

The de-feminization of Turkish culture

Friday 15 September 2006, by [Elif Shafak](#)

Source: Turkish Daily News, August 2006

According to Foucault, in modern societies individuals are extensively controlled through standards of normality disseminated by a wide range of knowledge, extending from diagnostic to normative knowledge such as criminology, medicine and psychiatry. Modern individuals become the agents of their own 'normalization.' Today, the Foucauldian understanding of power is widely used when analyzing Western societies. However, when it comes to exploring the Middle East or Muslim societies, even scholars who are notorious for borrowing so much from Foucault seem reluctant to employ the Foucauldian scheme.

When it comes to analyzing the Middle East, it is almost always a more conventional definition of power that is being employed — the most mainstream definition of power, defined as 'what agent A does to agent B.' It looks like political scientists, often knowingly, and diplomats, often unknowingly, employ two different criteria of power when talking about different regions of the world. Power in the Middle Eastern context is regarded as predominantly 'repressive' and 'exploitive' whereas power in the Western context is regarded as predominantly 'creative' and 'competitive.'

In Turkey, however, power is both repressive and creative, both exploitive and competitive. If one wants to have a better insight into this country, the classic definition of power won't help. This is one country I wish Foucault had had the time to come and study. Turkish society is a tapestry of disparities and clashes and coexistences. The overall complexity might seem to deny any consistency, but there are, at the same time, a set of repetitive patterns in this tapestry ' patterns of power that have emerged again and again over the course of Turkey's social and political history. One such pattern is what I call 'the de-feminization of the culture.' I contend that Turkish society and culture have gradually and systematically de-feminized over the past 10 decades.

The 'feminization of culture' has been an important theme for numerous scholars, including Simmel, who regarded modernity as a product of male activity. In the Turkish case, modernization was first and foremost a project of social engineering by the elite, which paved the way to the "monopolization of the public domain by the regime." This is a society already stamped with a 'strong state' tradition. The path followed from cosmopolitanism as a supra-identity to address the various nationalities of the Ottoman Empire to the very construction and consolidation of the Turkish nation-state needs to be investigated by taking into consideration the intermingling between nationalist and gender ideologies.

Within this historical framework one of the functions of the Kemalist reforms had been monologizing the culture and centralizing the system as such. Hence, the consolidation of the nation-state went hand-in-hand with centralization of the political order from above. To this assessment, I have added 'the de-feminization of culture' ' a process that has been under way since the late Ottoman era but reached a climax during the 1930s and 1940s and did not lose its impetus until quite recently. If and when a culture loses or suppresses its feminine side, it becomes less capable of showing its emotions and less capable of self-criticism. Individuals become less willing to empathize with one another. The society becomes more homogenized, militaristic and rigid and the code of 'normalcy' becomes easier to impose.

Nevertheless, post-1980s and especially 1990s has been a turning point in this regard. Today a re-feminization of Turkish culture is well under way, — a new process that coexists and clashes with the enduring masculinization of the culture.