

Adile Sultan, A Mystical and Rebellious Ottoman Princess

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In the late 19th century, the Catalan harpist Clotilde Cerdà lived for a while in Istanbul, where she witnessed the daily lives of Turkish women, who were far more cultivated and educated than Western prejudices assumed. There are indeed several female figures from that time that stood out for their creative work and advanced thinking, which led them to fight against the widespread archetype of the submissive Turkish woman in need of protection. The work of the writer Fatma Aliye is, in this respect, one of the first in feminist history studies. And the work of the mystical poetess Adile Sultan is also very important in this context because it helped Turkish women to begin questioning the prohibitions imposed on them, as well as to progress in the development of their personal life strategies.

Adile Sultan (1826-1899) lived through a turbulent period of Ottoman history, when women's place in Turkish society began to be debated after the first modernisation attempts of the Tanzimat period (1859 reforms). One of the most interesting facts about the society of this time can be found in the speech by the Catalan harpist Clotilde Cerdà (Esmeralda Cervantes, 1861-1926) at the Chicago World's Fair (1893). In a presentation in English entitled "Education and Literature of the Women of Turkey", Cervantes explains the influence of these reforms and the changes that were taking place in the lives of women: "I can safely testify that their instruction and development are not in the least inferior to the education of our own intelligent ladies. Several European authors have founded the erroneous idea they had about female education in the Orient, on totally wrong interpretations of the Koran, which, they pretend, condemns woman to re-

main in ignorance" (Cervantes, 1893: 3). And she continues: "The Mussulman woman's education has realized during the last fifteen years a progress that is indeed marvelous. It was only needed to give a little help to the development of her mental faculties, in order to enable the Oriental woman to make herself worthy in so short a time for a place in this universal Congress either in person or by representation. As I have already said the Mahometan religion is not an obstacle to woman's development. The Koran, which contains the basis of all liberal institutions and social duties, mutual assistance, equality before the law, respect towards the family, etc., says: 'Woman's education must be equal to man's' (Chapter 22nd. Verse 33 to 35)" (Cervantes, 1893: 4).

In her speech, Cervantes mentions one of the best-known writers and translators of the time, Fatma Aliye (1862-1936). For her, the new image of the woman is brilliantly embod-

ied in Fatma Aliye's novels and her own life. In 1904 in the *Diario de Tenerife*, the harp teacher to the women of the Istanbul Palace between the years 1890 and 1893 published her talks with her friend Fatma Aliye about the Turkish woman. The protagonists of Fatma Aliye's works are always independent women, at one with the people, with a strong personality, and who fight against the archetype of the "woman in need of protection".

In 19th century Ottoman Turkish society, the traditional aristocracy slowly began to lose influence in the face of changes in society, and some educated upper-class women, such as the Ottoman princess Adile Sultan, used their social and intellectual prestige to change the prevailing stereotypes.

For the Ottoman George Sands – George Sand's *Lavinia* was the most widely read novel in the elegant mansions along the Bosphorus – Paris was an open space of freedom, the enjoyment of free will of movement and ways of life that the narrow walls of female life in the Istanbul of the time denied them. In 1906, the first woman Ottoman traveller, Zeynep Hanım (d. 1923), sent her first letter from Fontainebleau to her Irish friend Grace Ellison (d. 1935), explaining: "And now, in the space of eight short months, what have we not seen and done! Every day has brought some new impressions, new faces, new joys, new difficulties, new disappointments, new surprises and new friends; it seemed to both of us that we must have drunk the cup of novelty to its very dregs" (Zeynep Hamm, 1913: 24).

It is worth noting that, in this period, literary discourse was the only one through which women acted and spoke publicly, a safe space that allowed them to elude the rationality of patriarchal logic. Ottoman aristocratic women appropriated that space by seeing themselves reflected in other women. Fatma Aliye's work on the women of the time of Islam, *Namdaran-ı Zenan-ı slamiyan*, is one of the

first in feminist history studies. In the Chicago World's Fair (1893), they included her biography and novels in *The Woman's Library of The World's Fair*: "Alier Hanoum, who wrote various works, among which *The Mussulman Women* is a classic book full of details on the customs and habits of oriental women. She has also translated Georges Ohnet's *Volonté*" (Cervantes, 1893; 4).

Adile Sultan was the first Ottoman woman to publish a book of mystical poetry, and she also first published the poems of her ancestor Suleyman the Magnificent in 1890. Adile's writings heralded a new feminine genre, that of mystical poetry. For this reason, she is not only recognised today as the first great mystical poetess in the Ottoman language, thanks to her *Divan*, but also for her poems with a rebellious tone, like this one: "I am a dervish and also a princess / I travel through the world of love" (Sultan, 1890: 230).

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To understand the meaning of women's equality in Adile's poems, one must know about the position of women during the Seleucid dynasty (11th-13th centuries). The Seleucid Empire was a medieval Turkic state that encompassed Central Asia, Khorasan, and parts of Anatolia and the Middle East, with its capital at Konya. Women played an important role in it, as a reflection of Turkish nomadic society: they used weapons, rode horses and actively participated in tribal society, including political decision-making.

Following Adile Sultan, the Ottoman Muslim woman began to progress in the development of strategies for her personal life, questioning the prohibitions of access to the

outside world, thereby advancing in forging her own identity and redefining the relations between men and women, for example, in the mixed literary meetings, with music and mystical dance (*sama*) that Adile held in her mansions. Her poems shed light on the events in the palace and the administration of the Ottoman Empire.

Women like Adile Sultan show that, behind the attitude of men who use Islam to condition women's lives, it is not religion that is hidden but their own masculine interests. The prohibitions and controls imposed on women were justified by supposed religious prohibitions, but, as we see in the case of Adile Sultan, there was a questioning by women of the elite that responded to these prohibitions. As the English theologian Margaret Smith explains: "In spiritual life the masculine there could be 'neither male nor female'" (Smith, 1928: 2). Adile Sultan was very familiar with the Prophet's saying about gender equality: "If any of the male companions of female disciples be buried in a holy place, they will intercede for such dwellers in that place as are worthy of their intercession" (Smith, 1928: 2).

As she affirms in her verses, in a rebellious and forceful tone to show gender equality in the mystical world, Sultan accepts pain bravely and even with joy, like Saint Teresa of Ávila: "Pain is pleasure, separation is gratitude / Its whim is a gift, its cruelty is beauty" (Sultan, 1890; 215). We have another example in the mysticism of Basra Râbi'atü-l Adeviyye (752-801), who introduced this theme of divine love among the Sufis. In the genre inaugurated by *Divan*, whoever suffers, whoever speaks, whoever yearns, whoever always hopes to be loved, is always a poet.

The lover is above, like a king, and commands sometimes mercifully, sometimes cruelly, and the beloved claims that he will never leave his love and will fight for this love:

"Although I am going to suffer, I do not care / Because I sacrificed my life to a very important sultan of love" (Sultan, 1890; 99). When we read this prototype of the lover in the mystical poetry written by male poets, it does not sound strange, but if the female poets use the same language, it is different.

Moreover, Adile Sultan was not the first woman in the history of mystical poetry of Islam, as Smith notes: "In the history of Islam, the woman saint made her appearance at a very early period, and in the evolution of the cult of saints, the dignity of sainthood was conferred on women as much as on men" (Smith, 1928: 2).

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Through poetry, Sultan tries to express her spiritual adventure and also the realities of the society in which she lives. Adile's own personality provides us with a valuable example of female spiritual development and openness. Adile was the proof, herself, of a sublime spiritual state, of one who has developed in her bosom the full presence of God. In modern Islam, women, even more than men, were also overcoming the orthodox Islam that had prevailed since the 19th century. Although Adile did not achieve the literary success of the poets Leyla Hamm (1850-1936) and Fitnat Hanım (1842-1911), recognised in their time and mentioned by Esmeralda Cervantes at the Chicago World's Fair (1893), she was the first to confront the prejudices of society and sometimes use words in Turkish instead of Persian, the Ottoman literary language, in her poems. We can therefore conclude that Muslim women in an Islamic empire were opposed to locking themselves in a life limited to the role of wives.

Protector of Orphan Girls

Sultan attached special importance to the education of women. She lost her mother very early, which made her very sensitive, so she turned her interest to literature and especially poetry. In the archives of the library of ancient works at the University of Istanbul we find the legacy of Adile Sultan divided among her eighteen foundations dedicated to the needy. She left her palace in Kandilli after her husband's death (1868) and moved to the seaside palace of Fındıklı. She donated this palace to the state on the condition that it became the first high school for girls in the Ottoman Empire, today known as Kandilli Anatolia High School for Girls.

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We must always keep in mind that literature is the creation of a new world, so the first task in studying it is to look at that world with the greatest attention, without an obvious connection with the worlds we already know. Once we have studied this new world of Ottoman society, we will then be in a position to examine its relations with other worlds. Thus, this new era of reforms begins to bear fruit for women almost sixty years later.

Figures like Adile Sultan or Fatma Aliye are only an example of the transformations that took place in Ottoman society in the late 19th century, which broke with the stereotypes of the European Orientalism of the time. These women, with strong personalities and solid education, were the pioneers of a movement that would reach its peak after the First World War. It should also be borne in mind that the religious and traditional education of this time

did not only have disadvantages, as it gave these new female Turkish intellectuals great mental and spiritual discipline.

The movements of the new Ottoman Turkish literature developed in this revolutionary environment, where there were also women writers and members of parliament like Halide Edip Adıvar (1884-1964) who, although they wanted reforms, did not reject all traditional literature and focused on the real life of society without imitating European society and nature.

1923 is the most important date in the history of Turkish women, the year of the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey. One of the female writers in the young Turkish Republic, Suat Derviş (1905-1972), in her novel *In the Shadow of the Yali*, describes the climate of change based on the portrait of a family, showing us an aristocratic grandmother in a mansion in the Bosphorus, writing in sad ink the same gray colour as the Sea of Marmara and clamouring to become visible in this effort by high society women to adapt to a new city whose name changes from *Islambol* ("full of Islam", one of names of the city in Ottoman times) to *Istanbul* (Istanbul, in modern Turkish). Finally, on 5 December 1934, this revolutionary atmosphere would culminate with the proclamation of Turkish women's right to vote.

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