

Zeynep Beril Saydun

Construction of Nationalism and Gender
in Halidé Edib's Autobiographical Writings

Memoirs of Halidé Edib and The Turkish Ordeal

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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“We are like mirrors standing face to face to each other...”

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INTRODUCTION

Halidé Edib (1884-1964) was born in Istanbul. Her father and her grandmother both played an important role in her life, especially in her education. After Halidé Edib's mother's death, she was left alone with her father, and a real mother figure was always absent. Nevertheless, in her grandmother's house (the house with wisteria), she was surrounded by female visitors. In this house, she also undertook her first religious practices. Her British education was the result of her father's interest and efforts. Later, she was sent to an American college by her father for further education. She was the first Muslim woman to graduate from the American College for Girls at Üsküdar in 1901. Thus, Edib had a chance to see and compare different cultures and religions in the East and West. Educated by private tutors and at the American College for Girls in Istanbul, she became actively engaged in Turkish literary, political, and social movements.

Halidé Edib's name has been constantly invoked in relation to the emancipation of women. She was one of the first Turkish feminists who established the Society for the Development of Women in 1908, a year before leaving for Egypt. On an invitation from Isabel Fry, an English educationist, Halidé Edib went to England for the first time. The meeting of the two minds marked the beginning of a deep and enduring friendship. In fact, Halidé Edib described in her memoirs how the cultural and intellectual contacts she made in England helped her to overcome her introversion and enabled her to further the cause of Turkish nationalism. Back in Turkey, she played a major role in raising Turkish educational standards and encouraging social and economic progress. Having joined the staff of the Women Teachers' Training College and reformed its administration and syllabus, Halidé Edib drew up elaborate plans for forming schools in Damascus, Beirut, and Lebanon. She felt especially satisfied with her educational work in Syria, including the running of an orphanage in Aintura. With her first husband, Salih Zeki, she had two children before they divorced. She divorced Zeki in 1910 because she rejected his decision to take a second wife. She remarried, to Dr. Adnan Adıvar, in 1917. It was during this time that she became increasingly active in Turkey's nationalist movement, and after the end of World War I, she and her husband travelled to Anatolia to fight in the Independence Struggle. Some time after the establishment of the new Turkish Republic, Edib and Dr. Adnan moved to England and lived there from 1924 until 1928. In later years, she travelled widely, teaching and lecturing frequently in the United States and in British Raj India. They returned to Turkey in 1939.

This dissertation examines the construction of nationalism and gender in Halidé Edib's autobiographical writings. Through my main sources – *Memoirs of Halidé Edib*¹ (1926), *The Turkish Ordeal*² (1928) – and secondary sources – an adaptation of her lecture series, *Inside India*³ (1929), and *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*⁴ – Halidé Edib's autobiographic writings will be analyzed. The analysis will focus on the construction of the nationalist psyche and on levels of self-narration in her memoirs in relation to the nationalist movement and the Independence Struggle. In Halidé Edib's memoirs, the levels of self-construction (private self, public/collective self and writing self) interact with each other. Consequently, her autobiography represents a complex structure of self-narration. It will be argued that by writing these autobiographical accounts, she re-/deconstructs nationalism and gender through self-narration and history. Hence, the objective of the thesis is to point out the levels of self-construction and narration in parallel to the construction of Turkish history.

Memoirs and *The Turkish Ordeal* closely follow the Western autobiographical tradition. The difference between the mainstream Western autobiographical tradition and Halidé Edib's autobiography lies in her persistent exploration of interpersonal national myths and self-na(rra)tions.⁵ The two separate volumes show remarkable differences in terms of content. *Memoirs* describes Edib's childhood during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Underscored in the account are reminiscences of the multiethnic, multi-religious character of the empire and of the different phases of Turkish nationalism.⁶ The first half of *Memoirs* dwells on the private, and consequently the feminine. One of the techniques employed throughout the book is portrait drawing, that is, attempting to present a sketch of that person's physical appearance, character, and world view.

The second volume of her autobiography, *The Turkish Ordeal*, exclusively depicts the events of the Independence Struggle of Turkey, foreshadowing the early years of the Turkish Republic. It is an important account of the nationalist

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- 1 Halidé Edib, *House With Wisteria: Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Leopolis Press, 2003).
 - 2 Halidé Edib, *The Turkish Ordeal, Being the further memoirs of Halidé Edib* (New York, London: The Century Co., 1928).
 - 3 Halidé Edib, *Inside India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 - 4 Halidé Edib, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*. Ed. Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar (Lahore: Malik Mohd Hussain at the Royal Printing Press, 1935).
 - 5 Hülya Adak, "National Myths and Self-Na(rra)tions: Mustafa Kemal's Nutuk and Halide Edib's Memoirs and The Turkish Ordeal." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Durham: Duke University Press, Vol. 102, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2003), 509-529.
 - 6 Ibid.