



AN INTELLECTUAL OTTOMAN LADY: EMINE SEMIYE

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Abstract: Emine Semiye the daughter of Ahmet Cevdet Paşa an-outstanding statesman during Tanzimat period – pioneered in the women’s movement with her sister Fatma Aliye. As an author, politician, journalist, teacher and nurse, she had a quite colorful personality. Emine Semiye focused on subjects like politics, women rights, feminism, child education both in her articles published in various newspapers and her literary Works. Since her Works namely her manuscripts and her series in newspapers have not been thoroughly evaluated so far (with the exception of a few articles) she is not very well known. This study’s goal is to determine Emine Semiye place within Turkish Literature and Turkish women’s movement via clarifying her political, literary and feminist identity.

Key Words: Emine Semiye, Feminism, Woman’s Movement.

Not: “Bu çalışma ilgili yazarın doktora tezi olan Emine Semiye Hayatı adlı çalışmandan esinlenerek hazırlanmıştır.

INTRODUCTION

Emine Semiye was the daughter of Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, two years younger than her sister Fatma Aliye, one of the first female Turkish novelists in Turkish literature. Emine Semiye lived between the years 1864-1944 and experienced the process of how the Ottoman State turned its face from the East to the West, how it entered another sphere of civilization and how it transformed from empire to nation state; she witnessed all the political and social upheavals of the period. Accordingly it would be fruitful to first look at the transformations in the field of women’s emancipation and visibility during this period in order to gauge Emine Semiye’s position. With the declaration of Tanzimat Decree in 1839 many changes started to happen in the Ottoman Empire in different spheres from the military to education, to social and

cultural life of the country. The tendency to westernize that made itself felt from the beginning of the 19th century in educational, military and social matters also effected the way the people perceived, and the Ottoman administration started to accept the transformation of its subjects to individuals. In this period changes were implemented in the state and all citizens were given equal rights and responsibilities. From this date onwards women also started to question their place in society and especially their rights to education, and the first official step that was taken for the emancipation of women is considered to be the 1856 Land Law.

With the declaration of Tanzimat in 1839 the Ottoman State enters a movement of historical transformation. Women take on the greatest role in this transformation and in a way they become the symbols of western-

ization. That's why the most important issue that Turkish intellectuals try to tackle since the Tanzimat period has been 'women'. For instance Namık Kemal drew attention to the issue of women in his articles "Maarif" (Education), "Aile" (The Family), "Terbiye-i Nisvan Hakkında Bir Layiha" (An Essay on the Education of Women). In his epistle entitled *Kadınlar* (Women), Şemsettin Sami states his views on women's education and the responsibility that a woman should take on as "a good wife, a good mother" both in the society and in the family. Ahmet Mithat Efendi, another important writer of the period is another example to be considered. Ahmet Mithat is one of the first feminist writers of Turkish literature. He treats issues that concern women in many of his books, and he encourages the appearance of women writers.

Emine Semiye was one of the first Turkish women to have an education abroad. She studied psychology and sociology in France and Switzerland for 7 years. After that she lived in Paris for long years and accompanied her son Cevdet Lagaş when he was studying political sciences in Paris as well. Emine Semiye got married twice. The first was the Military Supreme Judge Mustafa Bey. The second was the renowned governor Reşit Paşa. He was her nanny's son and their marriage ended quite scandalously.

Although Emine Semiye was only two years younger than Fatma Aliye not much attention was paid to her either during her lifetime or afterwards. It can be observed that when compare to Fatma Aliye she had a more acute and untraditional approach. The literary aspect of her work has also gone unnoticed due to the fact that there are almost no studies on her work that remains either in manuscript, or has been serialized in newspapers; but then there are also novels, short stories and articles in book form. Her articles on women's rights reveal her rather unconventional stance in her period. Maybe the reason why she was not recognized during her time was her radical approach.

We have been able to find five novels, four story collections, three memoirs, one scientific work, numerous articles and letters. Her novels are *Muallime* (Governess), *Sefalet* (Poverty), *Gayya Kuyusu* (Gayya Well), *Bikes* (Orphan) and *Mükafat-ı İlahiye* (Divine Reward). Her stories; *Terbiye-i Etfâle Ait Üç Hikâye* (Three Stories Concerning the Upbringing of Children) and *Hissi Rekabet* (Emotional Rivalry), *Emir Çoban Kızları* (The Girls of Shepherd Emir), *Dilşad Hatun* (Dilsad Khatun), her memoirs; *Selânik Hatıraları* (Salonica Memoirs), *Kalem Tecrübeleri* (Experiences of the Pen) ve *Hürriyet Kokuları* (The Scent of Liberty). Her scientific work include *Hülâsa-i İlm-i Hesap* (Summary of Scientific Calcula-

tions) and *İktitaf* (Extract) which contains her work that appeared in the women's paper *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*. She also has published articles on children's education, feminism and other subjects, along with letters.

Emine Semiye penned her novels and short stories with a feminine sensibility. She treated issues concerning women frequently in her novels. Her treatment sometimes appears as the silhouette of an educated woman that is reading a book, and sometimes a woman who works to earn a living. In *Muallime* Bihbude tries to earn a living by teaching. In *Gayya Kuyusu* Rezin starts to work as a tailor in order to ameliorate the dire financial situation they find themselves in. Another issue she tackles in her novels and short stories is the change in our understanding of love and marriage with the advent of westernization. During this period Şinasi with *Şair Evlenmesi* (Marriage of the Poet) and Şemsettin Sami *Taaşşuk-ı Talat ve Fitnat* (The Love of Talat and Fitnat) criticize arranged marriages. Staying within the current discourse of the time the women in Emine Semiye's novels also marry men they know rather than get married through arranged marriages. In *Bikes* the Memune and Raci who do not know they were betrothed when infants get to know each other, fall in love and marry. In the same novel Muti and Teveccüh also fall in love and marry.

In Emine Semiye's novels women are usually strong characters. In *Mükafat-ı İlahiye* Alis is a strong enough woman to divorce her husband who dries up the wealth he has inherited from his father due to his addiction to drink and gambling and who ends up having to beg people for money. In *Sefalet* Sabite tries to save her fortune which has been taken away from her through deception on the one hand and tries to stand on her two feet in the face of hunger on the other. Emine Semiye places special emphasis on the education of children in her novels and particularly short-stories. Her view on polygamy is similar to Fatma Aliye's. In Fatma Aliye's novel *Muhadarat* the protagonist Fazıla stays silent when he marries a second time due to the fact that they have not been able to have children. However, Fazıla objects to her husband marrying another time when the two *cariyes* he has taken have already become pregnant. In Emine Semiye's novel *Sefalet* Zümrüt Hanım similarly says nothing when her husband takes a second wife because they have no children. Both writers regard polygamy legitimate only when the couple can have no children. Other than women's issues Emine Semiye also treats other subjects such as errors in children's upbringing, class confrontation, 'wrong' westernization, social issues and superstitions in her short stories and novels.

Emine Semiye is not considered within the Servet-i Fünûn literary school, however, her work has been considerably influenced by it. She herself speaks of this influence in her book *Kalem Tecrübeleri* (Experiences of the Pen):

“-An able member of our extended family recommended me to practice Edebiyat-ı Cedide (New Literature) and told me to write with ‘new ideas’. This bore its fruit during the three and a half years I spent in Serez, and my efforts resulted in the first volume of the book. After writing *Hayat-ı Mufazzal* (A Privileged Life) which comprises the first part, the difficulty of my change of idiom slowly led me to go back and retain my old style of writing, however, I tried to add new colour to it. I was trying to record my own insignificant life and my usage of the new style smacked of mimicry and so I left it. I considered the work of Cenab, Fikret and other literary figures of this new style and then decided to write in a way that fitted the development of my own life and thus I acquired a style I could call my own; if it’s not good enough to read, I ask those who aim to read it to consider my female weaknesses and inform me of their assessments so that it may further my thought processes.”¹

This statement reveals that Emine Semiye was influenced by the literature of Servet-i

Fünûn. Just as in style, the influence of Servet-i Funun in subject matter is also quite evident. The clash between truth and imagination, the desire to flee and suicide are among the chief themes of Servet-i Fünûn. “The chief theme of hating the bitter truth and living in the imagination brings along certain side-themes. The writers of this period that display a great difference from those that have gone before them have treated a trope that has become quite a distinct feature of this literature. This dangerous trope that entered Turkish literature with Tanzimat was that of suicide.” (Akay 1998:179). In Emine Semiye’s novels there are also characters who like to dream, who have plans of escape and tendency for suicide. In *Sefalet* Hayati experiences the clash between harsh reality and his dreams. In *Bikes* Memune, in *Muallime* Bihbude try to flee when they are faced with difficulties. Such that when Memune realizes that she can’t run away she chooses suicide as a way out, however, she is saved by her brother Muti at the last minute. In *Sefalet* Mahir who loses all his money seeks escape in suicide. In *Muallime* when Mahsul Bey goes to visit the grave of his wife, he chooses the way through the cliff although he runs the risk of falling- pointing to his tendency for suicide as well. In the same novel Mahsul Bey’s wife Saadet Hanım commits suicide when her illegitimate affair with her daughter’s fi-

1 Emine Semiye Hayatı, *Fikir Dünyası, Sanatı, Eserleri*. 2010, Basılmamış doktora tezi.

ancé Sehil is revealed. The suicide of Saadet in *Muallime* shows similarities with Bihter's suicide in Halit Ziya's *Aşk-ı Memnu*. Just like Saadet, when Bihter's forbidden love affair with her young lover comes out to the open she takes her own life.

In her *Selanik Hatıraları* Emine Semiye compiled her work that appeared in the *Mütalaa Gazetesi* newspaper that appeared in Salonica for which she was the editor; in *İktitaf* she compiled her work for the women's newspaper *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*. The subjects treated in *Selanik Hatıraları* and *İktitaf* show many similarities to the ones in her novels and short stories. In the said memoirs she speaks of issues from children's upbringing to the wrong kind of westernization, education in general and womanhood. Her numerous articles on the political issues of the day have also been published in many newspapers and magazines. Emine Semiye lived in Serez between 1905-1908 while her husband was the governor of the principality. In her *Kalem Tecrübeleri* she speaks of her experiences in Serez. The larger part of the memoir spans the time period 23 July -7 September 1906 which she spent in the highlands of Serez. Şefika Kurnaz says the following about the travelogue nature of *Kalem Tecrübeleri*:

"Emine Semiye spent nearly two months of the summer of 1906 in the Serez Highland and she recorded the area's history, build-

ings, picnic places, mountains, hills, flora, fountains, brooks, nomads, natural medicine, traditions, beliefs and entertainments in detail. Her depiction provides one of the last vestiges of a culture that has ended with the exchange of populations with Greece, with the removal of Muslims from the area. The sections about the Serez Highlands are important not only because they provide the last picture of Turkish life in these areas but also because they are first pieces of travelogue writing that has come from the pen of a female writer in Turkish literature." (Kurnaz, 2008).

In *Hürriyet Kokuları* Emine Semiye compiled her articles that deal with politics and women's issues that appeared in various Salonican papers in the period 1908-1909. She says that she penned *Hürriyet Kokuları* for her experience to provide an example for coming generations and for her work to survive her own demise: "I should consider myself lucky if this work provides a beneficial lesson concerning the strife of life... If not, let it remain my small inscription on morals."² Her scientific work is her work of arithmetic called *Hülasa-i İlm-i Hesap*.

In the period of Tanzimat women started to seek solutions to their problems by voicing in them in various publications. Thus, intellectual Ottoman women developed a

2 Emine Semiye, *Hürriyet Kokuları*, Milli Ktp, Yz. A 2693. p.6.

common women's consciousness, a common 'women's ideal'. This is the period when the foundations of Ottoman feminism were laid. Women writers formed a women's movement with their works in different fields, such as fiction writing and journalism. Emine Semiye was very active in this movement.

Emine Semiye believed that womanhood had been denigrated for centuries, and she bears traces of a more radical stance than Fatma Aliye. She believes that the nations that give importance to women reach the highest level of civilization: "The nations who care about the progress and education of women who make up the greater part of the human race enjoy the highest levels of civilization today. For the soul of the family is woman, the cradle of humanity is woman, the treasure of hope is woman!" (Emine Semiye 1325: 3). Emine Semiye says that Ottoman women can be found at the highest posts of society and that they present a wealth of humanity; she wants to give them a sense of pride. Sometimes she looks down on men who try to denigrate women and criticizes them in a playful manner. She says that there is no difference between men and women when it comes to intellect:

"Yes ma'am, yes sir, medically there is no difference between the brains of men and women. In USA schools where girls and boys take the same classes, the number of

girl students who distinguish themselves by way of their comprehension are equal in number to the boy students, and the great teachers of that country who took note of this have concluded that there is no difference between the brains of men and women.

Concerning this I have also gathered information from doctors. They even add that women's intellect, that their spirituality adds extra affection and care." (Emine Semiye 1325: 3).

Men trying to "pacify women with lullabies full of compliment" will not have their way. According to Emine Semiye men either point to certain "oppressive powers" against women's movement or try to pacify women with lullabies full of compliments to prevent them from realizing their womanhood. Emine Semiye says that these efforts of men will amount to nothing and that women who have "forgotten their womanhood" are now being replaced by a generation that call the men to task as "you blind men!" (Zihnioğlu 1999: 8-9).

During the second constitutional period there was an understanding that the principles of liberty and equality would also benefit women. However, this did not come to pass and there was no change in women's situation. Seeing this, writers who defended women's rights felt dejected and when criticizing the situation used an angry and

depressed idiom. One of these writers is Emine Semiye. In her “From Whom Shall We Ask for the Emancipation of Women?” she speaks, without giving his name, of one of the high officials of the ruling Party of Unity and Progress, of how before the constitution she had asked for the restitution of rights for women, how he assured her that they would see it after the constitution is declared, and how, afterwards when they were in government, he did not keep his word. Emine Semiye states that the emancipation of women can be realized only through the struggle of women themselves: “Since our men do not think about us... that they think about us as the last issue, we have to think about our own situation, and it is women themselves who have to see to it that our future generations of women are educated in a way that befits the civilized world, that they are not deprived of any women’s or human rights.” (Emine Semiye 1325: 733)

In the conference that the Party of Union and Progress held in Salonica for women on 1st August 1908, Emine Semiye criticized the pressures on women’s dress code by saying “The clothing up that Islam orders us to keep is not this ill-fitting covering that we practice today” She gave start to the struggle with the following words to the public “We are trying our best to attain liberty of our persons which is our due right” eight months after the second constitution

was put in place.” (Zihnioğlu 2003: 54).

The articles of the first female writers (1869-1908), especially those of Fatma Aliye and Emine Semiye were published in the many women’s magazines that started to be published in the environment of freedom that followed right after the revolution of 1908. These articles play an important role raising the awareness of the coming generation to women’s issues. We see that the mission that Fatma Aliye and Emine Semiye took on in this period was later passed on to Halide Edip, Şükufe Nihal and especially Nezihe Muhiddin. Although they differed in their political views and suggestions for solutions these names that followed on the footsteps of Fatma Aliye and Emine Semiye took women’s struggle for their right unto future generations.

Women, who with every passing day started to become more visible in public life also tried to enter the sphere of politics which was considered to be exclusive to men only. Ottoman women’s participation in political life takes off after the declaration of the second constitutional period. That Turkish women should start to be visible in political life was a great step for the period even though there were gradual changes in women’s lives. Emine Semiye was one of the first Turkish women to be active in political life. She was among the active members of Ottoman Democrat Party, and the Party

of Union and Progress. During the Edirne governorship of her second husband Reşit Paşa she participated in the secret meeting of the Party of Union and Progress. Bernard Caporal relates in *Revue du Musulman* that Emine Semiye was the president of the Women's Revolution Committee of party in Salonica. (Caporal 1999:150). Emine Semiye continued this activity in the coming years and then fled to Paris. This led to her divorce with Reşit Paşa. In order to sketch the history of Turkish women's participation in politics, it is essential to have a good understanding of Emine Semiye's presence in the political sphere as a woman.

After the declaration of the second constitutional period women started to articulate their request for freedom through the press. The number of women's newspapers and magazines in which women could express and define themselves increased greatly during this period and this kind of press took on very important roles. Women's newspapers and magazines during this period are important when we want to observe the process of transformation of womanhood. Especially Emine Semiye's writings that have been published in various magazines and newspapers will provide us with important details about this process. Emine Semiye had realized the importance of magazines and newspapers in advancing awareness among women, and she actively

used this field to this end. She was the chief editor of the newspapers *Mütalaa* and *İnci* (Pearl) published in Salonica. Apart from that her many articles appeared in the different publications such as *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*, *Ati*, *Kadın*, *Mehasin*, *Edebiyat-ı Umumiye Mecmuası*, *Resimli Kitap*, *Saadet*, *Bahçe*, *Yeni Edirne*, *Yeni Gazete*, *Yeni Asır*, *Şura-yı Ümmet*, *İnci*, *İzler*, *İnkılab*, *Balkan*. Emine Semiye treated issues that developed thought and morals in her articles that were published in newspapers and journals. Apart from the emancipation of women she also treated such as children's upbringing, education, science, beauty, health and even clothes.

Among the first steps that were taken in the Tanzimat period on the route to modernization, the foremost ones are the education and education of women. Before this period the Ottoman State had already opened up schools in order to keep up with advancing science and technology. However these are not establishment that cater to women. Women's education gained importance starting with the Tanzimat period and that's when women's schools started to be opened. The main aim was to ameliorate and develop the roles that women played in Ottoman social structure.

Emine Semiye started to become active in women's movement, political activity and the press in her younger years. She was

aware of the importance of women's education from the very start and she chose to become a teacher. During the period when she was in Salonica due to her husband's job, she worked as teacher and inspector in the Women's Secondary School and the Terakki Schools. In her memoirs Naciye Neyyal says the following about her education and her teaching practice:

“- This grand lady was the younger daughter of the historian Ahmed Cevdet Paşa and the sister of Fatma Aliye. Although she did not pursue education very vigilantly at first, she then started to admire her older sister Fatma Aliye's progress and thus became a good student. She wrote stories and novels, she even received prizes. Because everybody fears her fierce tongue, everyone treats her with the utmost respect. Her house is like a school, she gives lessons to the children of her friends and acquaintances.” (Hürmen 2004: 259).

Emine Semiye thinks it fit to use her house like a school. However, her priority is women's education. She believes that lifting the veil of ignorance from the faces of women can be only through education:

“- Because the intellectual education that would befit the name of 'woman' is not given in our schools- do you realize how important it becomes for enlightened women of education to come together and carry over

to the less fortune what we have together by way of information and solutions so that we can make some dent in the veil of ignorance that seems to hang over the faces of women of Islam? Do you realize what important service this is? What important duty!”³

After 1920 Emine Semiye went to Beirut with Halide Edip in order to educate the upcoming teachers of the Republic. In later years she taught in various towns of Anatolia; she taught literature and Turkish in the Girls' Teacher Schools in Edirne, Sivas, Ordu and Adana.

In the years of Tanzimat, especially in the period after the declaration of the second constitution women's organizations were set up and they became centers of activity. In these organizations women helped soldiers and the families of soldiers especially during the war years. Although the activities of these organizations may seem strictly 'feminine' some of these organizations also carried out activities for the advancement of the educational and intellectual worlds of women.

These women's organizations were mostly founded by the daughters of prestigious families in Istanbul. Likewise, Ahmet Cevdet Paşa's daughters were active in these efforts. In 1908 Fatma Aliye founded Cemiyet-i İmdâdiye (Philanthropic Organization) for helping the soldiers at the front, and 3 *Hürriyet Kokuları*, s.7.

again in Emine Semiye founded Şefkat-i Nisvan (Women's Affection) in Salonica and Hizmet-i Nisvan (Service of Women) in Edirne. Şefkat-i Nisvan was a very active organization and branches were opened in Salonica, Edirne, Konya and Samsun. Among the activities of this organization was supporting women's education, helping them set up small businesses and contribute to production. Women made and sold hand-made materials in order to provide funds for this organization. Hizmet-i Nisvan on the other hand worked in the areas of helping women get into business life and to promote more practical clothing styles.

Besides being a writer, a women's right activist, a political activist, journalist, teacher and founding member of various organizations, Emine Semiye also worked as a nurse. During the Balkan Wars Emine Semiye wanted to work at the Etfal (Children's) Hospital and found a way to get employment there. Under the supervision of Besim Ömer Paşa, who is one of the leading figures of the history of Turkish medicine, she helped in the nursing of wounded soldiers during the Çanakkale War. In later years she also worked at the Şişli Etfal Hospital as a volunteer nurse.

Emine Semiye was a pioneering intellectual Ottoman woman whose life spanned the transformation and reconstruction years in Turkey starting from the Tanzimat pe-

riod to the Republican years. Throughout this historical process she was visible in the public sphere as a writer, politician, women's rights advocate and educator. As the younger sister of Fatma Aliye, her radical stance brought attention to both her literary endeavors and other activities. It is hoped that with time her works which still remain in manuscript form will be better known and this will help us place her more specifically within Turkish literature and Turkish women's movement.

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AYDIN BİR OSMANLI KADINI: EMİNE SEMİYE

Özet: Tanzimat'ın önde gelen devlet adamlarından Ahmet Cevdet Paşa'nın kızı Emine Semiye devri içerisinde aktif olarak kadın hareketlerinde öncülük görevini ablası Fatma Aliye Hanım'la birlikte yüklenmiştir. O yazar, siyasetçi, gazeteci, öğretmen ve hemşire olarak oldukça renkli bir kimliğe sahiptir. Emine Semiye hem çeşitli gazetelerdeki yazılarında hem de edebî eserlerinde siyasi konular, kadın hakları, feminizm, çocuk terbiyesi gibi konular üzerinde durmuştur. El yazması ve tefrika halinde olan eserleri üzerinde şu ana kadar birkaç makale dışında çalışılmadığı için edebî kimliği de bütünüyle değerlendirilememiştir. Bu çalışmada Emine Semiye'nin siyasi, edebî kimliği ve kadın hareketleri içerisindeki yeri belirlenleştirilerek Türk edebiyatı ve Türk kadın hareketi içerisinde hak ettiği yeri alabilmesi hedeflenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Emine Semiye, Feminizm, Kadın Hareketi