etc.) very meaningful, I especially emphasize that nationalism, the founding ideology of the Republic, and “Turkish feminism” go hand in hand. This reflects reality and also determines the limits of the women’s movement in Turkey. (p. 97, own translation) (See Appendix B, 16)

...after the establishment of the Republic, women found the opportunity to be emancipated from the pressures of religious and ethnic communities and to enter public spaces. This was a considerable achievement for them and served as an understandable reason for women to embrace the modernist/nationalist project firmly. (p. 110, my translation) (See Appendix B, 17)

This shows that for Berktaş, the legal recognition of their rights and the encouragement of their participation in public life have allowed women to break away from traditional patriarchal bonds and, hereby, have facilitated their engagement with nationalist ideologies. However, her narrative demonstrates that she found Kemalism emancipatory at the expense of the “exclusion” of Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Assyrian, Circassian, and Kurdish women from nationalist imagination.

Saying that the women’s movement in Turkey has been primarily led by Turkish women is indeed nothing but begging the question of what has happened to

“other women” and their organizations in the first place and what developments contributed to the ascendancy of Turkish feminism that “goes hand in hand” with Turkish nationalism, resulting in its dominance over the women's movement. Berktaş does not explain the reasons for this development, except for mentioning “the acceleration of the disintegration process of the empire”. This statement, as it stands, is notably vague. It does not explain what aspects of “disintegration” eventually caused the uniformity in the women’s movement.

Berktaş is not the only one who glosses over this period as “the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire” and presents the period between 1913 and 1918 to us in conformity with revisionist historiography. The period is described in other first-wave texts, paralleling the state’s official narrative, with phrases such as “dislocation and human losses” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 274) and “large population movements, displacements, and mass traumas” (Sancar, 2012, p. 97). The conformity between academic knowledge and official ideology manifests itself in the accounts of Kandiyoti (1988) and Sancar (2012) about Ottoman women’s active participation in politics through the philanthropic organization, the Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women (Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i İslâmiyesi).

Sancar (2012) elaborates that the Ottomans organized charity work in the name of solving the problems caused by “large population movements, displacements, and mass traumas” in the aftermath of “the Balkan wars, population exchanges, the First World War and the Armenian deportation” (p. 97). According to Sancar, poverty, homelessness, and the rise in the number of orphans and widows culminated in the need for social solidarity, and Ottoman women became the actors of “social healing” (p. 97). However, she does not provide a clear explanation of what these initiatives were exactly “healing.” While it is already problematic to

conflate the trauma of Armenian women and of other women vis-à-vis the Genocide, their approach to the Society founded by Enver Pasha, silences the history of Armenian women even further.

Kandiyoti (1998) argues that the primary goal of the CUP was to create a native Turkish-Muslim middle class, and therefore, the emphasis on employing and educating women stemmed more from the need for new cadres rather than a move towards achieving gender equality. Furthermore, she asserts that the humanitarian losses resulting from wars facilitated women's entry into occupations traditionally occupied by men, thereby enabling women's involvement in the war effort as laborers (p. 274). After mentioning women's role in charity organizations, Sancar, criticizes the Society that none of its members were women. This was Sancar's single objection. In fact, besides Enver Pasha's being one of the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide, the Society itself played a role as an intermediary in the transfer of orphaned Armenian children from Anatolia to Istanbul following the aftermath of the Genocide. The Ministry of Interior adopted Armenian girls to Muslim households to work as concubines, maids, or wives, while boys were distributed to Istanbul or Anatolia to work on farms, factories, or small businesses (Maksudyan, 2016, p. 151). This amounts to the continuation of the *devshirme* practice in the Ottoman era and a genocidal act as clearly defined by the Genocide Convention.³¹

³¹ Article II of the United States' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as any one of the following acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (UN General Assembly, 1948).

While the genocides and racist policies did not find a place in the first-wave accounts, some scholars studied Kurdish women as “rural women” without including the imperial history of Turkey into account. In the next sub-section, we delve into these accounts.

5.1.4 Kurdish women as “rural women”

Not integrating racist practices against Kurds (ban on speaking in their mother tongue, poor education and health care services, constant state of exception) into their analysis has caused the first wave of scholars to consider the Kurdish issue under the broader discussion of the underdevelopment of rural areas. For this reason, “Kurdish women” are readily compensated by “rural women” within this framework. Their analysis of class among women is reduced to an urban-rural divide, and this understanding of inequality, which lacks a discussion of racializing capitalism, made them articulate the exploitation and subordination of Kurdish women as a failure of modernization, namely a failure of civilizing missions in rural areas. To put it differently, the scholars’ concern lies in the inadequate dissemination of the Kemalist reforms to effectively reach and benefit the wider populace.

The first study to examine Kurdish women in Turkey from a developmental perspective is Yakın Ertürk’s doctoral research at Cornell University, resulting in the article *Rural Women and Modernization in South-eastern Anatolia* (1995). In this article, Ertürk (1995) argues that modernization weakened rather than empowered women in the “East,” particularly those living in Kurdish villages. She discusses how the inability of Kurdish women to speak Turkish left them vulnerable under modern laws, depriving them of civil registration and, consequently, of custody and inheritance rights. After analyzing the field data, Ertürk (1995) concludes that the

lack of legal citizenship for Kurdish women is rooted in the state's unsuccessful institutional integration efforts, which lack a gender-oriented approach (pp. 145-146). This deficiency arises because many development projects, designed by technical experts, assume the sex-segregated nature of Kurdish society, and implement their initiatives accordingly. Ertürk (1995) proposes that involving NGOs attuned to the "diversity of women's experiences" in state-led development projects could significantly advance progress in the region (pp. 148-149).

Kandiyoti also talks about this case by referencing Ertürk's study:

Republican reforms were a remote and unrealized ideal for the vast majority of rural women. Indeed, Yakin Ertürk argues that, paradoxically, rural women of eastern Anatolia may have been even further marginalized by the secular reforms because their access to institutions of the modern state was mediated through men, whose own access was in turn dependent upon the intercession of more powerful men such as tribal leaders, landlords, and leaders of religious sects. Thus, women's encounters with modern or secular structures merely bound them even more tightly to local power holders rather than defining them as equal citizens of the state. (Kandiyoti, 1997b, p. 125)

These accounts, which targeted the failed attempts of state-sponsored policies of "national integration," did not consider that the pauperization of Kurdish women and their deprivation of citizenship rights resulted from the very policies of "national integration." As I stated in chapter three, these policies include not only a long period of murders of indigenous non-Turkish, non-Muslim communities but also land and property confiscation from them. The Kemalist government's genocidal acts during their rule through military operations impacted the lives of Kurdish women in the region in detrimental ways. Some women were murdered, and some were displaced with their families along with *tedip* (discipline) and *tenkil* (suppression) operations held by the state between 1924 and 1938 (Döger, 2022; Yüksel, 2023). The girls from Dersim were distributed to members of the military and civilian bureaucracy (Gündoğan & Gündoğan, 2012). The formative violence paved the way for a process

of assimilationist measures such as prohibiting the native language of these communities by law and forcibly teaching Turkish.

However, upon reviewing the first-wave texts, it becomes apparent that the scholars took Kemalism's self-image at face value to a large extent in their analysis of Turkish modernization and nation-state building regarding ethnic and religious minorities. All the first-wave texts examined in this chapter assume that the prominent feature of Kemalist nation-building was its secularization of Sharia-based societal order, and Turkish nationalism is first and foremost an ideology opposed to Western imperialism and Ottoman *ancien régime*. In their imagination, Kemalism crafts an image of Turkish and Kurdish women that fits into the mold of the universal female citizen—the femina grata of the Turkish nation. This ideal woman is a symbol of modernity, defined by her dress and adherence to secular values, yet she also carries the weight of authenticity, embodying the self-sacrificial and maternal traits that are expected of Anatolian women.

This understanding led them to make broad generalizations and fail to see how the state implemented specific policies and civilizing missions targeting Kurdish women. Because they did not take into account these specific imperial policies, they conceived the oppression and exploitation of Kurdish women to their familial and tribal bonds. As a result, they presented illiberal bourgeois and cultural revivalist Turkish nationalism as progressive and Kemalist reforms as emancipatory, despite the Kemalist regime benefiting primarily Turkish upper- and middle-class women.

In this sense, the first-wave scholarship was closely aligned with the main tenets of Kemalist ideology, particularly in its division of women in Turkey along rural-urban lines. This perspective misconceived Turkey as a postcolonial country, overlooking its own imperial past. It is precisely between these lines, where, as

Ekmekçioğlu (2006) notes, a smooth transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic is assumed, that the silences about the imperial violence reproduced.

The above discussion demonstrates that the omission extends beyond “other women” to include the mass murders and other forms of persecution committed against them during the period discussed. As I traced the absence of the crimes against Kurdish women, I encountered the absence of Armenian, Greek, Syriac, and Arab women in the feminist academic literature, which allegedly recounts the history of “women in Turkey,” while some paid lip service to them in later studies (Berktaş, 2003; Zihnioğlu, 2003; Sancar, 2012; Çakır, 2021).

No matter whether they conceive that Kemalism was progressive or not, the formulation of Turkish nationalism as a post-colonial nationalism was embraced and reproduced by the succeeding studies focusing on women and Turkish modernization (Göle, 1996; Arat, 1997; Durakbaşı, 2000; Sancar, 2012; Çakır, 2021). That is, despite the differences, the salient feature of the first wave is its emphasis on the laicism of the Kemalist regime. Scholars often accentuate that Kemalist nationalism developed vis-à-vis the West and as a response to the Ottoman past that was perceived as a symbol of Islamic backwardness (Arat, 1997; Çakır, 1994; Durakbaşı, 2000; Göle, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1997a; Sancar, 2012; Toprak, 2022). Islamic reaction (*irtica*) is believed to have operated as the constitutive Other of Turkish nationalism during the early Republican era. Accordingly, Kemalist formulation of nationalism was considered a coping strategy of Turkish modernist cadres, namely, as a reaction that was developed in the face of Europe’s technological and political power, which was perceived as a threat to the political and territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

How does the second-wave scholarship of the 2000s, which draws from the same postcolonial framework, analyze Kurdish women? What has changed in the approach towards Kurdish women? The following section purports to present some valuable insights into this subject.

5.2 Kurdish women as “femina grata” of the Kurdish nation

We can observe that studies addressing Kurdish women as members of an ethnic group began to emerge in the early 2000s. When studying the condition of Kurdish women, they rely on the theoretical framework established by the first wave of scholars, as examined in the previous section. As we saw in chapter four, this suggests that the theoretical hegemony of feminist academia, which is predominantly led by Turkish scholars, persists despite changes in the object of analysis.

The works I analyze in this chapter, such as Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder’s *90’larda Türkiye’de siyasal söylemin dönüşümü çerçevesinde Kürt kadınların imajı: Bazı eleştirel değerlendirmeler* [*The Image of Kurdish Women in the Framework of the Transformation of the Political Discourse in Turkey in the 1990s: Some Critical Evaluations*] (2000), and Handan Çağlayan’s *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar* [*Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses*] (2007/2019), scrutinize how Kurdish women have become political agents.³² Both studies build on the theoretical perspective and methodology of the first-wave literature in their discussion of Kurdish women. To elaborate, they analyze “Kurdish nationalism” eclectic use of theories of Kandiyoti (1997a), Chatterjee (1993), and Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1989).

³²As I indicated in chapter two, I decided to discuss the Turkish (2007) and the English (2019) editions separately, carefully examining their differences. The English edition underwent some critical revisions, given that there have been significant developments for Kurdish women in the intervening years. Thus, when I use Çağlayan (2019/2007), I refer to content or themes that are consistent across both the 2007 Turkish edition and the 2019 English edition. Moreover, when there are differences between the editions that are relevant to my analysis, I will cite them separately.

Both studies employ a formulation theorized by Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) in their analysis of Kurdish nationalism. The formulation delineates five major ways through which nationalist projects incorporate women into their agenda:

- (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
 - (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
 - (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
 - (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
 - (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.
- (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989, p.7)

Unlike Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder (2000), who utilize Kandiyoti's theory to illustrate nationalism's dual nature—where it is both a modern project that brings new dimensions to traditional tendencies and a project that reaffirms “authentic” cultural values (p. 329)—Çağlayan (2019/2007) turns to Chatterjee (1993) to explain Kurdish women's voluntary participation. Çağlayan finds Chatterjee's framework more conducive to viewing women not merely as passive instruments but as active contributors to the construction of the nation (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 24; 2019, p. 8). Because Çağlayan believes that her feminist perspective made her “trace the strategies that women develop for adaptation and empowerment,” she finds Kandiyoti's (2013) concept of the patriarchal bargain particularly useful in her analysis (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 26; 2019, p. 9). Her choice of Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchy, which pertains to societies with agriculture-based economies, seemingly stems from her perception of Kurdish society as predominantly rural.

This established body of knowledge on women and nationalism provides a useful framework for understanding how Kurdish women's roles within Kurdish nationalism parallel those of women from the Global South, as theorized by Kandiyoti, Anthias & Yuval-Davis, and Chatterjee. However, its applicability to new data, such as Kurdish nationalism or Kurdish women, is questionable. In fact, it may even constrain scholars' understanding of the historically specific conditions of Kurds and render them ill-prepared to grasp the different trajectories of various Kurdish nationalist projects. In the following section, we will examine how researchers from the second wave approached Kurdish women, while also delving deeper into the gaps and limitations within their theoretical perspectives.

5.2.1 Kurdish nationalism versus Turkish nationalism

One of the initial studies in this direction is Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder's article (2000), which aims to explain "the parallel and diverging developments and processes between the image of Turkish women in the Republic of Turkey and that of Kurdish women in the Kurdish movement" by looking into representations of Kurdish and Turkish women during the 1990s (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000, p. 331). Their findings were based upon discourse analysis on verbal and visual texts as well as individual interviews they conducted with Kurdish women. The authors examine women's magazines produced by Kurdish women with varied political perspectives, with a particular focus on the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's writings on the women's question. Following a thorough depiction of Kurdish women's portrayal, the discussion shifts to media representations of two prominent political figures: Leyla Zana, the first Kurdish female deputy, and Tansu Çiller, the first female Prime Minister of Turkey. They then compare these representations

within their respective nationalist contexts, specifically the Turkish and Kurdish nationalist projects, to understand their significance.

In employing the formulation of Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989), their analysis reveals that three major roles stand out among others: Guerilla, politician, and mother. More specifically, the authors argue that the Kurdish nationalist intellectuals featured Kurdish women as “suffering mothers” and bearers of authentic Kurdishness, reproducers of the new generation of Kurds, and contributors to the national liberation. For them, these images do not represent typical Kurdish women; instead, they seem to be fabricated for propagandist purposes (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000, p. 331). The authors argue that motherhood was granted a new meaning throughout this process of nation-making. To elaborate, for them, the old image of Kurdish women as victims of Turkish modernity has now turned into bearers of authentic culture who resist Turkish modernity (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000, p.7).

Aside from being the first academic study on Kurdish women as political actors, this study is particularly intriguing because, to my knowledge, it is also pioneering in being the first comparison of Kurdish women with Turkish women. In this regard, the authors compare Tansu Çiller’s image with Leyla Zana’s. The portrayal of Çiller, emphasizing her femininity while also highlighting her role as a mother and addressing women in traditional contexts as “mother” or “sister,” is interpreted as a strategic attempt to mitigate the tension between modernity and tradition (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000, pp. 337-338). In doing so, Çiller aimed to appeal to Anatolia’s more traditional and conservative circles. Similarly, Zana, while projecting a modern image through her “elegant” attire, also endeavored to represent the image of rural and uneducated women as emblematic of Kurdistan’s

oppression and “underdevelopment.” Despite numerous challenges and injustices, she secured the right to represent Kurds in the parliament. Authors claim that the Kurdish movement has highlighted her as a symbol of Kurdish resistance, as well as an indicator that women have come a long way thanks to this resistance movement (Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder, 2000, p. 339).

At first glance, Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder’s comparison appears to consider the warnings of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) that different historical contexts will reveal women’s identities in various ways (p. 7). However, a deeper look may show us how they sideline the concept of the “state,” which holds significant importance in the latter’s analysis, and how they legitimize this omission by suggesting that this formulation could be used not only to understand women’s relationship with the state but also to comprehend the roles assigned to women in ethnic-national movements. However, in the book where Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) introduced this formulation, the relationship between the Israeli state and the Palestinians is clearly described as “settler colonialism.” Conversely, the status of Kurds in the Turkish Republic remains highly ambiguous in the discussion by Yalçın Heckmann and Van Gelder. Similarly, the citizenship status of Kurdish women is not debated at all, and no attention is given to the socioeconomic disparities between Turkish and Kurdish women, despite their cultural differences being of paramount importance. State oppression and racialized exploitation of women are addressed merely as discursive issues, yet there is no mention of the material conditions under which those women live. For example, what developments led Leyla Zana to become a symbol of “underdevelopment” or of the oppression targeted at Kurds? In the absence of an explanation of these material conditions, the authors’ treatment of

discursive formations is read as though the movement arbitrarily adopts these symbols.

Moreover, the authors evaluate Turkish and Kurdish nationalism on equal grounds, thereby obscuring fundamental power dynamics between them. This approach directly redounds the comparison between Zana and Çiller. Considering that Çiller was one of the agents behind racist state practices and persecutions against Kurds during her tenure, while Leyla Zana was personally a target of these practices,³³ we can say that their analysis requires contextualizing the differences between the two nationalist projects. This also leads us to think about the constraints of the theoretical framework of nationalism in examining the condition of Kurdish women as methodological nationalism seemingly led the authors to study Turkish and Kurdish women within their respective nationalist projects.

Çağlayan's *Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (2007), while reiterating Yalçın Heckmann & Van Gelder's methodological nationalism in examining Kurdish women, goes beyond their accounts in other respects. The book distinguishes itself from previous studies in its claim to "reach out to the voices of Kurdish women" and present them to a broader audience (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 20; 2019, p. 4). Unlike the study of Yalçın-Heckmann & Van Gelder (2000), which focuses attention on the discursive formation of the political image of Kurdish women, Çağlayan's was an attempt to explain the meaning of this discourse for Kurdish women and how they transformed it in their struggles. Selecting Amed (Diyarbakır) as the research site, she identifies it as the city most profoundly impacted by "incidents related to the

³³ According to Cizre (2002), Çiller's main strategy throughout her tenure was marked by an attempt to transform her stringent stance into a means of garnering sympathy and votes from those who shared her uncompromising view in the battle against the PKK. This included the aggressive tactics employed by the police during the arrest of deputies from the pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi—DEP) within the Parliament premises in March 1994, underscoring a broader strategy. For another discussion of Çiller's period with regard to the Kurdish issue, see Şur (2016).

Kurdish issue” spanning the 1980s to the 2000s. In 2005, she conducted oral history interviews with forty women representing diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, predominantly from Sunni Muslim groups and those associated with the movement’s sphere of influence. While the narratives of these women serve as the central focus of analysis, she aims to incorporate additional sources to present the “external factors” such as socio-economic and cultural dynamics, the political agenda of the Kurdish movement, its mobilization strategies, and discourse on women’s identity. In this regard, she resorts to speeches of party leaders, periodicals, political parties’ by-laws, programs, and various organizational documents. Furthermore, to profile women actively engaged in politics, she surveyed 122 women in 2002, encompassing individuals holding positions in the HADEP (p. 15).³⁴

The first part of Çağlayan’s discussion does not significantly depart from Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder’s analysis, as both probe the discursive construction of Kurdish women in nationalist narratives. Çağlayan (2007) contends that early Kurdish nationalists of the Second Constitutional era (1908) navigated between catching up to modern values and preserving what they perceived as authentic ones. She argues that the discourse of ideal Kurdish women, which rendered women the carriers of both modernity and “pure” Kurdish culture, played a pivotal role in overcoming this dilemma (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 74). Indeed, *femina grata* was envisaged by early nationalists as the indicator of civilization and as a mother who would teach Kurdish values to future generations (Çağlayan, 2007, p.

³⁴ The survey aimed to understand various aspects of women’s lives, including their educational status, professions, role distribution within party organs, household size, division of household chores, obstacles faced in participating in party work, daily time allocated to party activities, and challenges encountered within the party (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 251-259). In addition, the interview questions Çağlayan posed to women sought to explore their relationships with their families (such as religiosity, gender-based division of space and tasks, and differences in treatment between daughters and sons), experiences of domestic pressure and violence, the impact of state oppression on their political consciousness, their views on the code of honor, and their thoughts on their own subjectivity (p. 266).

75). The appropriation of the image of the free and leading woman, as depicted in 19th-century Orientalist works, created a myth that suggested Kurdish women were already free and held leadership positions within Kurdish society (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 76). To trace the representation of Kurdish women, she extends her analysis to the memoirs of Kurdish nationalists who witnessed the uprisings of Koçgiri (1921), Sheikh Said (1924), and Ararat (1930). These memoirs unearthed the involvement of women in the uprisings and documented instances of violence against women and children by Turkish militia.³⁵ Çağlayan (2007) found these memoirs scientifically unreliable as she notes that they were produced in the aftermath of the uprisings; they were colored by emotions, and thus, they cannot reflect the objective truth (p. 78). She emphasizes that the significance of these accounts in her discussion lies not in their bringing us the stories of women but in their narrative construction, revealing how nationalist intellectuals envisioned the *femina grata* of the Kurdish nation. (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 79).

Although Çağlayan (2007) evinces that there is a continuity between the early Kurdish nationalism and the post-1980 Kurdish movement in terms of their attributing symbolic roles to women establishing nationalist rhetoric that uses a gendered vocabulary (p. 87), her account (2019/2007) clearly departs from Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder (2000) in distinguishing the post-1980 Kurdish nationalism from the early one as well as articulating the differences. For instance, she underlines that unlike the latter's, the former's *femina grata* was charged with different meanings. In fact, she contends that the PKK's mobilizing strategy gave women an active and formative role in their political enterprise (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 87). In other nationalist projects, the role of motherhood typically assigns women the

³⁵ These are the memoirs of Nuri Dersimi (1952) and İhsan Nuri Paşa (1986).

responsibility of being the bearers of culture and producers of new generations.

However, within this context, motherhood was evolving into a political identity. This transformation is evident in Çağlayan's following observations:

These women became politicized as a result of their family members, especially their children, being detained, arrested, joining the guerrilla, or being killed...with these events, "motherhood" was transformed into a political identity. The fact that women's roles in the private sphere changed meaning and acquired political content is important in terms of showing that women's becoming political subjects will be considered as a process that cuts the boundaries between the private and public spheres. (2007, p.169, my translation) (See Appendix B, 18)

Çağlayan evinces that the party's handling of gender issues in the early 1990s was part of its "people's war strategy," namely a tool for recruiting more women into its ranks. In her words, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, deconstructed the notion of honor, traditionally associated with women's chastity, and redefined it in relation to *vatan* (homeland). Namely, honor regained a new sense, now referring to the honor of "protecting the territory of the nation and the freedom of Kurds." Thus, this very act of discursive reconstruction enabled women who have been subjected to familial domination (of their male relatives) to "step into the public sphere". Entering the public sphere meant breaking away from the traditional family. However, this transition led women to join another family structure, namely the party. To become part of this new, larger family, women enter into a patriarchal bargain and are compelled to assume desexualized roles of motherhood, comradeship, and goddesshood (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 123; 2019, pp. 212-213). Therefore, Kurdish women have managed to escape the scrutiny of their families, only to find themselves subjected to another form of control over their bodies. Nonetheless, the party instilled confidence in women. They not only participated but also contributed to transforming the movement's gender discourse (Çağlayan, 2019, pp. 220-223). This constitutes the foundational elements of Çağlayan's analysis.

Because Çağlayan's approach to gender is grounded heavily on Kandiyoti's theory of classic patriarchy and patriarchal bargain,³⁶ and her approach to honor is drawn from Germain Tillion (2006), in the following section I briefly mention these theories and their adaptation by Çağlayan in the Kurdish case.

³⁶ Using ideal types as heuristic tools, Kandiyoti explores the concept of patriarchy and scrutinizes whether the influence of the "patrilineal-patrilocal complex" in various societies extends beyond the perceived religious and cultural confines of Hinduism, Confucianism, or Islam, identifying shared experiences across North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, South Asia, and China (1991d, p. 31). Although certain common patterns can be observed, Kandiyoti emphasizes that classic patriarchy is not uniform across different regions or cultures. The specifics of patriarchy can vary significantly, influenced by local traditions, economic conditions, and social structures. This "complex," prevalent in Islamic regions, might give the impression of a patriarchy peculiar to Muslim societies, but Kandiyoti demonstrates that the material underpinnings of classic patriarchy were deeply embedded in the peasant cultures of agricultural societies. For her, classical patriarchy emerged as a result of a transition from kin-based to tributary modes of production (p. 31). Metaphorically speaking, in agrarian societies, the dynamics between the modern state and patriarchal family mirror the relationship between kings and vassals seen in European feudalism. Here, the family is incorporated and regulated by the state, yet the state exercises its control over women only indirectly, channeling its influence through senior male figures rather than intervening directly in their lives. Through case studies and comparisons from different regions, such as North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and China, Kandiyoti illustrates that while the overarching structure of patriarchy might share similarities, its implementation and impact can differ significantly, reflecting diverse aspects of patriarchal control and adaptation across these regions. Kandiyoti (1991d) further explains the structuring of the family in classic patriarchy. She argues that, in this social system, the structure of patrilocally extended household represents a family structure which centered around male authority, with men holding primary decision-making power and leadership roles. Property and lineage are passed through the male line, while women are often confined to domestic roles and have limited inheritance rights. Typically, after marriage, young women move into their husband's family home, and become subjected to the husband's family's control. There, they are subservient not only to all men but also to older women, particularly their mothers-in-law (p. 32). Regardless of whether women belong to Muslim, Hindu, or Confucian communities, young brides entering their husbands' households often find themselves dispossessed, as they typically possess fewer inheritance rights compared to men. The nature of marriage payments, whether brideprice or dowry, does not substantially alter this situation. Dowries, distinct from premortem inheritance, are generally given to the groom and frequently exclude productive assets such as land. Consequently, dowries do not provide the bride with resources capable of generating income or wealth but rather serve as a contribution to the household. This indicates the economic dependence of women in rural economies on their husbands' households. However, this does not imply that women lack resilience. Kandiyoti notes that especially middle and upper-class women in the Middle East "did own and control property," if these women's inheritance rights threaten the integrity of the family or tribe, the patrilineage expropriates them. (p. 32). After examining these cases, Kandiyoti (1991d) argues while patriarchy is fundamentally independent of religion, class and caste differences, the only system intersecting various cultures and religions is a form of patriarchal bargaining. Women's sexuality is controlled by their relatives, their labor is exploited by their husbands and mothers-in-law, and their access to property rights and resources is mediated by their families (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 33). Despite these challenges, she argues that women are not entirely passive victims. They are capable of achieving their goals and even assuming leadership within the family through emotional manipulation, particularly when the patriarch loses power due to aging (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 34). More significantly, bearing male children confers substantial status upon women, as their authority over daughters-in-law amplifies their power. This cyclical relationship represents a patriarchal bargain where women gain significant power, yet simultaneously perpetuate the very system that subordinates them (Kandiyoti, 1991d, pp. 32-34).

5.2.2 The condition of Kurdish women

In line with previous studies discussed in the earlier section regarding the position of Kurdish women, Çağlayan also relies on the rhetoric of underdevelopment to explain the condition of Kurdish women in Turkey. According to this narrative, Kurdish women are trapped within traditional bonds due to the delayed capitalist development in their regions. This is clearly articulated in the 2007 Turkish edition:

Studies examining the changes in the position of women in Turkey within the context of the evolution of capitalist production relations are largely applicable to Kurdish women as well. However, it is important not to overlook certain specificities. For instance, Ertürk's (1995) observation that the impact of modernization does not spread in a linear fashion but can integrate with existing structures is particularly relevant to our discussion. In this context, the fact that Kurds lived in nomadic or semi-nomadic tribal communities before the Republic and the delayed impact of capitalist development and modernization in their regions due to geographical and/or political reasons can be seen as specific aspects of Kurdish social life. Such specificity naturally includes a stronger presence of classical patriarchy. (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 38, own translation) (See Appendix B, 19)

She further observes that the penetration of capitalism, along with the state's development projects like large dams and irrigation schemes and other modernization efforts, led to a socio-economic transformation; yet has been "insufficient" in bringing democratization to the region and transforming traditional gender relations, namely in "altering the positions of women within society and the family. According to Çağlayan, this occurs due to the state's collaboration with traditional power groups such as local landlords, sheikhs, and tribal leaders; and this patronage relationship led to the preservation of the [semi-feudal]³⁷ structure and classical patriarchy (Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 42-43).

Çağlayan makes a valid point by highlighting that the relationship between the state and local power groups exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women. However,

³⁷ I added the term for clarification. Although Çağlayan does not pronounce the word, she implies that the mode of production in Kurdistan was pre-capitalist.

by not situating this relationship within a colonial framework, she risks falling into the discourse of underdevelopment. The collaboration between the Turkish state and the Kurdish landlords led her to deduce that the region's societal norms were trapped in time; the codes of propriety, such as honor, appear to be something preserved rather than something gradually transmuting and intensified by racism and colonial violence over time. In the 2019 English edition of her book, Çağlayan completely abandons the "failed modernization" discourse and even criticizes this approach. She attributes this discourse to "Turkey's official identity politics, based on denying Kurdish identity". Çağlayan argues that this academic perspective ignores the denial of Kurdish existence, the assimilation policies introduced by the Republic, the militarization of the region they live in, and the continuous imposition of emergency regimes. She believes that these studies often view Kurds and Kurdishness "in terms of 'backwardness,' 'feudalism,' 'the eastern question,' 'poverty,' or 'rural population,' thus "missing the relationships between these factors and the broader structuration" (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 42). While she refrains from using rhetoric that frames the issue as one of "backwardness" and "feudalism", she does not clarify how the situation of the Kurds can be conceptualized. Without addressing this question, she continues to employ Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchy, which is applicable in explaining patriarchal relations within a feudal society, in the 2019 edition.

Kandiyoti's theory, based on Weberian ideal types, examines common patterns across a broad geographical area she describes as the "traditional agrarian society," encompassing North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, South Asia, and China. This approach highlights the shared aspects rather than the differences within these regions. According to Kandiyoti (2021), her theory relies on a very simple logic: understanding how women develop different strategies, or "bargains," in

response to changing conditions (2021, para. 1). She contends that patriarchal bargains are sensitive to differences such as class, caste, and ethnicity, and for this reason, the concept helps scholars to understand the internal dynamics of male-dominated systems. Moreover, she argues that since patriarchal bargains are not static and open to social transformations, they continuously create new spaces for negotiation and struggle (Kandiyoti, 2021, para. 2).

Kandiyoti's theory must have seemed practical for Çağlayan (2019/2007) and enabled her to observe the same pattern of classical patriarchy in Kurdish society. In Kurdish society, the patrilocally extended household structure centers around male authority, with men holding primary decision-making power and women often limited to domestic roles with fewer inheritance rights. Young women, upon marriage, typically move into their husband's family home and are subjected to the control of both male family members and older women, particularly mothers-in-law. This structure perpetuates a cycle where women's status and influence within the family are enhanced through their aging and having male offspring. Çağlayan regards that young brides in Kurdish society are often monitored by their mothers-in-law, with young brides in particular expected to remain quiet and invisible within the household. They try to secure their place by behaving as expected and performing household chores to the best of their abilities. Young women often dream of moving into their own homes and attempt to persuade their husbands to live separately, especially after having children. On the other hand, mothers-in-law tend to delay their sons' moves to separate households as much as possible (Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 45-46).

Furthermore, Çağlayan (2007/2019) elaborates on the issue of honor. Following Tillion (2006), she considers the code of honor as a means to control

women's labor and bodies to be associated with the relations of production, specifically land-based production across the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin. In order to show how this resonates with Kurdish society, she presents the anthropological research conducted by Yalçın-Heckmann (2002) in the early 1980s in Hakkari. Çağlayan explains that until a woman is married, her honor is the responsibility of her father and brothers, and women's lives are shaped around their sexuality and virginity. Although codes of honor and dignity may vary, preserving virginity is ultimately the most important rule. Premarital and extramarital sex are absolutely taboo. Men who fail to control women's sexuality face the threat of losing their respectability. The way to regain this respect is by "cleansing the honor." Thus, men's power is closely tied to this understanding of honor. (2007, pp. 59-60; 2019, pp. 48-49).

In her discussion concerning the breakdown of this system of classical patriarchy, Çağlayan again appeals to Kandiyoti, who argues that the material bases of classic patriarchy dissolve along with the expansion of capitalism in rural areas which brings "economic marginalization and immiseration" (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 35). This process, which necessitates that every household member, including women, must work, eventually diminishes the traditional dominance of men over women. Also, young men gain independence from their fathers and leave the parental home earlier (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 35). In short, the extended family is replaced by the nuclear family, freeing brides from mothers-in-law's dominance as households separate.

After scrutinizing the rural-to-urban migration patterns, she observes that Kurds preserve honor codes despite its material basis, namely classical patriarchy, was dissolved together with migration. In this regard, she states that:

I should emphasize that families *still* [emphasis added] used “honor” to justify the regulation of women’s bodies and their sexual identities, and that this regulation is internalized by women themselves. My interviews revealed that the patterns of mentality that shape widespread perceptions of honor were *still* [emphasis added] embraced by women from rural areas. (p. 50)

In essence, the persistence of male control over women’s bodies is attributed to the resistant nature of tradition against change. According to this understanding, despite capitalist development, traditions resist the changes brought by capitalism (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 63; 2019, pp. 50-52).

After suggesting that the patriarchal codes within Kurdish society confine women to the domestic sphere and equate honor with the protection of women’s bodies, she tries to answer the following questions: How did women, who largely lacked formal resources such as education, economic means, and time required for political participation, manage to step beyond the confines of domestic and traditional gender roles to become political actors in the public sphere? More importantly, what motivated their participation? As a response to the first question, Çağlayan (2007/2019) speculates that the party manipulated patriarchal norms to recruit women into the party’s ranks. She explains how the PKK challenged this limited conception of honor in the following terms:

The PKK critiqued the understanding of honor as merely safeguarding women’s bodies, reframing it to encompass the protection of the nation’s territory and the freedom of Kurds. This shift in the concept of honor was not a rejection of its importance for the national project, but rather a redefinition of its role within the movement’s mobilization strategy. By expanding the notion of honor beyond the private realm, it facilitated women’s transition from the domestic sphere to broader social and political participation. (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 69)

How have women manipulated this new definition of honor to create spaces for themselves according to Çağlayan? In what ways has this “new understanding of honor” been advantageous for women? She answers these questions by providing examples from her interviewees whose lives change after their participation to the

party. For instance, while previously it was difficult for women to leave the house and they were subject to strict supervision, it became easier for a woman involved in political activism to get permission to leave home for party activities, or “the cause” (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 186). As long as women went out for the cause, their actions were considered legitimate. Çağlayan utilizes Kandiyoti’s theory of patriarchal bargains to argue that women assume “desexualized” roles, such as those of mothers or sisters, as a strategy to assert themselves in the public sphere. According to this argument, women negotiate their ability to engage in political activities by adopting these desexualized roles. She provides additional examples from interviews. For instance, Nurê’s solo journey to Ankara to participate in a hunger strike, despite never having traveled alone before, represents a significant step towards autonomy and public engagement. Her involvement not only symbolized personal growth but also earned her pride and prestige within her community (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 187). Çağlayan (2019) further presents another shift in the perception of honor; women like Fikriye, Hamdiye, and Saadet who experienced sexual violence during detention, did not view these experiences as dishonoring but rather as violations of their rights. Fikriye noted her lack of shame despite her husband’s discomfort, while Hamdiye described how her husband defended her honor by saying that “My wife was not detained in a *wrong* place. ... My wife has dignity. She dignified me a lot. I am clean” (p. 188). Also, Saadet spoke openly about her detention, noting that she was mentally prepared for such situations due to her brothers’ teachings: “It is the patrie that is your honor, not your bodies.” This mindset allowed her to recount, with surprising ease, how she was stripped of her clothes, a detail she felt compelled to share with her husband immediately after her release. Despite her composure, the

gravity of the situation was evident in her husband's reaction, as he blushed and simply referred to “the enemy” (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 189).

According to Çağlayan (2019), this redefinition of honor, tied to political commitment rather than sexual purity, represents a significant change in how these women perceived themselves and were perceived by others. It helped eliminate gender segregation and encouraged outdoor socialization in spaces where men and women could work and act together. It also compelled husbands and brothers to view sexual violence not as a violation of moral codes or as an indicator of women's dishonor, but rather as a “right violation for the victim” (p 189).

Nonetheless, the prominence of terms like “the patrie” and “the enemy” in men's statements complicates Çağlayan's interpretation that they view such issues as violations of rights. Instead, men seemingly frame the situation as one of war. Moreover, Çağlayan herself often notes that women's sexuality remains under vigilance of men despite the alleged redefinition of honor. For instance, when women deviate from their “new” roles, described by Çağlayan as “desexualized” roles of mother or sister by engaging in romantic relationships, they are suspected and can be ostracized from the community (2019, p. 190). This observation casts doubt on Çağlayan's argument and raises questions about the effectiveness of the “redefinition of honor” in changing men's attitudes.

5.2.3 Patriarchy in Kurdish society

The notion that seclusion inherently defines the patriarchal nature of feudal Kurdish society is questionable. Similarly, stepping out of the house and socializing with men does not necessarily indicate a reduction in the control over women's sexuality. In this regard, Mojab & Hassanpour's analysis (2021), which is based on Mullah

Mahmûdê Bayazîdî's ethnography on Kurds (1858-1859), may give us details about the condition of Kurdish women in feudal formations where the dominant mode of production was agriculture or animal husbandry. One key aspect that strengthens Bayazîdî's narrative is his detailed distinction between tribal/nomadic women and settled rural women. Nomadic women, like men, participate in production, yet they are also responsible for all domestic tasks. They fulfill roles as both slaves and guards when necessary, serving as companions to men both within the home and in the outside world (Bayazîdî, 1963, pp. 98-99, quoted in Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021, p. 36). In contrast, rural women do not participate in the mode of production.

In both communities, women are not permitted to choose their own spouses; their fathers and brothers make these decisions, and women have no right to oppose them. Women do not veil themselves and participate in social activities with men. During winter, men, girls, and young people from both communities attend night parties at different houses every two or three nights. During these gatherings, men and women sing, dance, and enjoy themselves together (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021, p. 37). Bayazîdî, similar to the orientalist narratives of European travelers, compares Kurdish women to European women, noting that both socialize with men equally. However, he points out that the boundaries of this freedom are sharply defined. For example, women do not have control over their own bodies, which are considered the property of men. Propriety codes also restrict the apparent freedom to socialize with men. Engaging in extramarital, premarital relationships or eloping leads to unquestionable killing, and the perpetrators remain immune as it is normalized and legit to punish someone who commits a "shameful act". Although there was total control over women's bodies and sexuality in this society, "women were not veiled, secluded, or segregated" (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021, p. 39).

Considering these data, we can propose two objections to Çağlayan (i) The limitation on women's "stepping into the public sphere" has little to do with the relative empowerment of Kurdish women. That is, the absence of seclusion and segregation does not imply that women's sexuality is not controlled; rather, it indicates that women's bodies are regulated through different mechanisms. This brings us to a further objection: (ii) It is difficult to agree with the idea that women "succeeded in" taking on "desexualized" roles or managed to manipulate men through the redefinition of, particularly considering that the conditions brought about by the conflict have extremely sexualized not only the homeland but also women's bodies. This becomes clear when we reconsider the previously mentioned example about Çağlayan's interviewees who experienced sexual assault in custody and the reaction of their husbands to these incidents. When men describe such incidents as acts of "the enemy," they underscore and reaffirm their belief in the non-consensual nature of these encounters (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 189). Therefore, sexual violence in custody may not have been punished, not because it was viewed by men as a "human rights violation" but because it was presumed to be non-consensual. This does not indicate that organizing within the party has not changed anything for women; rather, it suggests that their oppression and resistance may have been sought in the wrong places. Therefore, focusing on how the concept of honor has evolved over time, rather than how it has been preserved, will be crucial for understanding patriarchal dynamics.

Let us begin by discussing the second point in more detail, specifically the issue of desexualization. When we look at historical data, we can notice that honor as defending the patrie, namely communal honor, has long been a sexually charged norm. This has been a longstanding issue, especially considering the history of state

violence and militarization in Kurdish cities. When we review Yalçın-Heckmann's anthropological study (2002), which offers abundant data on how the state transformed intertribal relations and moral norms in a sexualized manner, we can see how the state's militarization of rural areas infiltrated existing patriarchal relations. Yalçın-Heckmann's research (2002) demonstrates that the encounter between the state and the tribes can alter tribal norms in sexualized ways or intensify already existing sexual hierarchies. For instance, tribal leaders who accept becoming village guards, collaborating with the state, or maintaining friendly relations with military officials or local bureaucracy boosted their masculine pride (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2002, p. 39). On the other hand, the tribes that refused collaboration or were simply left out of it faced the threat of emasculation. One of the most striking examples provided by Yalçın-Heckmann involves the confiscation of weapons by state forces, leading to a crisis within the Oramar tribe as its members began to question each other's moral values. The crisis emerged after suspicions arose that a member, detained on charges of smuggling and possessing weapons, had confessed to possessing weapons. This led tribe members to accuse each other of "losing manly virtues and corrupting the community." In their view, the confessor's betrayal of the armed villagers was attributed to "longing for his new wife's bed" (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2002, p. 41).³⁸

³⁸ Another example of how forced disarmament led to a masculinity crisis for men could be observed in the remarks made by Besê (Beser) Dalga, who is a witness of Dersim Massacre. According to Dalga, before the 1938 events, during what the Dersim people call the Kirmanciye period, it was a tradition for the groom to go up to the roof on the morning after the wedding night and fire a gun. This was a customary practice. Her late husband Hasan became furious when he couldn't find a gun to fire on the morning after their wedding night. He exclaimed, 'Damn it all! They didn't leave a single rifle in the whole tribe. Now, am I supposed to go up to the roof and shoot with my cock!' (Yağan, 2015, p. 45).

We may find another story in Sakine Cansız's memoir,³⁹ which demonstrates how honor was related to community honor and how its meaning and intensity transformed with the racial state's intervention. Cansız (2014) recounts an incident involving her aunt, Melek, who was abducted after her family opposed a marriage proposal from the Rayber tribe, preferring an internal family marriage. Despite the family's wishes, Cansız's grandmother secretly betrothed Melek to a young man from the Rayber tribe. On the night of the abduction, a staged attack on the sheep distracted the grandmother, allowing the abductors to take Melek. The grandmother pursued them but was misled about their whereabouts. Angered, the grandmother alerted the nearby Rayber village, which then reported the abduction to the authorities. No one anticipated that the state would become involved. The next day, the gendarmerie raided the village and conducted a search. The incident escalated, with the gendarmerie becoming involved, leading to further conflict. Ultimately, Melek and her abductor married, but the episode left a lasting impact, damaging relationships and the grandmother's reputation.

Furthermore, in conditions of conflict, it becomes almost impossible to separate communal honor from the honor of protecting women's bodies. In an interview conducted by Mehmet Ali Birand with Meral Akşener, the Interior Minister at the time, on the television program *32. Gün* in 1997, a case of sexual violence that occurred in Diyarbakır was brought to light. Birand reported that a ten-year-old Kurdish child had been raped for four months by a village guard (a paramilitary figure). The perpetrator used his position as a guard to silence the local people. Despite a lawsuit being filed, with over twenty lawyers trying to prove the rape, they were unsuccessful, and the perpetrator was released. The program

³⁹ Cansız is one of the co-founders of the PKK, and a notable female political figure for Kurdish people.

included a statement from the survivor, whose face was concealed. The child recounted the incident as follows:

My parents had gone to the city; it was night... I went to the toilet and saw that Süleyman (the perpetrator) was waiting there. He grabbed me and covered my mouth. He had a Kalashnikov. He pressed [the gun] to my mouth and said, 'If you tell your parents, I will kill you. I am a government man.' (32. *Gün*, 2021, 00:52:55–00:53:20, own translation) (See Appendix B, 20)

Journalists from the program visited the village where R.K. lived to investigate and spoke with his mother. She raised her hands to the sky, crying out, and then shouted:

Will Allah accept this? Süleyman has violated my honor. The state has set him free. What do they want from us? (32. *Gün*, 2021, 00:54:14–00:54:21, own translation) (See Appendix 21)

While the woman was speaking, the village headman approached with a stick and began to beat her, driving her away from the cameras. After these images were shown on the program, Birand asked Minister Akşener about the fact that the guards were under her supervision and mentioned that there had been 23,000 incidents involving guards over a decade. He inquired whether this situation troubled her. Akşener acknowledged that these events did trouble her but also stated that the guards had an important duty to fight the PKK. She mentioned having projects to train the guards as a solution (32. *Gün*, 2021, 00:56:00–00:57:26).

These examples and Çağlayan's interview excerpts reveal that the state uses sexuality as a tool to control Kurdish families and individuals. Patriarchal values constantly transform under the influence of colonial intrusion, and the concept of the homeland becomes sexualized, not by the party, but primarily by the state. The association of communal honor with the homeland, as well as women's adoption of maternal and sisterly roles, indicates that women are not "desexualized" but rather sexualized in different ways under the conditions of war. We can notice this when we observe how women's bodies were subjected to increased control of their relatives

when they were in a hostile environment where they faced racism or under militarized conditions, as the Turkish state compromised moral values, such as virginity and purity, as a tactic of war. This dynamic is evident in Çağlayan's interviews, where the frequent discussion of the "virgin guerrilla" issue is noted (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 184). During the interview period, mainstream media often questioned the virginity of female guerrillas and reported on the presence of birth control pills in PKK camps.

From the interview excerpts, it is observed that women respond defensively and with strong reactions when Çağlayan asks about the guerilla women's cohabitation with men in the mountains, as well as their thoughts on "honor killings".⁴⁰ The participants may have perceived the researcher's questions as a form of interrogation, prompting them to assert the moral integrity of the guerrilla cause. Comments like Nurhan's, "Why should it be embarrassing so long as one maintains her honor?" and Sadiye's statement, "They go as sisters and brothers," reflect this defensive stance. These responses suggest that the participants felt a need to protect and affirm the honor and dignity of the cause of the movement, likely as a reaction to societal accusations or stigma about honor.

Moreover, when I look at the texts reflecting the doctrines of the party leader, I could not find anything about honor not being the women's bodies but being the patrie or any emphasis on the honor of defending the patrie (Erdem, 1992). The party attempts to regulate the sexuality of women, especially of guerillas, but this has nothing to do with the mobilization of Kurdish women to the party as they have long been actively joining Kurdish parties since the 1970s. According to Çağlayan, this

⁴⁰ The concerning questions originally in Turkish are as follows: Question 7: "Kadınların dağa çıkmış olması ve erkeklerle birlikte kalmalarını nasıl değerlendirdiğini, 'kadın savaşçı' hakkında ne düşündüğünü." Question 13: "Namus cinayetleri hakkında düşünceleri" (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 266).

expression about honor being the patrie circulates among Kurdish people who sympathize with the movement. This shows a simpler fact instead of Çağlayan's pages of discussion regarding the redefinition of honor: The party has gained acceptance, legitimacy, and support among the public as Çağlayan's participants try to legitimize the cause within their moral framework against the accusations of lack of honor led by the state and mainstream media. We can see that women defend communal honor when an outsider questions them, and the patriarchal values are intensified under war conditions. Furthermore, the party seemingly did not transform anything about these values at this stage of mass mobilization.

This can make us question whether Çağlayan's research questions were sufficient to understand the agency of Kurdish women, namely her questioning of women's mass mobilization. As we remember, she asked how women, who largely lacked formal resources such as education, economic means, and time required for political participation, managed to step beyond the confines of domestic and traditional gender roles to become political actors in the public sphere (Çağlayan, 2007, p. 21). Here, she takes for granted that the obstacle of women's mobilization and politicization is the patriarchal structure of the Kurdish family. When we consider historical data and Çağlayan's data discussed above, we can see that while men's regulation of women's bodies has been substantial, patriarchal values alone do not fully explain women's participation in politics. Moreover, the relevance of gender-seclusion as a component of classic patriarchy in Kurdish society is questionable. This brings us to the question of what conditions deprive Kurdish women of the "public sphere."

It is essential to consider the broader social and political context to understand how exclusion from the public sphere occurs in Kurdish society.

Çağlayan previously attributed this exclusion to the feudal structure of Kurdish society, suggesting that even though women have somewhat transcended this through urban-to-rural migration, the practice persisted (Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 58-63; 2019, p. 50). However, when we examine the demographic information about women in *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar* and the excerpts from interviews Çağlayan conducted with women subjected to forced migration in 2011, it becomes clear that the exclusion from the public sphere is influenced by multiple factors, with institutionalized racism being a significant cause (Çağlayan et al., 2011).

Her demographic data reveals that most Kurdish women, deprived of formal education, represent the poorer segments of the working class in Turkey. They work in precarious conditions without social security as seasonal agricultural workers and house cleaners in middle-class urban households, and many are unemployed domestic workers within their own households. Additionally, they live in poor conditions, such as homes without proper heating (Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 151-154).

Poverty and lack of access to resources are primarily due to women not being able to speak Turkish, coupled with restrictions on speaking Kurdish; being Kurdish often leads to criminalization. This systematic racism also prevents them from socializing in the cities to which they were forcibly relocated. Consequently, it deprives them of avenues to resist patriarchal domination by creating insecure and precarious living conditions. Thus, exclusion from the public sphere is not merely a result of traditional family but is deeply intertwined with the broader political and social structures that marginalize Kurdish women.

When we read the statements of her interviewees, quoted in Çağlayan et al. (2011), it can be understood how state oppression has increased the domestic violence women are subjected to. For instance, one of the interviewees, when asked

whether she sought support from official/semi-official institutions when she was subjected to domestic violence, she describes how she is afraid of government officials in an environment where unidentified murders occur and where they live under the threat of attacks from state law enforcement. Under conditions where Kurdish identity is marginalized and associated with terrorism, their fear extends not only to state officials but also to their Turkish neighbors. Therefore, we can say that it is the racist state that restricted Kurdish women's public access through racist laws and policies, which included banning and discriminating against the use of the Kurdish language, suppressing the public visibility of Kurdish culture, and perpetuating racism in all aspects of life, ultimately leading to the impoverishment of Kurds. A straightforward answer to why Kurdish women could not enter into the public sphere and could not resist the patriarchal domination is related to these conditions created by the state's racism. Just like Segato's metaphor of body snatching,⁴¹ the gender regime was reconstituted alongside colonial intrusion despite old names, signs, and rituals were maintained (Segato, 2021, p. 62). Our analysis should be informed that the state has been involved in manipulating these moral values and intensifying the patriarchal violence in subtle ways. These complex factors may cause scholars who consider gender relations confined within household

⁴¹ Segato shows patriarchal relations are historically transmuted by colonial intrusion and how coloniality "crystallized and permanently reproduced by the state" (Segato & Monque, 2021, p. 781). Segato (2021 and 2022) employs the metaphor of body snatching from the Hollywood science-fiction classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in which extraterrestrial beings gradually take control of a small town by replacing its residents with identical, emotionless duplicates. These duplicates lack individuality and emotion, effectively erasing the uniqueness of the human inhabitants. Drawing parallels with this narrative, she suggests that the gender regime underwent a similar process of reconstitution alongside colonial intrusion. Despite the maintenance of old names, signs, and rituals, the essence of the gender regime was transformed, much like how the town's residents were replaced by alien duplicates while outward appearances remained unchanged (Segato & Monque, 2021, p. 790; Segato, 2022, p. 62). This metaphor vividly captures the subtle yet profound alterations brought about by colonialism in reshaping societal structures and norms.

relations attribute women's seclusion to tradition while it was primarily caused by racist politics and colonial intrusion.

However, the colonial situation is absent from Çağlayan's gender analysis as she draws from Kandiyoti. How does Kandiyoti's theory impact the depth of Çağlayan's analysis, despite its claims to be sensitive to ethnic, caste, and class divides (Kandiyoti, 1991d; 2021)? While insightful in many respects, we can see that this theory in simplest form do not give a space for an analysis of state-led violence. Kandiyoti herself acknowledges in a later essay that her focus on patriarchy within micro-household relations may have led her to overlook instances of gender-based violence directly perpetrated by the state (2021). The Weberian ideal types she employs derive their analytical power from abstracting historical specifics to simplify and classify complex social phenomena. Researchers can then enrich this concept of patriarchy with the particularities they observe in the societies they study. However, this approach can be selectively applied, emphasizing certain features while omitting others based on the researcher's interests and value-relevant concerns (Bhambra, 2016). While the concept of classic patriarchy appears to fit the structuring of feudal Kurdish society, the theory's focus might lead Çağlayan to consider changes in patriarchal dynamics primarily in terms of economic conditions, rather than fully integrating the political contexts such as the role of religion as well as racism, militarism, and colonialism.

To begin with the discussion on the role of religion, Çağlayan does not thoroughly address its influence on patriarchal dynamics within Kurdish society, largely because she relies on Kandiyoti (1991d) and Tillion (2006), who attribute patriarchal structures to land distribution rather than culture or religion. She clearly states that Islam is not relevant to the discussion of honor (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 49).

This absence leaves us ill-prepared to fully understand the party's mobilizing power over Kurdish women. Çağlayan emphasizes that the Marxist foundations of the party allowed women to have a voice in its organization and shape its political agenda along "gender-sensitive" lines, distinctly separating the movement's perspective from bourgeois liberal or religious revivalist nationalisms (2007, p. 67; 2019, pp. 94-96). However, when explaining the circumstances that enabled women's mass mobilization to the movement, she underemphasizes its secular character and program. It is problematic that Çağlayan claims the most significant factor in mass mobilization was the association of homeland with honor, and that women were permitted to join the struggle only on the condition that they were saving the honor of the homeland. This redefinition of honor does not, by itself, ensure the legitimacy of women organizing within party ranks. Men could have equally believed that women's participation would degrade the cause rather than strengthening it. If we set aside this rhetoric of honor and homeland, it becomes clear that the secular nature of the movement could be a strong explanation for why women participated from the very beginning and were later mobilized *en masse* to the party.

Another issue is the absence of racism, militarism and colonialism in her gender analysis. The absence is most evident in her questioning of why women, when facing domestic violence, turn to the pro-Kurdish party HADEP instead of the police. Çağlayan's interviewees, who experienced violence from their party-affiliated husbands, sought help from the party rather than law enforcement. Çağlayan finds it intriguing that they chose the party over the police and questions the reasons behind this decision (2019, p. 177; 2007, p. 214). In her attempt to explain this situation, Çağlayan (2019) says:

The stories of these three women exemplify the awareness that results from reading domestic violence from within the meaning set, based on the

discourse of the Kurdish political movement in terms of oppression, injustice, rights claims, and equality claims. This connection between supposedly private issues and the politics of the public are crystallized in the women's willingness to appeal to HADEP to resist the domestic violence that they had been subjected to. This conforms to the strategies of resistance ... used by the oppressed is their call for dominant groups to comply with their public discourse in their own behavior. In line with the women's tactics in party politics, their call to Kurdish men to behave in accordance with their self-claimed political identities shows how women's rights demands have been articulated into Kurdish political discourse. (p. 180)

According to Çağlayan (2019), the women are interpreting their personal experiences of domestic violence within the broader political discourse of the Kurdish political movement, which emphasizes themes of oppression, injustice, and rights. By appealing to the party, they are aligning their personal issues with the party's political agenda, which may be more receptive and supportive of their concerns. The women's actions represent a demand for *consistency* between the public discourse of justice and equality espoused by Kurdish political leaders and their private behavior. By appealing to HADEP, they are holding Kurdish men accountable to the values and principles that the party promotes, thus using the party's own rhetoric as a tool of resistance. However, this explanation does not fully address why these women turned to the party rather than filing a formal complaint with state institutions or seeking help from other non-governmental organizations. Çağlayan's explanation seems to presuppose those women had two options—appealing to the party or the state—and chose the former because they viewed the party as the only authority capable of demonstrating to their husbands that they were violating the party's principles of justice. In reality, the party may have been their only viable option because (i) Official state institutions and informal institutions dominated by Turks may not be seen as trustworthy bodies to file complaints. These can be perceived as enemy institutions, meaning the institutions themselves pose a security threat to Kurdish women. (ii) Resorting to these institutions can be considered by some as reporting

someone from their own community to the enemy. This may eventually lead to a loss of reputation for women, as it is interpreted by the community as a sign of betrayal.

(iii) In a context where mass incarceration and unsolved murders target Kurdish society, women—especially those who are economically dependent on their husbands—may perceive that seeking formal legal recourse could result in exacerbating their economic difficulties due to the potential arrest of their husbands.

So, when considering what exactly the party changed in the lives of women to enable their mass mobilization and political participation, particularly if the change is not merely related to patriarchal norms, the straightforward answer might be that the party provided them with access to the public sphere from which the Turkish state had previously excluded them. The state's exclusion of Kurdish women was a gendered act, and the resistance of women against it was also gendered. However, Çağlayan seemingly does not consider women's resistance to the state as a gendered-based struggle.

5.2.4 Kurdish women's agency

Çağlayan's insistence on viewing women's agency within familial domains (whether Kurdish family or "party family") seems to be more influenced by her appeal to Kandiyoti's theory of agency than by the data obtained from the field. Kandiyoti's main goal was to demonstrate how women living in pre-capitalist societies serve the reproduction of patriarchy. For example, in extended families of those societies, women gain certain authority when they have a son. They gain power in ways such as controlling their sons through emotional manipulation and rendering their daughters-in-law to serve as they wish. In this picture, gender-based violence and oppression are confined with household relations. Racism and colonial violence are

not necessarily part of the analysis unless the scholar who use this theory decides to introduce these factors. Second, according to Kandiyoti, these societies which are characterized by classic patriarchy do not bear the structural conditions which provide women for a transformative agency like in feminist politics in Western societies which successfully develop a bourgeois sense of public sphere and civil society. Instead, in feudal and semi-feudal societies, women's resistance was confined to the domestic sphere, limited to manipulation and bargaining. That is, they could not be feminists in Western sense, in fact they are incapable of being one.

This perspective becomes evident in her following words:

Women in areas of classic patriarchy thus are often unable to resist unfavorable labor relations in both the household and the market, and frequently adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules that result in the devaluation of their labor. The cyclical fluctuations of their power position, combined with status considerations, result in their active collusion in the reproduction of their own subordination. They frequently adopt interpersonal strategies that maximize their security through manipulation of the affections of their sons and husband. (Kandiyoti, 1991d, p. 34)

Embracing this viewpoint, Çağlayan's analysis places undue focus on women's patriarchal bargains, where they supposedly accepted desexualized roles in exchange for participation in the public sphere and politics. Nevertheless, Çağlayan eventually moves away from Kandiyoti's approach and argues that women's internal struggles within the party have, over the years, transformed the party's gender policies. In doing so, she makes significant contributions in explaining Kurdish women's resistance, contributions that cannot be overshadowed by a limited view of patriarchal bargains. It is important to underscore this and highlight the value of Çağlayan's analysis.

As we mentioned before, unlike Yalçın-Heckmann and Van Gelder (2000), Çağlayan (2019/2007) is more precise in elucidating Kurdish freedom movement's political lines. She clearly articulates that in contrast to early "aristocratic, religious

and tribal” Kurdish nationalism, the PKK began its political journey as a Marxist movement that emerged precisely in opposition to the Kurdish ruling classes. She associates it with popular resistance movements in Latin America, which draw strength from the urban and rural poor (2007, p. 67; 2019, pp. 94-96). She discusses the gender agenda of the movement accordingly and states that the Marxist foundations of the party allowed women to have a word in its organization and shape the political agenda and principles of the party into “gender-sensitive” lines.

The changes in gender policies such as gender quotas and co-chair systems and policies aimed at combating violence against women within Kurdish political parties were driven by Kurdish women’s intra-party resistance manifested in their advocacy for equal representation and rights. This resistance, thanks to the collaboration with broader feminist movements in Turkey, amplified demands for gender equality and facilitated the integration of gender issues into party platforms. The support of progressive party leadership within the parties was also instrumental in driving these reforms, shaping policies that aimed to address gender disparities effectively. It is important to highlight that Çağlayan explains how Kurdish parties began to adopt more comprehensive policies aimed at combating violence against women. For instance, DEHAP’s (Democratic People’s Party) platform addressed all forms of violence, including domestic violence, harassment, and polygamy, and sought to hold members accountable for such actions. This commitment was reflected in the support for women mayors and the establishment of women’s cooperatives and counseling centers to provide resources and support for survivors of violence (Çağlayan, 2019, pp. 101-112).

The examination of Kurdish women’s intra-party struggles and their fight against the patriarchal structure within the party, which culminated in the

implementation of policies against sexual violence, is crucial. However, these issues occupy only a small portion of Çağlayan's book, which disproportionately emphasizes equal participation and participation in the public sphere. Most importantly, due to her adherence to the theory of patriarchal bargain, Çağlayan does not sufficiently address the Kurdish women's broader resistance to state violence and oppression. According to her approach, Kurdish women do not engage in gender-based struggles when opposing the state; rather, such struggles only emerge in their confrontations with their families and the men within their party. This distinction becomes evident when she readily separates Kurdish women's struggles rooted in their "womanhood" from those stemming from their "Kurdishness" (Çağlayan, 2007, 2019), even though such a clear-cut separation is difficult to make.

Çağlayan maintains this approach when discussing Kurdish women guerrillas, specifically when analyzing the thoughts of the women she interviewed regarding these guerrillas. According to her, the significance of the women guerrillas lies in empowering Kurdish women against the patriarchal pressures they encounter in their daily lives. She elaborates on this point with the following words:

The positive impact of the image of a guerilla woman had a number of aspects. First, this image conveyed a sense of capability for women. "Woman guerilla" represented a counter-power disposition *vis-à-vis* the restrictions of women to sites where they were incapacitated by patriarchal patterns. The women who were most affected had immediate contacts with *women guerillas* who were able to cope in spaces deemed to belong to men, who could go to the mountains, wear military-style uniforms, and who, most importantly, were armed. For women constrained in their everyday life, woman guerillas symbolized liberation while for those who considered themselves oppressed, she stood for the capacity to militarily resist all oppression, and represent emancipation in the face of forced marriages... Clearly, the response of these women to the image of the guerilla woman as well as their reactions to their immediate encounters with armed and uniformed women was related to their general status in society and in the family in particular. For the women who were locked into the domestic sphere, constrained by familial responsibilities, and living with a sense of worthlessness the woman guerilla meant escaping from oppression, being

free, engaging in worthy practices, and most importantly, being strong.
(Çağlayan, 2019, pp. 182-183)

This shows that Kurdish women's struggles "stemming from their womanhood", as Çağlayan puts it, are reduced to the struggle against patriarchy. This remains a lacuna in her analysis because it leaves aside the discussion of in what regards and to what extent Kurdish women's resistance to the state has a feminist character.

In summary, while the second wave of scholars predominantly focus on Kurdish women's interactions with Kurdish men and patriarchal structures such as family and party, their analyses often do not fully address the direct impact of the racist state practices on women's lives or the ways in which women develop resistance against state persecutions. This lacuna in the literature leaves us with the following questions: How have the patriarchal values of Kurdish society changed in conjunction with racism and militarism? How have the violence of the Kurdish family and the state coalesced into a gender regime where the oppression of women has intensified? Can Kurdish women's struggle against the state be a gender-based struggle? And how have women waged a gender-based struggle against these two different actors, namely the Kurdish patriarchy and the state which, although sometimes seen in conflict with each other, intensify women's suffering when intertwined? In the next section, we will turn our attention to the third wave of scholars who offer a more detailed examination of these circumstances.

5.3 Kurdish women as "femina sacra"

5.3.1 Delinking from colonial theory

As we see in the previous section, Kurdish women were analyzed in terms of their subordination and agency within the Kurdish nationalist projects in the early 2000s, but their status in Turkey remains undertheorized. However, especially towards the

late 2010s, a body of literature emerged that emphasized the Turkish state as a colonial power, the racialization of Kurdish women, the constant state of exceptions, and women's resistance in such conditions.⁴² As highlighted in chapter four, this shift was influenced by several factors: researchers of Kurdish gender studies became able to work in relatively freer academic environments in North America and Europe; Kurdish gender studies gained international recognition; the autonomy brought by the Rojava revolution and the revolutionary experience enabled Kurds to institutionalize their knowledge through platforms including Jineolojî academies in Rojava and Europe, and the Kurdish Gender Studies Network (KGSN). The international connections and theoretical interactions facilitated a break for researchers in Turkey studying Kurds from the theoretical approaches historically defined by Turkish feminists. Consequently, issues such as racism, colonialism, and their impact on gender regimes in Turkey began to be openly addressed by these researchers.

The third wave, characterized by a decolonial turn in Kurdish gender studies within the context of Turkey, began to examine Kurdish women's lives within the framework of (de)coloniality. These scholars highlighted how the Turkish state implements a colonial governmentality over Kurdish people by illustrating how Kurdish women have been excluded from the realm of bios and abjected, subjected

⁴² The debates over whether Kurdistan can be categorized as a colony trace back to the 1960s. The Iranian-Kurdish political leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was the first to describe Kurdistan as an "internal colony" divided among Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria (Hassaniyan & Sohrabi, 2022, p.325). Simultaneously, Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi highlighted the underdevelopment of Kurdistan as a consequence of an alliance between the Turkish dominant classes and feudal landlords in Kurdistan, though he did not use the term "internal colonialism" in his late 1960s work (Tuğrul, 2022, pp. 4-5). Beşikçi later explicitly characterized Kurdistan as an "international colony" in his thorough analysis in *Devletlerarası Sömürge Kürdistan* (1991), which was subsequently published in English as *International Colony Kurdistan* (2004). On the other hand, the issue could not be regarded as merely an academic endeavor. On the contrary, the 1970s witnessed ardent discussions between Turkish and Kurdish revolutionaries regarding the thesis that Kurdistan is an internal colony of Turkey. During these debates, the Kurdish left found itself diligently searching for evidence to support the thesis, countering the persistent denial by the Turkish left (Jongerden & Akkaya, 2012, pp. 6, 8-9).

to various forms of oppression, including state-backed sexual violence and assimilation policies (Dirik, 2022; Işık, 2022; Sarıkaya, 2021; Türkyılmaz, 2016; Üstündağ, 2023).

With this epistemological break, researchers from this wave, while talking about the imperial history of the Turkish state, mention not only the forms of colonial violence that Kurdish women were subjected to, but also the colonization and state violence that non-Muslim women such as Armenian and Assyrian women, non-Kurdish Alevi women were also subjected to (Dirik, 2022; Sarıkaya, 2021; Üstündağ, 2023). For Üstündağ (2023), the history of racism against Kurds is connected to a long process of persecutions started with Armenian genocide and the founding of the republic (p. 111). Thus, unlike the previous literature, this paves the way for not singularizing the condition of Kurdish women, but to consider them in relation to other women who are marginalized and persecuted within the same geographical context.

By implicating Kandiyoti's emancipation thesis (1987),⁴³ Üstündağ (2023) states that Kurdish women's resistance disrupted colonial history, "a history that either denies the Kurds' existence or describes them as *already emancipated* [emphasis mine] within the law of the Turkish state" (p. 14). In a similar vein, Türkyılmaz (2016) demonstrates that the first wave of feminist scholarship concerned with the Republic's project of creating its *femina grata*, considering it is as if a mission of educating all women regardless of the ethnic and religious divides and emphasizes that this scholarship misses to see the colonial nature of civilizing projects the Kemalist implemented in Dersim. She specifically focuses on Elazığ Girls Institute and the headmaster of the institute Sıdıka Avar, who took in the

⁴³ Kandiyoti's argument in this regard is thoroughly discussed in the subsection 5.1.2.

mission of “educating” and domesticating “the savage” Dersimli girls after the Dersim massacres, and underlines that this mission was indeed a genocidal mission, constituting “a stage of the genocidal military operation” (Türkyılmaz, 2016, p. 171). Another third scholar from this current scholarship, Ruken Işık (2022), accentuates the colonial governance over Kurds. According to Işık (2022), Kurdish people have long been living in a condition where the law is suspended, and “their lives have been reduced to ‘bare life’” (p. 44). Her research presents how the “necropolitical” governance of the state operates over Kurdish women’s bodies through mutilation and public display. These acts are intended to disseminate fear and deterrence among the Kurdish people, aiming to prevent their participation in guerrilla forces (Işık, 2022, pp. 39-40).

This scholarship also departs theoretically not only from the first wave but also from the second wave. The figures of “mother, politician, and guerrilla” to be discussed in this section differ significantly from the previous literature. If we recall the previous section, both Yalçın Heckmann & van Gelder (2000) and Çağlayan (2007/2019) discussed these figures as a reproduction of traditional/familial roles within the nationalist imaginary of the Kurdish movement. In the third-wave scholarship, conversely, women’s subjectivity begins to be discussed through their relationship with state violence. We can see this when we give an ear to Dirik’s words articulating her perspective in the preface of her piece (2022):

...the book defends the perspective that it is not possible to appreciate the resistance of Kurdish women without reference to the violence of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, authoritarianism, and militarism. (p. xx)

Kurdish women’s relationship to history and knowledge production is intrinsically linked to their antagonistic relationship to the state. (p. 22)

As we have seen in Dirik, the fact that women are described as individuals subjected to colonialist state violence does not mean that they are portrayed as victims in this scholarship. The important aspect of this corpus of knowledge is that it shows how women's resistance mechanisms in the midst of these oppressions cannot be explained without understanding the specific conditions of these oppressions. These scholars explore how Kurdish women resist the laws of the Turkish state, its law enforcement, its prison officers, and its racist official ideology (Dirik, 2022; Işık, 2022; Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021; Üstündağ, 2023).

To conceptualize how this scholarship represents a theoretical departure from the previous one, I turn to Lentin's concept of *femina sacra*. In the following subsection, I will first elaborate on this concept in detail.

5.3.2 From "femina grata" to "femina sacra"

As seen in the previous sections, scholars from the first- and second wave rely on the framework of gendered nationalism and focus on how various nationalist projects strive to construct their femina grata. Their methodological nationalism has led them to discuss women's conditions within their respective nationalist projects without adequately examining broader societal factors such as imperialism, racism, or statelessness.

Feminist scholars such as Nahla Abdo's and Ronit Lentin's discussions on racism constitute a significant shift in gendered nationalism literature in the context of the Middle East. Lentin's concept of *femina sacra* proves to be functional in illustrating the perspectives of third-wave scholars in their analysis of Kurdish women. When developing the concept *femina sacra*, Lentin (2006, 2011) draws on Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, who may be killed and yet not

sacrificed, is the opposite of sovereign power, standing at the point of “indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit” (Agamben, 1998, p. 170). In this zone of indistinction, its inhabitants were included in political life (bios) only through their exclusion, and their existence was reduced to bare life, which is included in politics in the form of exception (Agamben, 1998). Inspired by Agamben, Lentin (2011) contends that thinking through Agamben’s bare life opens up new perspectives in analyzing statelessness. She describes Palestine under the siege of Israel as a zone of indistinction between exception and rule in which subjective rights and juridical protection are inconceivable (p. 167). The relevance of Agamben’s theory notwithstanding, Lentin makes two interventions when she talks about Palestinian women: She brings the colonial condition to the light and transforms *homo sacer* into a gendered concept by developing the link between birth and nation Agamben (1998) undertheorize.

Lentin (2011) characterizes Israel as “a racial state par excellence” due to the racist laws from its foundation to the present day and due to its Zionist ideology, which conceives Palestinians as premodern and endows Israel with a civilizing mission as Zionism represents European civilization. In this context, Palestinian women are at the mercy of sovereign power where they are subjected to violence and control without the protection of the law. (p. 166). According to her, Palestinians are not merely viewed as a racial group but as a despised and demonized one; and state racism in Israel legitimizes its practices of ethnic cleansing, including the confiscation of Palestinian lands, house demolitions, and the deprivation of Palestinians’ citizenship rights (Lentin, 2011, p. 166). Following Mbembe (2003) and Ghanim (2008), she argues that biopolitics operates differently in colonial

contexts, where power is directed towards “destroying, eliminating, and dismantling” marginalized groups (Lentin, 2011, p. 167).

Lentin (2011) draws attention to the deep connection established between life and nation in genocidal actions where state racism and state sexism converge, highlighting how ethnic-other women are targeted by racist states. She uses the term “*femina sacra*” to describe Palestinian women in the settler colonial and racial state of Israel, referring to them as individuals “who can be killed or impregnated but cannot be sacrificed due to their impurity” (Lentin, 2006, p. 465; 2011, p.167), and as women “who are permanently banned as impure, but also as the producers of future generations of the racially ‘inferior’” (Lentin, 2011, p. 167). This challenges the narratives familiar in the existing gendered nationalism literature, where women are often examined solely within the nationalist project of their ethnic group and as producers of the nation. Such narratives typically set aside discussions of racism, framing women’s oppression within the context of “competing nationalisms.” In other words, as Abdo describes, women’s experiences are discussed in isolation within their nationalist projects (Abdo, 2011, p. 32). Lentin (2011) argues that nationalist projects should not only be seen as shaping women as reproducers of life and carriers of culture but also as subjecting those they view as “racially inferior” and “impure” to genocidal policies designed to prevent them from raising enemy generations (cf. Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989). She asserts that Palestinian women are targeted by Israel not only through repressive measures such as home demolitions and land confiscations but also by becoming boundary markers subjected to thanatopolitical control over birth and death (Lentin, 2011, p. 167).

When we consider the Turkish context, similar governance techniques can be noticed. The Turkish state’s genocidal policies affected non-Muslim and/or non-

Turkish women during the late Ottoman period and the early Republican era. Actions such as mass killings, rapes, burning of women, forced migrations with their families, and distribution to Turkish families where they were treated as servants were initiated by state authorities. “Exceptional” measures, albeit not in the form of genocide as before, continued to be exerted on Kurds. Has (2023) notes that the state operates on a dual governance model, functioning as a normative state for obedient citizens and a prerogative state towards dissident groups, with different administrative formations such as general inspectorates and OHAL (State of Emergency) Regional Governorships manifesting this dichotomy (p. 435). This governance underscores the repressive and discriminatory nature of state policies towards women in Kurdish regions, highlighting a significant contrast with the state’s treatment of women in Turkish-majority areas.

As noted earlier, the third wave of scholarship examines the condition of Kurdish women by taking these factors into consideration. In this section, with a particular focus on Üstündağ’s *The Mother, the Politician, and the Guerilla* (2023), Dirik’s *the Kurdish Women’s Movement* (2022), and Kutlay Sarıkaya’s *Between silence and resistance: Kurdish women in colonial Turkish prison Diyarbakir military prison 1980-1984* (2021), I aim to demonstrate the significant shift in the literature in approaching Kurdish women’s condition and political agency.

5.3.3 The Kurdish mother

Üstündağ’s piece starts with the analysis of Kurdish mother and the political meaning of motherhood. Her approach departs from the previous accounts including Yalçın Heckmann & Van Gelder (2000) and Çağlayan (2007 and 2019). As we remember, Yalçın Heckmann & Van Gelder (2000) argued that in the Kurdish

movement, as in every nationalist project, women were assigned the role of “mothers of the nation who are intended to raise new generations”. Çağlayan (2007), on the other hand, disagreed, arguing that motherhood did not emerge as a “reproducer of the nation” and that the Kurdish movement promoted mothers as political figures, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the cause. However, Çağlayan, in her analysis, ultimately presented the entire party as one big family because although women were given certain respected positions within the party, these were mostly executive bodies and they were mostly assigned to organizational work. For Çağlayan (2007), this proves that the party was once again relegating women to traditional roles (p. 115). Her focus on analyzing women’s condition within the Kurdish family and Kurdish nation leads her to discuss women’s political subjectivity as an extension to their “private” roles, such as mothers and sisters, and frame their political agency as negotiations with these patriarchal actors, such as husbands or party leadership.

Üstündağ’s account (2023), on the other hand, foregrounds the role of the Turkish state in the analysis of gender dynamics in Kurdistan. Her approach presents the undeniable link between colonial violence and the character of Kurdish women’s resistance. She illustrates this by discussing the figure of the Kurdish mother. For her, matricide has been a longstanding fantasy of the Turkish colonial state since the republic’s establishment—a fantasy of getting rid of Kurdish mothers (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 42). Considering the state’s assimilation policies, we indeed see that women are often the primary targets. As Üstündağ (2023) presents, matricide could take different forms, such as taking girls away from their families to Turkify them or circulating discourses about their incapacity for motherhood (p. 42). She uses examples from Turkish films and novels to show how Kurdish fathers are portrayed as “promiscuous,” “obscene,” “unreliable”, “temperamental,” and often at odds with

the law, while Kurdish mothers are depicted as living “miserable” lives, dependent on their domineering husbands, and enslaved by their fears and desires, driven by maternal instincts. Because Kurdish parents are ultimately seen as incapable of caring for their children, these children are often portrayed as being adopted by Turkish families. Hereby, getting rid of the Kurdish parents resolves the conflict and brings us to a satisfactory closure if not a happy ending (Üstündağ, 2023, pp. 43-45).

Fantasies of matricide extend beyond killing the Kurdish mother to killing the mother tongue of Kurds. The politics of linguicide as a means of suppressing Kurds and other ethnic minorities was practiced from the early years of the Republic. Turkification policies aimed not only to make Kurds adopt Turkish identity and Kemalism but also to make them forget their mother tongue, their identity, and their past. In this sense, the Turkish state pursued policies not only on the denial of Kurdish identity but also on the destruction of the Kurdish language (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012, p. 105). According to Üstündağ (2023), Kurdish women had limited access to education and the labor force, which meant they often did not learn Turkish. This situation rendered the state’s policies of linguicide unsuccessful. A significant indicator of this failure was that the majority of Kurds continued to speak Kurdish with their mothers (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 35), and Kurdish mothers have been a thorn in the side of the Turkish state. Üstündağ (2023) touches upon this persistent concern of the state with Kurdish mothers in the following words:

The Kurdish-speaking mother is then unbearable to the Turkish state twice: First, she breathes life into Kurdish and bears children on whose ears Kurdish will fall, turning them into ethnically *different* citizens. Second, when the state kills her children, she laments loudly, cursing the law under which Kurds must endure. In such a context, linguicide and matricide emerge as constitutive fantasies of the Turkish state that aim at preventing both the reproduction of Kurdishness and the mourning of its loss. (p. 33)

She presents the most striking example of the state's fear of the Kurdish mother tongue through the ban on speaking Kurdish to prisoners in Diyarbakır Prison during the 1980 junta regime. In this notorious prison, known for its severe torture and mistreatment, one form of torture involved prohibiting prisoners from speaking Kurdish, whether among themselves or with their visiting relatives, while forcing them to sing Turkish national anthems constantly. Prisoners could not communicate with their visiting mothers, who often did not speak Turkish, and were tortured for speaking Kurdish (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 45). In her words, the Diyarbakır Prison became a site where the Turkish state's fantasy of rebirthing Kurds as Turks unfolded, as if they had been born without mothers (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 46).

Üstündağ (2023) contends that the Turkish state's racist laws and policies have rendered the Kurdish language to a status "less than a language" (p. 30), effectively reducing it to mere "unknown sounds" (p. 38). This language has been made abject, evoking from Turkish people responses of disgust, shock, and horror when they encounter its utterance (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 34). Recalling her own ethnographic study with Kurds, Üstündağ further observes that this abjection can be internalized by the younger generation of Kurdish children, particularly girls, transforming into a sense of shame. These girls, perceiving their mother's inability to speak Turkish as a mark of "primitiveness" and "backwardness," distance themselves from them. They tend to bond with their fathers instead until they themselves become mothers (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 39). This illustrates how state policies sever the bond between Kurdish mothers and their children, disrupting the connection to the cultural and emotional universe into which Kurds are born. While these policies reduce the Kurdish language to "less than a language," conversely, it becomes "more

than a language,” transforming into the sole access to truth, with mothers becoming the keepers and transmitters of this truth (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 30).

According to Üstündağ (2023), the role of mothers in the Kurdish movement goes beyond their traditional role as carriers of culture and producers of future generations (p. 31). Their voices, including lullabies, laments, screams, and cries, perform a distinctly political function by disrupting and destabilizing established symbols and meanings (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 29). She argues that these voices reach beyond the limits of the symbolic order and produce a surplus of meaning that escapes conventional linguistic expression. This vocal power evokes deeper layers of human experience, tapping into fantasies, obsessions, and pleasures. The voices of Kurdish mothers are not only expressions of emotion but also play a critical role in challenging the symbolic and legal structures imposed by the state. Their vocal expressions, whether a mournful cry or a defiant scream in public space, can reveal and underline the failures of the law to adequately identify and control its subjects and opens up a path to new political and cultural narratives (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 32).

Üstündağ diverges from approaches like Çağlayan’s, which views the politicization of motherhood as an extension of “their assigned roles in the family” (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 64; cf. Çağlayan 2007/2019). According to her, the “limit” occupied by mothers differs from the private-public limit; moreover, their agency has significantly changed over the course of their political engagement (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 64). For instance, they transformed the very meaning of motherhood for Kurds, where it is now the mother, rather than the father, who ‘takes to the streets’ and faces persecution by state authorities (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 66).

Kurdish mothers have made motherhood political (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 55), thereby creating a rupture in the everyday functioning of state mechanisms

(Üstündağ, 2023, p. 63). While their dedication to their children and their consequent politicization is unquestionable, mothers have brought a different perspective of struggle, one defined by themselves, into the political arena. For instance, the Saturday Mothers organize sit-ins to learn about the fate of their missing children and demand justice for their children. The Peace Mothers, who have a different political agenda, are the mothers of PKK members who died while fighting the state. Unlike the Saturday Mothers, they are engaged in a struggle for peace rather than truth (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 65). Through their efforts, the Peace Mothers hold accountable not only those directly responsible for murders but also those accountable for the suffering caused by and to be caused by the war (Üstündağ, 2023, p.66). Both the Saturday Mothers and the Peace Mothers have voiced “state-inflicted injuries” in the public sphere, revealing that they possess emotions and truths that cannot be assimilated by state laws and are confined to the private realm (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 67). Most importantly, by reclaiming their children who were taken from them not only physically but also by erasing their mother tongue; namely, by claiming their children’s bodies, honoring their past, and defending their future and dreams, they have also reclaimed the motherhood that was taken from them. This is articulated in Üstündağ’s words:

Her appearance in the public space as someone both within and outside of it, represented yet not presented, creates an exception: her love, which consoles, repairs, and nourishes (and on which the reproduction of the nation depends), is furnished and simultaneously forgotten when secular state law operates. It then erupts in the public space as a sovereign, affirmative, and enduring law of another register that momentarily wounds the nation-state’s law. (2023, p. 67)

Dirik (2022) emphasizes the importance of understanding political Kurdish mothers’ activism as distinct from traditional roles. She notes that while motherhood can serve as a patriotic symbol reinforcing patriarchal nationalist ideologies, it cannot be

reduced to a mere tool for legitimizing nationalist causes. The glorification of motherhood is deeply rooted in feelings of “love, care, and longing for serenity” (Dirik, 2022, p. 117), which transforms many mothers into respected activists in their own right. She suggests that the emotional foundation of their activism leads to an unconventional organizational structure characterized by urgency and flexibility—qualities often absent in bureaucratic organizations like political parties, which typically adhere to fixed schedules (Dirik, 2022, p. 115). She also illustrates that these mothers’ activism represents a continuation of their traditional roles as intermediaries and conflict resolvers in village life. Within the Kurdish freedom movement, this role of women in Kurdish society now serves in peacemaking practices, as the Peace Mothers act as intermediaries between the people and the PKK, as well as between the PKK and the state (Dirik, 2022, pp. 113-114). However, we can see that this continuity of their intermediary role does not necessarily signal the reproduction of patriarchy in the public sphere, but rather the emergence of a new form of politics mobilized through emotions.

5.3.4 Kurdish women’s flesh

The concept of “voice” is not the only one which Üstündağ (2023) uses in order to account for “devalued lives in modernity”. She presents the concept of “flesh”, first articulated by Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers (2003) and further developed by Alexander Weheliye (2014), instead of “bare life.” (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 109). Üstündağ (2023) finds this concept suitable for describing the experiences of Kurdish women under colonialism, patriarchy, and occupation (p. 110). According to her, “body” signifies a domain where biopolitics operates, while “flesh” escapes biopolitical inscription. This escape signifies the erasure of subjectivity through the

workings of law and the removal of social identity. Under patriarchy, the bodies of Kurdish women are exposed to male violence, while the colonial state also emerges “as a Man” that reduces the bodies of Kurds to flesh through torture and massacre (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 110).

How does the colonial state act “as a Man”?⁴⁴ Scholars contemplate this question by presenting the case of Kevser Eltürk, a woman guerilla known by the code name “Ekin Wan.” Üstündağ (2023) touches upon the media coverage of the dead body of Ekin Wan. She depicts her lifeless body lying on the ground, surrounded by three civilians and uniformed men standing over her. The body is sprawled face down, stripped entirely bare. Only the legs of the men are visible (Üstündağ, 2023, p.4). According to the report from IHD (Human Rights Association), eyewitnesses have stated that there were marks on her neck, leading to suspicions that she was dragged by a rope tied around her throat and subjected to torture (IHD, 2015). Üstündağ (2023) is impressed by this image, and in a scrutiny of why the counterinsurgency squad leaked this photo, she suggests that they aimed to separate “the flesh” from the living and breathing environment to isolate it. By doing so, the state was separating the pure from the impure, and the insurgent from the human/citizen (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 7). This image serves to disseminate the violence, sexism, and racism within the Turkish community, while also emphasizing that “the law will always remain Turkish and patriarchal in Kurdish lands” (Üstündağ, 2023,

⁴⁴ By the arguing that the colonial state’s acting as a Man, Üstündağ (2023) appeals to Simpson (2016) who criticizes the settler colonial regimes in Canada. According to Simpson (2016), the Canadian settler governments have historically acted as a male, heteropatriarchal, and white-dominated entity, which have dispossessed Indigenous women of the status previously granted by their communal laws through the colonial laws like the Indian Act. These laws caused those women to lose their inheritance rights and social status when they married non-Indigenous men, forcing them into a patrilineal system where they became the property of their husbands. This legal framework contributed to the destruction of Indigenous communities, deepening the poverty and disempowerment of Indigenous women. Moreover, Simpson draws our attention to the increasing disappearance of Indigenous women. For her, femicides occurs as a result of the system devaluing those women’s lives within the settler colony as they were rendered “killable” and “rapeable”.

p. 4) For Fulden İbrahimhakkıoğlu (2018), it was disclosed to the press to humiliate and dishonor the Kurdish resistance in general. As İbrahimhakkıoğlu aptly states, these images were also disseminated to gratify the public supporting the state's war on terror and to normalize state violence in Kurdish regions (p. 10).

This provocation was met with a strong response from women. Ekin Wan's funeral became a protest against state violence, and protests held by women across the country where they spoke up against the state's war crimes through the case of Ekin Wan. Demonstrations organized by Peace Mothers and various women's platforms featured the memorable slogan, "Ekin Wan is the most naked phase of our struggle" (İbrahimhakkıoğlu, 2016; Işık, 2022; Öksüz, 2015). Researchers analyzing this case highlight how the women's resistance thwarted the state's attempts to demean the Kurdish women's struggle, dehumanize the Kurdish people, and disseminate fear to deter them from joining the struggle (İbrahimhakkıoğlu, 2016; Işık, 2022; Üstündağ, 2023). The women transformed the vulnerability embodied in Ekin Wan's body into an act of resistance (Işık, 2022; Üstündağ, 2023).

In her dissertation on the experiences of Kurdish women political prisoners in Diyarbakir Prison between 1980-1984, Berivan Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) also recounts how colonial state power was wielded as a tool to control women's bodies and to deter their political activism within the Kurdish freedom movement. Her analysis starts by presenting how the colonial Turkish state rendered Kurdish women political prisoners *femina sacra* by reducing their bodies to flesh and rendering them abject (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 113). According to her, these women found themselves subjected to institutionalized and racialized sexual violence, excluded from the protection of the law, and reduced to bare life in the Diyarbakır prison. She underlines that this systemic violence against Kurdish women is not an anomaly but

a deeply entrenched aspect of Turkish colonial state control of Kurds (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 106).

According to Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021), Turkish military officers employed various techniques to discipline Kurdish women in Diyarbakır Prison. One of the most common practices was forcing women to undress, use the toilet, or bathe in the presence of soldiers and guards (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 105). Her participants describe how the torturers mocked and demeaned their bodies by labeling them as “dirty,” having “impure blood,” and being “undesirable women” (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 113). In addition, women are subjected to sexual violence in various forms. They underwent forced virginity exams, were raped during interrogations, or were denied access to toilets and the ability to wash themselves if they were menstruating or had been raped (p. 119). Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) recounts that sometimes these rapes occurred in the presence of their own husbands, family members, or male political prisoners (p. 129); and she adds that some of her participants had to give birth in prison (p. 105), others were subjected to forced sterilization under dire conditions (p. 137). Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) notes that all the women interviewed in her study mentioned that the prison director of the time, Esat Oktay Yıldırım, frequently targeted their reproductive systems (p. 137). As Kutlay-Sarıkaya expresses this as follows:

Esat Oktay would say, in a way that the male prisoners also could hear: “I will sterilize you, I will dry out your wombs, may you never give birth to bastards”. Their tortures were deliberately directed at their bellies, groins, and vaginas. Such eugenic discourse (“You will never give birth again”), is yet another dimension of sexual torture towards women. (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 137).

The acts of violence, including rape, forced sterilization, and deprivation of basic needs during menstruation and pregnancy, sexual insults, and humiliation institutionalize their dehumanization (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 110), and, as Lentin

(2011) suggests, revealed the state's intents to "permanently ban them as the producers of future generations of the racially 'inferior'" by the Turkish state.

However, for Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021), all these aspects did not simply indicate that women were victims of torture and oppression. In fact, her participants focused more on how they resisted in Diyarbakır Prison. As the torturers attempted to separate and isolate the women from one another, the women clung to each other and established bonds whenever they could come together (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 172). The women's ward remained silent during forced confessions as a form of resistance; this was not merely an act to avoid giving information to the enemy but held significant meaning for the female prisoners, as it demonstrated their resilience and refusal to surrender in the face of oppression (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 171). The women's resistance took other forms as well. They celebrated Newroz, a culturally and politically significant festival for Kurds, with *halays* (p. 172) and continued to sing in Kurdish despite the bans and torture (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 175). They also turned humor into a form of resistance, sometimes mimicking and mocking the guards and soldiers and other times making jokes about themselves and their condition (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, pp.175-176). The prison witnessed not only suffering but also laughter and hope. According to the women's accounts, the prison administration was most disturbed by laughter and songs, which resulted in further punishment for the women (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 177). As torture persisted, so did the resistance.

Üstündağ (2023) presents other cases of resistance where Kurdish women have subverted the nationalist imaginary by embracing the flesh that the state seeks to strip from the body, not only through literal nakedness and mutilation but also through the deprivation of their fundamental human rights. For her, flesh,

constituting “what remains after bodily devastation and cruelty,” escapes from ideological interpellation (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 110). To illustrate that, she focuses on the figure of Kurdish politicians. One notable example is Ayşe Gökkan’s 2013 protest against the state’s plan to construct a wall along the Syria-Turkey border in 2013. Gökkan attempted to block the wall by using her own body and performing a powerful act of resistance against the state’s actions (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 103).

It is essential to look into the historical context in order to convey the significance of the wall for the Kurdish people. Kurds have long been divided by artificial borders but have managed to maintain deep cultural and social ties. These enduring connections, manifested through the “transactions of brides, goods, people, and political ideas,” had allowed a sense of “popular sovereignty” and solidarity among Kurdish communities (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 102). With the Rojava Revolution and the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, Kurds in both Syria and Turkey felt closer than ever. They embraced Abdullah Öcalan’s ideas of democratic confederalism and regional autonomy, namely they followed the ideological leadership of the Kurdish Freedom Movement of Turkey. These connections intensified as many young Kurds from Turkey joined the Kurdish fighters in Syria’s Kurdish region with an endeavor to find an autonomous government and partake in the acclaimed struggle against ISIS (Üstündağ, 2023, pp. 102-103). Although the Turkish government promoted the wall as a measure to prevent the entry of “jihadi” fighters into the country, many Kurds believed the policy was specifically targeted at them, and they considered it an effort of the Turkish government to disrupt Kurdish unity and autonomy rather than a measure against jihadi fighters since there was convincing evidence that the Turkish government was already providing support to certain Islamist factions. In summary,

this wall was more than a mere structure for the Kurds; it represented a significant and deliberate effort to deepen their sense of separation and oppression, and to prevent their self-determination.

Ayşe Gökkan, then the mayor of Nusaybin, a district on the Syria-Turkey border, initially objected to the construction of the wall through legal channels and, receiving no response from state authorities, tore through the barbed wire, crossed into the mined area between the two countries, and began a hunger strike to prevent the wall's construction. She later escalated this hunger strike into a death fast (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 103). Üstündağ (2023) explains the significance of Gökkan's act as a form of resistance as follows:

Bodies become flesh when that which is abject resurfaces and the body cannot appear as an unbroken surface. While causing enormous pain, this situation also challenges and destabilizes the symbolic order by making visible that which is excluded, endowing it with agency. In Ayşe's case, for example, and as far as the national body is concerned, what she makes visible is the abjected mined area between borders, that no man's land that separates neighboring cities. Meanwhile, her flesh, as that which hungers, urinates, and freezes, threatens to reveal the Real of her body and becomes a force that moves people and endows them with a "nongovernmental viewing" that sees the wall that is being built as a disaster in continuity with the mining of the border. Ayşe is never absolutely reducible to flesh, however, because of the title she holds as the mayor of a city. She rather occupies the site flesh/body. (pp. 110-111)

Here, Üstündağ (2023) demonstrates that by occupying this liminal space, Gökkan "destabilizes" the symbolic order in which the unity and autonomy of Kurds are denied by the Turkish state. As she crossed the border in her endeavor to bridge the divide between Kurds separated by national boundaries, Gökkan also transgressed the limits of the law. For Üstündağ, this act revealed the truth that the borders between Syria and Turkey, as well as the division between body and flesh, are artificially constructed to serve the interests of sovereign states. Gökkan was seen as a body, namely situated in the realm of biopolitics as she was the legitimate mayor of

the district, but she was also the flesh that crosses legal boundaries. Gökkan incorporates what is excluded as she situates herself in the mined areas of “no man’s land,” embraces the vulnerability of her suffering hungry body, the visceral reality of human existence, and turns it into a weapon against the state. Her very liminality revealed the limits of the law of the Turkish state; it indeed exposed the inherent arbitrariness of all legal frameworks.

Feminist scholars from this wave, in addition to addressing how colonial state violence was gendered and how women created mechanisms of resistance against it, also explain how patriarchal structures were transformed by state intervention and how colonial domination reinforced patriarchy. We can begin our discussion with Üstündağ’s analysis of how patriarchy operates in a colonial condition as she presents one way in which the Turkish state and Kurdish family conspire in the committing of femicide by giving an example about a woman who was killed by her family in the name of honor⁴⁵ (2023, p. 101). The woman in question had recently married, and when no blood was seen after the first marital intercourse, her husband and her husband’s family accused her of not being a virgin and threatened to send her back to her family’s home as punishment. Her husband’s family then systematically tortured her, and she could not reveal her suffering to anyone for fear of being branded as dishonorable. Eventually, she was killed by her husband and his family. Her dead body bore numerous cigarette burns and marks from shackles (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 101). Üstündağ asks the following question after telling the story: “Where

⁴⁵ This case was told to her by Ayşe Gökkan, the former mayor of Nusaybin, Mardin, who worked on a project on “honor-killing” together with Nükhet Sirman conducted by Diyarbakır Bağlar Municipality. The interviews and investigations conducted by Gökkan and Sirman were compiled into a book titled *Gökyüzünde Asılı Çığlıklar (Screams Hanging in the Sky)* (2007). Interestingly, we cannot find this case in this book.

did this family learn to torture and to put out cigarettes on another person's body? To kill slowly?" (2023, 101).⁴⁶

By asking these questions, she draws our attention to how these practices, conventionally associated with customs or tradition, are seemingly implemented in modern ways through modern methods. This brings us again to Segato (2021), who illustrates "how gender relations are historically modified by colonial intrusion, as well as by the matrix of coloniality crystallized and permanently reproduced by the state" (p. 781). Segato (2021) rightly observes that the appearance of stability is often illusory and that customs are in constant flux, underscoring the dynamic nature of societal norms (p. 274). The collusion between the state and patriarchy is not explicit most times; it often occurs in tacit ways, where neither party acts deliberately to oppress women. She suggests that the colonial intrusion can lead to the emasculation of non-white men, meaning it can undermine their masculinity or authority. On the other hand, it can enhance these men's status within their communities. In the pre-intrusion world, these men often served as intermediaries between their own communities and other groups, but after the intrusion, they became intermediaries with the white administration. This shift likely altered their roles and possibly their standing within both their own communities and the broader colonial context (Segato, 2021, p. 789).

Besides Üstündağ (2023), other third-wave of scholars demonstrate how patriarchal dynamics have been transmuted by colonial intrusion of the Turkish state. Erengözgin (2021) and Dirik (2022) discuss how Kurdish men are emasculated in the

⁴⁶ In an interview about "customary killings," held in 2009, Üstündağ states that she does not believe these murders occur due to "Kurdish customs," especially after doing extensive research on the topic. She asserts that this violence is, in fact, related to "modern issues". According to her, these murders are symptoms of the long-standing war, violence, torture, and oppression that have afflicted the entire Kurdish region for a prolonged period (Genç, 2009).

colonial encounter and how the humiliation culminates in domestic violence. Dirik (2022) interviews Elif Ronahî, an Alevi woman from Maraş and one of the first women in the PKK. Ronahî presents the positioning of an ordinary Kurdish man in his encounter with the state institutions in the following words:

With the state's brutality against the uprisings, men were taught to see the state as all-powerful. The Kurdish man learned to equate the most insignificant state official, who would take care of a bureaucratic issue for him, with the state. He would timidly button up his shirt when seeing an official. He would enter government buildings, thinking: 'I must not clash with the state. They must not find out that I am Kurdish. I need to run my errands and leave quickly'. The Kurdish man, withered and with a broken will in front of the state, experiences this rage deep in his core. With this inferiority complex, he regrets not being as powerful as the state and resorts to his only sphere of influence and authority and which he can call his property: the family and the woman. He compensates for his defeat by becoming his own state in the household... Walking through the day with constant humiliation by authorities, the first thing he does when arriving at home is to shout at his wife and daughter to assert his power, to make them shake in submission ... He renders the woman needy and dependent on him, creating an atmosphere of violence and domination in his house, where he gets to be the small emperor, the small replica of the state. A man, who commits all sorts of atrocities towards woman, but at the same time attributes to her body his sense of honour, ready to kill anyone who approaches her. (Ronahî quoted in Dirik, 2022)

In a similar vein, Erengözgin (2021) analyzes the comments made by her interviewees, who discuss Kurdish men's feelings of humiliation in the colonial encounter. She addresses how men cope with police brutality, sexual violence during detention, and the humiliation experienced during compulsory military service. Erengözgin's interviewees mention that these experiences make men feel emasculated, and this emasculation culminates in a more "furious" and "provoked" masculinity. The men, subjected to humiliation and violence, often project this violence onto their families, turning state violence into domestic violence (Erengözgin, 2021, pp. 111-112).

Furthermore, the Turkish state can use patriarchal codes such as honor as an instrument to control the Kurdish family. This is not only true for Kurds but also

applies to Palestinians living under colonial conditions. In her analysis of sex and family as colonial instruments of political control over Palestinian society, Abdo (2008 and 2014) recounts how Israel employs sexuality to suppress women's participation in national resistance. By analyzing her interviews with Palestinian women political prisoners, Abdo (2008) expresses that the Israeli state attempts to depict Palestinian women as discordant within their families, it uses various torture methods, threats, and intimidation to coerce women. Particularly, social pressure related to losing virginity is leveraged against women, who are frequently denigrated with terms like "sharmouta" and "qahbah" (whore) during interrogation. Palestinian women are accused of immorality for fighting alongside men and are threatened with rape and being deprived of their virginity if they remain silent (Abdo, 2008, pp. 181-183).

By building on Abdo's analysis, Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) successfully unveils a way in which the state and the patriarchy collude in producing the silence of the sexual violence against the Kurdish women prisoners in the Diyarbakır prison. According to Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021), while the state utilizes the concept of honor "to humiliate the Kurdish culture," honor codes were reproduced through the silencing of the women's experiences of sexual violence committed in the Diyarbakır prison (p. 113). The most significant indication of this silencing is that while the prison is remembered for the resistance of men, the struggles of women have gone unrecognized and remain invisible in the historiography of the Kurdish resistance (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 2). Beyond their fear of state persecution, if they file a complaint against a state officer, the silencing primarily occurs because women refrain from filing these complaints, fearing that their family members will believe they have brought shame upon the family (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 114). To break

this silence, human rights lawyer and public figure Eren Keskin has made various efforts, including filing cases against police officers herself. Despite these efforts by Keskin and other activists, many women who experienced violence in custody do not wish to publicly share their stories. Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) recounts an incident from 1996 when she was working as a reporter for a pro-Kurdish newspaper. She wrote an article about a woman who had been subjected to violence while in custody and was subsequently contacted by the woman's brother, who was a colleague of hers. The brother attempted to persuade her not to write about the matter, arguing that their father would be unable to cope with the shame if he found out. Following this incident, Kutlay-Sarıkaya learned that the woman was abandoned by her husband for "not handling the situation," leaving her alone with her young daughter and unsure of what to do next (Kutlay-Sarıkaya, 2021, pp. 115-116).

Kutlay-Sarıkaya (2021) expresses that not only family members but also the male comrades and the party leaderships of Kurdish organizations, including the PKK, Rizgarî, and the DDKO, silenced women who were willing to speak about sexual assaults that occurred in the Diyarbakır prison (p. 161). To illustrate how women were forced into silence by their organizations, she presents the story of Lorin, who was a member of Rizgarî organization at the time. Through Lorin's following words, Kutlay-Sarıkaya sheds light on how patriarchal structures concealed the sexual violence inflicted upon women by the state, thereby intensifying the oppression they endured.:

Whenever I wrote or talked about my experiences in the DMP, I never censored myself. So, in spite of difficulties in remembering many traumatic [events], I wrote down my memories day and night. I mentioned in my report that male guards called us whore, cunt, or slut, and they swore and humiliated us, and sexually assaulted us all the time. When I submitted my part, one of the male comrades was hesitant to include it in the report. He warned me not to use those words in my writing and to use the appropriate language, since the Rizgarî could not accept it because it dishonoured the Rizgarî

organization. This is the Diyarbakir Prison Report for Rizgarî! But I said: “I was told that, ‘I [will] fuck you!’ “and called as a whore, shit, cunt, etc.” It is the most political misfortune for me in my political organization that I confronted. I was ashamed and hesitant to respond to that guy at that time, and the organization’s hierarchical structure did not allow me to expose his behaviour. But I also did not change the language that I used in my writings. So, they did not put my part into the Rizgarî report! There are no women’s voices in those two Rizgarî reports for the DMP; both are terrible. They expected us to write a political analysis; even I do it better than them. Hesitation, hierarchy - so fear of the organization, whatever you call it. Now you see how their male comrades have silenced Kurdish women. They cut our voices! Then, I refused to change my writings. We wanted to transform society, we wanted to change the whole world, but we could not reflect anything to our praxis. I became the woman who resists this mentality after 25 years! Imagine... this is the same male violence that I confronted all my life. (Lorin, quoted in Kutlay-Sarikaya, 2021, pp. 162-163)

Kutlay-Sarikaya (2021) notes that although many women wanted to document their experiences in Diyarbakir Prison, none, except one, were able to do so (p. 165).

Among other factors, patriarchal norms played a significant role in preventing them from speaking out about their experiences. Kutlay-Sarikaya’s account demonstrates that while women successfully resisted the state’s sexual violence, they were less effective when confronting the patriarchal structures within Kurdish political parties and Kurdish society in general. So, how did the women confront patriarchal dominance within Kurdish society and organizations?

5.3.5 Kurdish women’s resistance against patriarchy

Dirik (2022) highlights the importance of local governance in the empowerment of Kurdish women. She examines the essays of Kurdish women involved in local politics featured in *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* (2018), edited by Gültan Kışanak; and discusses how the gender policies implemented by municipalities have transformed women’s lives. In 1999, during the HADEP period, more than thirty municipalities were won, resulting in the election of twenty women mayors (Dirik, 2022, p.182). She argues that following this victory, during the meetings held by

these mayors with women in the neighborhoods, women were, for the first time, able to openly express their problems and demands (p. 183).

When we examine Kubilay's essay, to which Dirik refers, we see that women were able to express their demands in their native language for the first time (Kubilay, 2018, p. 212). As Dirik (2022) also reminds us, this was significant for women whose access to public services had been previously limited due to their lack of proficiency in Turkish (pp. 183-184). The fact that an official institution was soliciting their opinions for the first time generated significant enthusiasm among the women (Keskin, 2018, p. 103). They demanded policies to address issues such as polygamy, bride exchange (*berdel*), forced child marriages, dowry, and violence, and they expressed a desire for economic independence (Kısanak, 2018). From the day they were elected, female mayors began implementing policies aimed at empowering women. For instance, as Dirik suggests Leyla Güven subjected municipal employees to training on sexism and violence against women during her tenure as mayor (p. 184). Güven also took the initiative to try something unprecedented: during collective bargaining between the municipality and the union representing municipal workers, she managed to add certain provisions regarding women to the contract. According to these provisions, any municipal employee who brought in a second wife or practiced polygamy would be dismissed without compensation, the salary of an employee who committed domestic violence would be given to their spouse, and financial support for sons would be cut if daughters were not sent to school. Moreover, municipal employees would be granted leave on March 8th, International Women's Day (Güven, 2018, p. 205).

Particularly after 2004, with the increase in women's representation in local governance, these policies were institutionalized, leading to a greater proliferation of

women's centers, cooperatives, shelters, and efforts to combat violence against women within the municipalities (Dirik, 2022, p. 176; p. 184; Kışanak, 2018). In addition, the female mayors coordinated with women's organizations and began offering training on sexual health and gender-based violence (Dirik, 2022, p. 185).

In a 2016 interview, Gültan Kışanak highlighted the significant impact local governments can have in empowering women and creating opportunities for them. Currently, municipalities have developed expertise in offering counseling and services to women, supported by teams of psychologists, social workers, researchers, and educators. A notable initiative is the 24/7 hotline for women survivors of violence, which provides support across both urban and rural areas, demonstrating a commitment to accessible assistance for all communities. Kışanak also underscores the importance of various social projects, such as laundry houses, tandoori houses, and children's playrooms. She notes that the expansion of kindergartens and their design as spaces that foster social interaction have contributed positively to community engagement (Kışanak, 2016).

However, the state has attempted to undermine these gains by arresting mayors through political operations, imposing bureaucratic obstacles on municipal projects related to women, and ultimately appointing trustees to municipalities in 2016 (Kışanak, 2016, 2018). Simultaneously, these efforts have faced resistance from men, and women have had to struggle against both the state and patriarchal forces (Dirik, 2022, p. 185). Unlike feminist struggles that aim to discard men rather than transform them, changing men has always been a crucial objective for the Kurdish women's movement (Dirik, 2022, p. 105).

According to Dirik (2022), from its early years, the PKK endeavored to change men. In this regard, new masculinities were tried to be constructed, and it was

thought that only in this way could society be liberated. In this context, the Free Women's Academy of 2002-2004 provided "killing the man" education programs to male cadres. During this period, the more right-wing and patriarchal factions within the movement mocked the men who participated in these programs, labeling them as emasculated. Despite these attacks, many men received training and reflection on women's history, sexism, love, and patriarchal codes such as honor. The women guerrillas tasked the men with writing evaluations of their upbringing, their sexist attitudes in everyday life, and reflecting on how they were trying to be better comrades to the women. These reports have been transcribed and prepared as educational material (Dirik, 2022, p. 105). According to Dirik (2022), transforming men has been a key strategy of the Kurdish women's movement. The women do not believe that men will change on their own, as they see male dominance being continuously reproduced under capitalism and patriarchy (p. 105).

The movement has shifted from its earlier radical stance against the family, now aiming to democratize it. Jînda, Dirik's participant from the Women's Academy in Sur, discusses the social work they carry out in impoverished neighborhoods. Men participating in the training are asked questions such as: "Do you ever tell jokes to your wife? Do you drink tea on the balcony together? Do you ever discuss the peace process? If not, then why are you married? What is the meaning of your togetherness? What is that woman's position in your life?" (Jînda quoted in Dirik, 2022, p. 107). During the training, men often realize the burden their wives bear at home and, in their discussions, admit to having beaten their wives before joining the program. Jînda notes that men frequently cry during these sessions (p. 106). She explains that their work aims to create a family model free from exploitation, where a "socialist life" can flourish, instead of the traditional nuclear family seen as a

prototype of the state (p. 107). However, this effort is met with resistance from society, and the process of change is slow. The goal is no longer to abolish the family but to transform it through a “slow revolution.” According to Dirik, this shift is related to the movement’s attempt to position itself within the existing social realities of the Middle East (Dirik, 2022, p. 107).

Dirik recounts that she also had the chance to observe how men were aimed to transform through Jineoloji courses given at The Mesopotamia Academy for Social Sciences in Qamişlo (Rojava), a higher education institution established in 2014. She traces this transformation through recounting one of her participants, 24-year-old Malik. Malik admits that he used to look down on women, believing that women were inherently inferior to men before he attended these classes; but, after the classes, he realized that women’s oppression originated from historical processes in which women’s power had been systematically destroyed by men. He also acknowledges how, as a man, he has personally benefited from male supremacy. According to Dirik, consciousness-raising and consciousness-raising groups are crucial in demonstrating that male dominance is historical rather than natural. In addition, the formation of women’s own units to fight against ISIS in Rojava has contributed to changing men’s perspectives. Unlike stories of individual women’s success, this has demonstrated that women can organize collectively and pursue their own political agendas (Dirik, 2022, p. 108).

She also mentions that the movement has undertaken numerous activities in the civilian sphere to prevent patriarchal domination and domestic violence. For instance, she refers to the neighborhoods in Rojava organized into communes, where the movement promotes solidarity in childcare and housework and encourages children to grow up without adopting sexist gender roles (Dirik, 2022, p. 109).

However, Dirik also warns us that there is a longer process ahead in fighting against violence and building egalitarian relationships. She states that Öcalan's doctrines of "killing the man" and mechanisms such as women's autonomous assemblies and co-presidency safeguard "critical minimum moral standard" such as gender equality in the community, men might still pay only lip service to these values. She illustrates how men can create moral divides among women for their advantage, such as militant women versus women as homemakers or guerilla versus marriable women. In response, the women's movement seeks to protect its gains and resist these new forms of control by maintaining its autonomous organizational structures and working to transform men. As Dirik (2022) emphasizes, "killing the man is a continuous and dynamic individual and social process of reflection and transformation," and "liberating life" can only be achieved through this revolutionary struggle. (pp. 109-110).

In a similar vein, Al-Ali and Käser (2022) discuss how revolutionary national liberation movements have historically aimed to create new male and female revolutionary subjects through educational programs, envisioning these new individuals as leaders in the pursuit of a more just society. The authors also emphasize that the Kurdish freedom movement's approach to gender carries certain unique characteristics. They note that the party leader's critique of masculinity, encapsulated in the "killing the man" doctrine, has not only facilitated the establishment of autonomous women's organizations and ensured equal representation but also led to the development of various mechanisms that hold men accountable for their sexist actions. When they interviewed those organizing Jineolojî workshops, they were informed that transforming men and patriarchal structures is an ongoing process. The authors furthermore draw our attention to

another important issue. According to them, the movement's foundation on women's liberation perspective, embodied in the idea of "killing the man," enables it to build transnational alliances with other movements and activists fighting against capitalism, sexism, and racism (Al-Ali & Käser, 2022, p. 231).

Other scholars, including Dirik (2022) and Üstündağ (2023), warn that the Kurdish women's liberation movement diverges from other national liberation movements and feminist organizations in its approach to transnational alliances. As they suggest, under its new paradigm, the Kurdish freedom movement no longer seeks to establish an independent nation-state but instead fights against all nation-states (Dirik, 2022, p. 12; Üstündağ, 2023, p. 10). According to Üstündağ (2023), the movement views femicides and the broader oppression of women as outcomes of a global war waged against them by men, nation-states, and capitalists (p. 174). She argues that the movement offers a new governance model not only for Kurds but for the entire Middle East, proposing a "transnational emancipatory project that brings together conviviality, local autonomy, horizontal organization, women's representation, and the establishment of an ecological life" (Üstündağ, 2023, p. 10).

In this context, Dirik (2022) emphasizes that the Kurdish women's liberation movement urges women and feminist movements worldwide to form international alliances "not for solidarity, but for 'common struggle'" (p. 311) against nation-states, imperialism, and capitalism. As Dirik states:

Its [the Kurdish women's liberation movement's] theory and praxis, which constantly evolves, does not limit itself to the decolonization of Kurdistan, but seeks methods and frameworks to decolonize life from systems of power. In its efforts to reach out to other social movements, it shares its perspectives and experiences for wider discussion and to learn from other contexts. World Democratic Women's Confederation aspires to be a non-statist, revolutionary, autonomy-based counter-force to the status quo politics of the UN system and its agendas. In any case, as members of the movement always stress, just as society will not be free without the liberation of women,

Kurdistan will not be free without the liberation of the Middle East and the world. (2022, p. 311)



CHAPTER 6

CONCLUDING REMARKS

After reflecting on all these discussions, we can see that the production of knowledge, whether in theory, methodology, or empirics, could be deeply ideological. Academic knowledge production, much like every other domain of life, is fraught with oppression, censorship, and the struggles against them.

Methodologies and concepts we use are far from being “objective” or “value-free” or do not necessarily serve for a more “inclusive” or “democratic” knowledge production, sometimes regardless of our “good” intentions. They are influenced by political perspectives, and they contribute to particular political agendas whether they are deliberate in their actions or not. When we focus on the subject of this thesis, we observe how the academic approach to the Kurdish issue and Kurdish women has evolved over the years. As previously mentioned, feminist academic writing on Kurds in the context of Turkey has developed in political engagement with the feminist grassroots movement, and it has been influenced by the political developments concerning the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

When we look at the post-coup feminists of the 1980s, we can notice that they were predominantly middle to upper-middle-class women, mostly from Kemalist families, and largely unaware of the genocidal policies enacted by both the Ottoman Empire and the Republican regimes against communities such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds. They challenged the official Kemalist historical narratives, which claimed that Kemalism liberated women, as they discovered that the history of the Turkish women’s movement actually dates back to the Second Constitutional Era of the Ottoman Empire. However, the experiences of Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian,

and other women subjected to ethnic cleansing were not on the political agenda of this wave of feminism. The academic scholarship of the era developed accordingly. This first wave of scholarship led by Şirin Tekeli and Deniz Kandiyoti sharply distinguished the Republic of Turkey from its Ottoman past by neglecting to address the genocidal policies and the dispossession of racialized groups inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Without acknowledging this history, the newly established Republic of Turkey was situated within a postcolonial framework, and Turkish nationalism was analyzed through this lens. The Kemalist regime, described as secular and authoritarian, granted certain rights to women, but these rights primarily empowered urban and middle-class women, while failing to uplift rural and impoverished women. Women were not liberated by this project, nonetheless, they were emancipated.

Serpil Çakır (2011), when evaluating this first-wave feminist scholarship, asserts that it marks a significant paradigm shift, revealing the gender aspect of modernization in Turkey. However, she criticizes its approach for not focusing on women's experiences and overlooking the history of the women's movement. Indeed, this body of literature has primarily concentrated on the discourse produced about women, neglecting to investigate what women themselves have said. According to Çakır, women's history should approach women as subjects and focus on what women say rather than the symbols and myths created about them. She points to the dearth of data regarding the political activities of "different" ethnic and religious groups in the Ottoman era and underscores that we need scholars proficient in different languages to unveil the histories of these different women and to "enrich the field" (Çakır, 2011, p. 103). Hard not to agree with her on this point, yet it is

interesting not to see any mention of silencing of the archive in her account. She formulates the problem as if it is a matter of intellectual interest.

I agree with Çakır (2011) that the first wave of literature represents a departure from the Kemalist official ideology, and like Çakır, I believe in the necessity of a historiography that is written “from women’s eyes” and centered on “women’s experiences.” However, I diverge from her approach in three respects. First, the scarcity of data does not stem from the intellectual disinterest of scholars. We know that it has always been troubling to reach sources in non-Ottoman works in Turkey, and the destruction or “diasporization” of resources in Armenian, Greek, and Ladino languages brought about the silencing of the history of non-Muslim women (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006, p. 332). As the CUP found the books written in non-Ottoman languages, including French, German, English, Russian, and Kurdish, “harmful,” many books were confiscated and destroyed during WWI (Üngör, 2011, p. 65). Second, data about women can also be obtained by examining state officials’ reports and memoirs, and confidential correspondences should not be glossed over due to a fetishism of women’s agency. That may risk marginalizing already marginalized subjects even further. Such fetishization may easily reduce the history of gender to a history of women’s struggles, and the gender history of Turkey could be conflated with the history of feminism in Turkey, in which Kurdish women appear as latecomers.

The majority of Kurdish women who were displaced during the years 1916, 1925, and 1934 left behind no trace other than their names or numbers in official archives. A few oral histories, which were not conducted from a feminist perspective and were compiled by non-academics such as Şeyhmus Diken (2005) and Yusuf Ziya Döğer (2022), include these women’s voices. Besides these works, access to

those women's voices has not been achieved, to my knowledge. Notwithstanding, official correspondences, records, and memoirs written by men and state authorities may also provide valuable insights, considering the challenges of accessing women's own narratives.

I also believe that the problem is not the absence per se, it is rather how the scholars deal with it. My revisiting of feminist academic literature demonstrates that the addition of new data itself does not amount to "democratization" of the field or open up ways for an episteme grounded on feminist solidarity. For instance, more recent critical works produced by scholars take the criticism made by Kurdish and Armenian feminist scholars about the silencing of "other" women's voices more seriously. These recent works on gendered nationalism such as Berktaş's *Tarihin Cinsiyeti* (2003) and Sancar's *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti* (2012), avoid euphemisms like "rural" or "Eastern" women and include more space for Kurdish women.

Nonetheless, they reproduce the silences in different ways: (i) by marginalizing those women's experiences as peripheral to the main discussion on women and Turkish nation-building, and (ii) by underemphasizing how the state's genocidal practices and practices of racialization (discriminatory laws, language ban, assimilation, and forced conversion) created a gender regime and divided women along class lines. This shows us it is not a matter of just "enriching" the field as Çakır (2021) suggests as if we lack different colors on the palette, but in effect, we need a paradigm shift. Despite extensive documentation on the imperialist policies and internal colonization associated with the Turkish state, and despite numerous feminist scholars repeatedly underline a need to shift in theoretical approach (Ekmekçioğlu, 2006; Mojab, 2001), many feminist scholars continued to adhere to

the same theoretical perspectives. This persistence is evident among both state-aligned and dissident scholars. As discussed before, one possible explanation is the fear of state repression, including job loss or imprisonment. Consequently, an important question arises: In an environment of censorship and oppression, how are researchers' narratives, rooted in these silenced experiences, methodologically legitimized? That is, how do they avoid ethical accountability through specific methodologies?

The present thesis shows that they do so (i) by sharply distinguishing between the nation-state and the empire-state and focusing their analysis on the nation-state. For instance, the Republic is often seen as a new beginning, having left behind the coercive policies of the Ottoman Empire, and (ii) by viewing newly acquired information as a deviation from the norm, although it may challenge the hegemonic narrative. Hereby, a radical change that could lead to a paradigm shift is avoided. Such new information can be deflected by framing it as a new set of "value-relevant" concerns (Bhambra, 2016, p. 4). This is why critiques from Armenian feminists about genocide could be dismissed by merely acknowledging the existence of Armenian feminism. Similarly, the Kurdish national liberation movement could be added to the cluster of nationalism, each sitting by the other as "competing nationalisms." In this scenario, the analysis of the Kurdish movement does not constitute a substantial challenge to the previous analysis of Turkish nationalism.

In effect, my analysis of Yalçın-Heckman & Van Gelder (2000) and Çağlayan (2007) shows that the inclusion of Kurdish women did not necessarily lead to a more "inclusive" feminist scholarship. Interestingly, these texts, which center on Kurdish women, reproduced previous narratives about gendered nationalisms without challenging racism and coloniality in Turkey. Both Yalçın-Heckmann & Van

Gelder and Çağlayan fall into the trap of methodological nationalism, but not because they ignored the voices of women, as implied by Fırat (2006). In fact, Çağlayan's work is noted as one of the first to "reach out to the voices of Kurdish women" (2007, p. 20; 2019, p. 4); yet, she ended up appropriating the discourse of *femina grata* as the previous gender and nationalism scholarship did and did not consider Kurdish women as *femina sacra*. In this way, she did not challenge the methodological nationalism of the previous literature, as she isolated Kurdish women's lives within the Kurdish nationalist imagination.

Why did the third wave of scholarship, which approached Kurdish women as *femina sacra*, offer a more comprehensive explanation of their condition than the first and second waves, which viewed them as *femina grata*? The answer lies in the third wave's suspicion that the sociological categories traditionally employed might be products of imperial, colonial, and capitalist institutions. In their effort to disengage from this imperial/colonial sociology, third-wave scholars embrace a decolonial perspective in their analysis.

I agree with Ekmekçioğlu (2022) that the omission of the history of "different" women renders the gender history of Turkey so deserted that the addition of it would lead to a paradigm shift in the current feminist historiography of Turkish modernization (p.50). As Ekmekçioğlu emphasizes, it is vital to recognize that the Turkish Republic was not founded as a result of a smooth transition; it was built upon devastating and traumatic events that radically changed the ethnic and class structure of the society, such as massacres, deportations, and population exchange, which greatly affected the lives of women in Turkey (2006, p. 331). Thus, when narrating the history of Ottoman and Turkish modernization, it is essential to recognize that these periods were marked by developments that profoundly and

detrimentally impacted the lives of non-Turkish, non-Muslim women. This impact varied, as some Kurdish women were complicit in the mass violence against non-Muslim women, while others remained bystanders to this violence (Ekmekçioğlu, 2022, p. 49). The official Turkish historiography that excluded and distorted the histories of Armenians, Kurds, and the Christian heritage of Anatolia, would be comparable to “a history of Germany without Jews or California without Native Americans” (Kieser (2005) cited in Suciyan, 2015, p. 10). This erasure serves to promote a narrow nationalist narrative and marginalize non-Turkish groups, preventing understanding and solidarity.

How can we speak of feminist solidarity in an academic environment that finds new ways to be deaf to the objecting voices for recognition? The mainstream feminist scholars’ persistent indifference demonstrates the need to move away from approaches that frame the issue as one of inclusion and exclusion or continually situate it within a politics of recognition. I feel more convinced that every attempt to demand recognition risks culminating in the multiculturalist formula of “add and stir,” albeit in different forms. The degree of recognition we achieve often depends more on the extent of our political power than on the quality or the abundance of the data we present.

Exploration of third-wave scholars and the Kurdish women’s movement has taught me many things. Among these, three points are of utmost importance. First, feminist knowledge must be liberatory; it should not merely exist as an end in itself but should aim to transform lives and should have the potential to liberate them from gender-based oppression and exploitation. Second, forming international class alliances can prove more effective than seeking recognition from liberal feminists. This insight has profound implications for academic knowledge production,

revealing the importance of evaluating our potential alliances within academia. In essence, liberatory feminist knowledge necessitates collective effort and camaraderie. Third, and most crucially, producing such knowledge requires dedication and courage.



APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

ID	Interviewee	Date	Place	Length
Interview 1	Kadri, professor	October 20, 2023	İstanbul	55 minutes
Interview 2	Ayla, retired professor	November 29, 2023	Online (via Zoom)	35 minutes
Interview 3	Berrin, emeritus professor	December 8, 2023	Online (via Zoom)	1 hour 21 minutes
Interview 4	Sevgi, retired professor	December 18, 2023	Written Interview (via Gmail)	na
Interview 5	Melda, professor	December 22, 2023	Online (via Zoom)	41 minutes
Interview 6	Kiymet, Ph.D. researcher	December 28, 2023	Online (via Zoom)	1 hour 13 minutes

APPENDIX B

LONG QUOTES IN TURKISH

1. Atatürk bu hakları tepeden veriyor ama, tepeden vermesi için bir neden yok.

Çünkü aslında, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun son dönemlerinde, II. Meşrutiyet döneminde İstanbul, Selanik ve başka şehirlerde son derece canlı, etkili, kendi hakları için mücadele veren, bunun için henüz bizim bugün yapamadığımız sayıda dernek kurmuş, yayın çıkaran bir kadın hareketi var. Benim kuşağımın sosyal bilimcileri eski Türkçe bilmiyorlar, dolayısıyla biz bu hareketi kaynaklarından okuyup öğrenemedik. Ancak şimdi, kadın hareketinin yarattığı canlanma içinde genç ve eski Türkçe bilen tarihçiler o dönemle ilgili çalışma yapmaya başladılar. Mesela son günlerde bir doktora tezi bitirildi... Serpil Çakır doktora tezinde bu dergiyi [Kadınlar Dünyası] derinliğine inceledi. Hayretle görüyorsunuz ki bugün bizim, feminizmin gündeminde olan kadınların ezilmesi ve bunun nedenleri konusundaki bütün sorular... hepsi tartışılmış, hepsine çözüm aranmış, hepsi için bugün kadın hareketinin yapamadığı birtakım önlemler alınmış.

2. Bizim-eski Türkçe bilmediğimiz için okuyamadığımız belgeleri, sağolsun bazı tarihçi arkadaşlarımız çıkarıyorlar... Mesela üç beş yıl önce Zafer Toprak bir belge yayımladı ve biz o zamana kadar bilmediğimiz bir şey öğrendik. O zamanki inançlarımız neydi? Tepeden de olsa ileri doğru bir hamle yapıldı, kadınlar politikaya girdi ve 18 milletvekili çıktı, ki bu görebildiğimiz en yüksek sayı. Bunun bedeli Neydi? Bunun büyük bir bedeli vardı, o da, yüzyılın başından beri bir sivil toplum hareketi olarak gelişen kadın hareketinin bastırılması oldu.

3. Serpil Hoca'nın Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi şok etkisi yaptı Kemalist kadınlarda. Şefika Kurnaz, Osmanlı döneminde kadın yayınlarını çalıştı mesela, çok ağır eleştiriler aldı "Cumhuriyet'i hafifletiyorlar" diye. Modernist paradigmaya göre kadınları Cumhuriyet kurtardı ve kadınlara mutlak bir kurtuluş getirdi. Onun dışındaki şeyler tehlike olarak algılandı.
4. Orda da çok zorlanmıştım, hep kötü notlar almıştım. O Vietnam savaşları... Bir girdim siyaset bilimi derslerine Lise [Robert College] bana okuma yazmayı öğretti ama çok apolitikti. Hakaten hiçbir şeyin farkında değildik. Kürt sorununu bırakın, Kürtlerin olduğunu falan yurt dışında öğrendim. Ermeni sorunu, Kürt sorunu... Bunlar bize öğretilen şeyler değillerdi.
5. Bir slogan vardı, "Farklılıklarımızla beraberiz." Bu son derece olağandı. Ne olacak? Farklılıklarımızla beraberiz. Ancak bu Kürt kadınlar, Kürt feministler açısından başka bir şeyi ifade ediyordu. Orada başka bir düşünme biçimine davet etme söz konusuydu. Kürt ve kadın kimliğinin birbirinden ayrılmasının mümkün olmadığını altını çizdiler. Mesela bu bizler için çok yeni bir şeydi çünkü [bize göre] bütün kadınlar eziliyorlardı, bütün kadınlar patriyarka tarafından sömürülüyorlardı.
6. Dönüp dolaşıp aynı noktaya geliyoruz. Türkiye'deki feminist hareketin, ülke koşullarında, ciddi bir tıkanma sürecine girmiş olduğunu görmek gerekiyor. '98 8 Mart'ı, bu sorunun feminist hareketin karşısında bir varoluş problemi olarak durduğunu gösterir niteliktedir. Kürt sorununda feminizm mazlum kadınlara yardım eden bir orta sınıf duyarlılığını aşmak zorundadır. Feminist hareket bu iç sorgulamayı yaşamadığı sürece, yine sistemin zararsız muhalefet olarak örnek gösterdiği bir hareket olmanın ötesine geçemeyecek.

7. Çok etkili iki gün geçirdik orada. Benim için kafa açıcı ve sarsıcı bir şeydi çünkü kendini hiçbir zaman Türk olarak tanımlamış birisi olmayan ben, milliyetçi olmadığını veya bununla bir derdimin olmadığını zannederken o kadar kolay olmadığını [gördüm]. Türklük meselesiyle yüzleşmek zorunda kaldım orada çünkü çok fazla kişisel deneyim paylaşıldı. Genelde teorik ve politik bir düzeyde konuşmak kolay ama kişisel ilişkilerde o kadar kolay olmadığını gördüm.
8. Tabii ben DÖKH'ün kuruluşunu da hatırlıyorum. Diyarbakır'a... gitmiştik galiba, büyük bir toplantı olmuştu. DÖKH'lü kadınlarla, bir gerilim değil de, feministlerin, yani bizlerin toplumu dönüştürmek gibi bir hedefimiz yoktu. Ama DÖKH'lü kadınların konuşmalarının satır aralarında bu bariz hissedilen bir şeydi. Mesela feminizme benzer mi bakılıyor, bakmak zorunda değildik ama nasıl bakılıyor [gibi] feminizme dair soru işaretleriyle döndüğümü hatırlıyorum, aynı şekilde düşünmediğimiz şeklinde.
9. “Nasıl oluyor da benim kardeşim, arkadaşım da olabilecek birileri kendilerini Doğu'da savaşıırken buluyorlar, bu savaşın öznelere haline dönüşüyorlar? Askerlik nasıl bu kadar sorgulanmadan yaşanan bir süreç olabiliyor?” sorularını sorarak başladım.
10. Roza'ya Jujin'e baktığımızda, hatırladığımızda [ırkçılığın] ısrarla altını çiziyorlar aslında. Jineolojî tartışmaları çerçevesinde de ırkçılık denip denmediğini hatırlamamakla birlikte, Türk feministlerin ürettikleri söylemin egemen söylem olduğuyla ilgili...Duymadığımız bir şey bu. Yani bunu farklı bir şekle dönüştürme, ya da görmeme, bunun böyle olduğunu kabul etmeme, başka biçimde adlandırmak. Evet, “Kürt oldukları için farklı ezilme biçimlerine maruz kalmak” deniyor, ancak yapılanın işaret edilenin ırkçılık olduğu söylenmiyor. Bir yüzleşme gerekiyor belki de. Türk milliyetçiliği dediğinde daha yumuşak

[oluyor]. Literatür açısından daha iyi konuşturabiliyorsun elindeki malzemeyi milliyetçilik dediğinde, tehlikeli sulara yüzmüyorsun. Ama ırkçılık dediğinde kendini de işin içine katman gerekiyor.

11. Siz bir şeyi ignore ederseniz, görünmez kılasanız, sizin biraz kendinizle de muhasebeye gitmeniz gerekir. Kadınların deneyimini görmek, kadınların bilimsel üretimini görmek sizin biraz da akademisyen olarak şimdiye kadar size yüklenen bilgileri özeleştiril bir süreçten geçirmenizi gerektirir, bir akademik sorumluluk olarak çünkü siz sadece bir mülakatla yetinmemelisiniz, o mülakat sizi de akademisyen olarak değiştirip dönüştürmeli. Bence Batılı feminizmin en büyük handikaplarından biri akademisyenler bu özeleştiriyi yapma pozisyonunda değiller çünkü bu pozisyona gelmek pek çok farklı sorumluluğu beraberinde getiriyor, yeni bir perspektifle bakmayı gerektirecektir.

12. Ne yazık ki Türkiye’de benim anlattığım bu döneme ilişkin siyaset strateji tartışmalarını böyle kamusal alanda yapacak düzeyde değiliz. Yüksek düzeyde kriminalizasyon trendi var, başka şeyler de var, moral bozukluğu gibi. Dolayısıyla çok önemli olmakla birlikte tam olarak öyle bir anda değiliz. Birçok şeyi tartışmıyoruz. 2000’ler boyunca AB sürecinin; demokratikleşme, AKP’nin demokratikleşmeyi üstlenmesinin ilk iki döneminde ve sonra barış sürecinde etkisi oldu. Gezi’den öncebu liberal şeyin çok beklenmedik bir solculuk, radikal bir popülerliğe ulaştığını gördük. Yani önceki demokrasi söylemleri Gezi’den itibaren daha gerçek anlamına kavuştu. Bu HDP sürecinde de öyle oldu. Fakat şimdi çok sert bir şekilde yenilmiş durumdayız. Dolayısıyla bu bariz bir yenilgi ve bunun üzerinden düşünmek gerekir tabii ki. Dediğim gibi hem vakit hem de zemin uygun değil derin tartışmalar yapmaya.

13. Ben ancak şunu söyleyebilirim bununla ilgili: Ben kadın emeği

çalıştım...Dolayısıyla ben aslında aktivist olarak Kürt kadın hareketinin yanında yer aldım. Akademik olarak bununla ilgili bir şey yaptım mı? Sadece “Bu Suça Ortak Olmayacağız” bildirisini imzaladım. Onun dışında akademik olarak iki tez yönettim. Barış İçin kadın girişimi (2009) nin içinde yer aldım, Jineolojî dergisi çıktığında dayanışma göstermeye çalıştım. Bunun dışında Gültan Kışanak’ın kitabı, Kürt Siyasetinin Mor Rengi’ni tanıttım. ben aslında aktivist olarak Kürt kadın hareketinin yanında yer aldım.

14. ... dönemin kadın konusundaki algılamasına biraz daha yakından bakıldığında, gelenekselci kalıp ile modernleşmeci kalıp arasında, toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri açısından temel bir farklılık olmadığı görülür. Kemalist erkeklerin hayalindeki “yeni kadın”, “ailevi, içtimai, milli vazifelerini benimseyen ve başkaları için yaşayan” bir varlıktı. Kadının en belirgin meziyeti, fedakarlığı ve feragatiydi.

15. ...yeni bir devlet kurma arzusuyla şekillenen modernleşme anlayışı, erkekleri devlet, kadınları da modern aileler kurmak için görevlendirdi... Ulusun eğiticisi olarak “modern anne” rolünün öne çıkartılması ve bunu besleyen “güçlü kadın” imgesinin gölgesi her zaman kadın haklarının ne olduğuna dair tartışmaları gölgeledi ve cinsiyet eşitliği fikri egemen zihniyete yeterince nüfus edemedi.

16. “Osmanlı feminizmi”, elbette salt Müslüman-Türk kadınlarıyla sınırlı de ğildi.

Bu açıdan son zamanlarda yapılan araştırmaların çeşitli milliyetlerden kadınların kurdukları dernekleri ve faaliyetleri sergilemesi bir yana, Müslüman-Türk kadın derneklerinin bazılarının “bütün milletlerden” kadınlara açık olduğunun vurgulanması bu olguyu kanıtlamaya yeter. Ancak, imparatorluğun dağılma sürecinin hızlanmasına paralel olarak yükselen Türk ulusçuluğu ile Türk feminizmi arasında, hem ampirik hem de teorik içsel bir bağlantı olduğu

kanısındaım. Dolayısıyla, “öteki kadınlar”ın -Rum, Ermeni, Musevi, Süryani, Çerkes, Kürt, vb.- mücadelelerini görünmez kılmamak konusundaki uyarıyı çok anlamlı bulmakla birlikte, Cumhuriyet'in kurucu ideolojisi olan ulusçuluk ile “Türk feminizmi”nin el ele gittiğini özellikle vurguluyorum. Bu, bir gerçeği yansıtmakta ve aynı zamanda Türkiye’deki kadın hareketinin sınırlılığını da belirlemektedir.

17. ...Cumhuriyet sonrasında kadınlar, dinsel ve etnik cemaatlerin baskısından önemli ölçüde kurtulma ve kamusal alana girme olanağı buldular. Bu onlar açısından, küçümsenmeyecek bir kazanımdı ve kadınların modernleşmeci/ulusçu projeye sıkıca sarılmalarının da -anlaşılır- nedeniydi.
18. Bu kadınlar, başta çocukları olmak üzere aile fertlerinin gözaltına alınması, tutuklanması, dağa gitmesi ya da öldürülmesi sonucunda politikleşmiş ve... yaşanan olaylarla birlikte “annelik” politik bir kimliğe dönüşmüştü. Kadınların özel alandaki rollerinin anlam değiştirerek politik bir içerik kazanması, kadınların siyasal özne olmalarının özel alan ile kamusal alandaki sınırları kesen bir süreç olarak değerlendirileceğini göstermesi açısından önemlidir.
19. Türkiye’de kadınların konumundaki değişimi kapitalist üretim ilişkilerinin evrimi bağlamında inceleyen çalışmalar, büyük ölçüde Kürt kadınları açısından da tanımlayıcı niteliktedir. Öte yandan kimi özgüllüklerin bulunabileceğinin de gözden kaçırılmamasında fayda var. Örneğin, Ertürk’ün (1995) modernleşme etkisinin doğrusal bir yayılma şeklinde gerçekleşmediği, mevcut yapılarla eklemlenebildiği saptaması konumuz açısından önemlidir. Bu bağlamda, Cumhuriyet öncesinde göçebe-yarı göçebe aşiret toplulukları halinde yaşıyor olmalarının ve coğrafik ve/veya politik nedenlerle kapitalist gelişmeyle modernleşmenin yaşadıkları yörelere geç yansımalarının, Kürtlerin toplumsal

yaşam koşullarının özgöl yönlerini oluşturduğunu varsayabiliriz. Böylesi bir özgüllük doğal olarak klasik ataerkinin daha fazla hissedilmesini de içeriyor.

20. Annem babam şehre gitmişti, geceydi... Tuvalet'e gittim, baktım ki Süleyman (fail) orada bekliyor. O anda beni yakaladı ve ağzımı kapadı. Elinde kalaşnikof vardı. [Silahı] ağzıma dayayıp, "Annen babana söylersen seni öldürürüm. Ben hükümetin adamıyım" dedi.

21. Allah kabul eder mi? Süleyman benim namusuma el atmış. Devlet onu serbest bıraktı. Bizden ne istiyorlar?



APPENDIX C

APPROVAL OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE



T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbinarek)



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Sayın Doç. Dr. Bülent KÜÇÜK

Tez danışmanlığını yürüttüğünüz öğrenciniz Şılan Tank'ın "1990'lı Yıllardan Günümüze Türkiye'de Feminist Bilgi Üretimini Eleştirel Bir İncelemesi" başlıklı projesi ile Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (SBİNAREK)'e yaptığınız 2023-12T kayıt numaralı başvurunuz 18.10.2023 tarih ve 2023/08 sayılı kurul toplantısında incelenmiş ve projenize etik onay verilmesi uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya on-line olarak katılımıyla ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. Onay mektubu tüm üyeler adına Komisyon Başkanı tarafından e-imzalanmıştır. Bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Saygılarımızla,

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Işıl Erduyan
Kurul Başkanı

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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