



Vulnerable identities: Pious women columnists' narratives on Islamic feminism and feminist self-identification in contemporary Turkey

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SYNOPSIS

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study on pious women columnists' negotiation of feminist self-identification in contemporary Turkey. Given the rise of the anti-feminist gender politics under the pro-Islamist AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) [Justice and Development Party] rule, it discusses how pious women columnists as crucial intellectual figures in the public sphere interpret feminism, Islamic feminism, and feminist self-identification. In this frame, the main aim of this study is to put forward the complexities of pious women columnists' positions in the public sphere and how this positionality affects their narratives about feminist self-identification in contemporary Turkey. Making use of the theoretical perspective provided by concepts such as "positionality" and "situatedness," this study concludes that negotiation of identity categories always takes place within the frame of reference, the contours of which is mapped out by one's position in the power configuration in society. Moreover, it brings into the open that the dialectical openings of Islamic feminism in pious women columnists' narratives can enhance the feminist coalitional politics in contemporary Turkey.

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Introduction

In the current neoliberal era, feminist self-identification has become a controversial terrain composed of myriad complexities. Scholars put forward that young women in Western Europe increasingly tend to disarticulate the "feminist" label, claiming that gender equality is already achieved and feminism is passé and unnecessary for contemporary social and political world. (Budgeon, 2001; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2013) Moreover, it has been suggested that the neoliberal discourses of individualism and self-liberation, which in return result in repudiation of the feminist struggle for gender equality, are deeply embedded in political discourses and popular culture in the Western context today. (McRobbie, 2004, 2007) The rising anti-feminist discourse in the current era can also be clearly tracked down in the Turkish context with respect to the political agenda of the pro-Islamist AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) [The Justice and Development Party] government. Studies on AKP's gender politics reveal that the party's policies and political discourses

have constantly reproduced traditional gender roles and confined women to familial roles (Çitak & Tür, 2008; Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). One can also allege that the patriarchal tones in AKP discourses have been further reinforced through attempts to disassociate feminism and gender equality and marginalize feminism as an extreme ideology. Keeping this anti-feminist gender regime in mind, it is significant to ask how feminist self-identification is negotiated in Turkey in this particular era marked by a striking proliferation of anti-feminist political discourses.

The label "feminist" has always been very contentious in the Turkish context as everywhere else; yet one can argue that in a time period distinguished by the rise of anti-feminist discourses, public negotiations of feminist self-identification display multiple layers of complexity that are difficult to disentangle. This complex character of feminist self-identification in contemporary Turkey becomes even more intricate when vulnerable subject positions in the public sphere are taken into account. To comprehend how vulnerabilities in the public sphere influence

the ways in which subjects make sense of identity categories in contemporary Turkey, this qualitative study examines pious women columnists' narratives on Islam, feminism, and Islamic feminism. In this way, it aims to gain a thorough insight into the narrative lines that pious women columnists resort to while explaining their relationship to feminism.

To this end, I will firstly discuss the anti-feminist tones underlying the gender politics of the AKP government and the discursive field in which anti-feminist discourses are reproduced through certain discursive opportunity structures. Having pointed out the high circulation of anti-feminist discourses in public debates, I will delineate the peculiarities of pious women columnists' position in the contemporary social and political context in Turkey. Since every subject in the public sphere speaks from a particular location, experience, and context, it is vitally important to take into account research participants' positionality and situatedness. In this sense, the concepts of "positionality" and "situated reasoning," which connote a continuous engagement of the self into social and political reality (Alcoff, 2006: 94–95), provide a useful theoretical basis for the purposes of this study. These concepts enable one to see that judgments, perceptions, and demands are formed through the horizon of meanings available to subjects at a particular time and place. Making use of this theoretical perspective, this paper discusses pious women columnists' narratives on Islam, feminism, and feminist identity with a particular reference to the peculiarities of the interpretive horizons available to them in the current era. This context-based narrative analysis, in return, may provide us an understanding of how public vulnerabilities configure the contours of feminist self-identification in neoliberal times marked by a striking proliferation of anti-feminist discourses.

The rise of the anti-feminist discursive regime under the AKP rule

In the last decade, the main characteristics of Turkish politics has been subject to a radical change as a result of the rise of the pro-Islamist Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [Justice and Development Party] (AKP). For the first time in Turkish politics, a pro-Islamist political party could get the majority of the votes in four successive general elections, i.e., in 2002, 2007, 2011, and 2015, and has ruled the country with a new Islamist thinking marked by pragmatism rather than religious principles (Çavdar, 2006). As a part of this Islamic resurgence, conservatization in socio-cultural and political matters has come to the foreground. The party's approach to women's issues can be seen as a litmus test through which this conservatization crystallizes.

In the AKP's conservative politics, being a woman is first and foremost defined within the familial sphere through traditional gender codes (Çitak & Tür, 2008; Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011; Unal & Cindoğlu, 2013). To protect family unity, the AKP government aims to reinforce a strong commitment among citizens to the moral and political importance of the family ideal. It has attempted to implement policies to consolidate this ideal as a regulative principle in the social and moral imagination. Pronatalist policies constitute a main pillar of AKP's pro-family politics. Stressing the need for a young population in his

speeches, PM Erdoğan frequently advises married couples to have at least three children:

"One or two children mean bankruptcy. Three children mean we are not improving but not receding either. At least three children are necessary in each family, because our population risks aging." (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013).

In addition to such pronatalist discourses defining the ideal number of children, the recent anti-abortion policy initiative could be identified as another reflection of this pronatalist vision. Upon Erdoğan's remarks in a public meeting in 2012, stating that abortion is murder (Radikal newspaper, 2012), a policy initiative appeared on the political agenda, which is designed to considerably reduce the time limit defined in law for the use of the right to abortion. Moreover, following this policy initiative, certain legal arrangements have been made, which restrict c-sections to medical emergencies. Through regulating women's reproductive capacities and their rights on their bodies, such discourses and policy initiatives see women's womb as a policy area that can be easily utilized for political purposes (Unal & Cindoğlu, 2013). The result of this conservative emphasis on women's roles as mothers and wives is that familial roles assigned to women in the private sphere turn out to be the decisive element for their life choices.

Another major component of this patriarchal regime under the AKP rule is the articulation of distaste of feminist ideas. As in other prevalent stereotypical accounts, feminism in AKP's discourses is closely associated with man-hating, extremism, and clash between men and women. In a meeting organized in 2008 by the party's women's branches, Dengir Mir Firat, AKP's former vice president, stated that feminist ideas foster the opposition between sexes and women from AKP cannot be slaves to feminism:

"Our view as AKP on women is very different from other parties and other segments of society. We do not support the clash between men and women as envisioned in the philosophical ideas in feminist thought. Women from AKP have never been slaves to feminism and never will be. Because we believe that men and women are inseparable and they complement each other." (Radikal newspaper, 2008)

On the other hand, in 2004, when hundreds of women gathered in front of the parliament in Ankara to protest the draft bill criminalizing adultery¹ and shouted slogans "our bodies and sexuality belong to ourselves," PM Erdoğan expressed his anger by labeling the women activists as marginal:

"There were even those who marched to Ankara, carrying placards that do not suit the Turkish woman. I cannot applaud such behavior that does not suit our traditions and moral values... A marginal group cannot represent Turkish women." (Vatan newspaper, 2004)

The statements above clearly designate that feminism and the feminist movement in the AKP mindset is coded as antithetical to the image of the "ideal Turkish woman." In this anti-feminist discourse, feminism is further marginalized for

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