REVIEW

for the dissertation of Semra Mustafa Ahmed

"Intercultural Dialogues in the Fiction of Contemporary Turkish Women Writers"

by Prof. Dr. Plamen Bochkov, New Bulgarian University

Semra Ahmed's dissertation is a thorough and extensive study of contemporary Turkish literature as represented by the works of women writers. At the same time, the text has a specific focus - contemporary Turkish literature written by women, through the dialogues between fundamentally different cultural layers reflected in it. The tensions between modernity and tradition, between male dominance and female presence, between Western culture and Eastern culture, between the urban and the rural, etc., are touched upon. This focus lends consistency to the analysis of the authors presented and maintains a basic research stance despite the seemingly disparate literary themes and approaches.

The dissertation contains 245 pages of text and includes an Introduction, three chapters - Contemporary Turkish Literature: processes, trends, currents. Interactions and Changes in Turkish Society after World War II", "Female Presence in Contemporary Turkish Fiction", "Intercultural Dialogues in the Works of Turkish Women Writers", conclusion and bibliography. Publications on the topic of the dissertation and a list of the author's translations are appended. The dissertation was discussed and directed for public defense at the meeting of the Scientific Council of the IBTC held on 13.05.2025.

In the Introduction, Semra Ahmed introduces the aims, object, sources and methodology of the study, and defends the relevance of the topic. I will start from there, because I believe that the issue is twofold - on the one hand, the ongoing debate in contemporary Turkish literature itself between the traditional and the modern, and on the other hand, the interest of the Bulgarian reading public in contemporary Turkish literature in view of the growing volume of translations. To this should be added the fact that we are not presented with contemporary Turkish literature at all, but with that produced by women, which is as much a topical issue as it is a little explored one, especially on such a scale and with such temporal depth.

The methodology chosen by the author adequately reflects the complexity and broad context of the topic. Methods of literary analysis, the sociocultural perspective and the

historiographical approach are employed. Thus, we could define Semra Ahmed's dissertation as an interdisciplinary study, situated within a broad subjectological framework.

Semra Ahmed formulates in the Introduction the main aim of her work as "the intercultural collisions of Turkish society in the work of some prominent female names of modern Turkish fiction". The work relates the appearances of women's literary creativity to the general socio-cultural context of events in the country and at the same time weaves in biographical elements.

The first chapter "Contemporary Turkish Literature: processes, trends, currents. Interactions and Changes in Turkish Society after the Second World War", is introductory as a panorama of the history of Turkish literature and the place of new Turkish literature in it. This chapter is a source of valuable information and acts as the necessary socio-cultural context and historical background against which women writers of more recent times appear, not gratuitously and quite by chance, but somewhat expectedly and legitimately. The chapter covers a historical period of about 150 years, tracing the social, political and cultural changes that led to the emergence of modern Turkish literature. Classicism, Enlightenment Realism, and Enlightenment Romanticism, for all the conventionality of these terms as applied to Turkish literature in the second half of the 19th century, mark the gradual transition from traditional to modern literature. Semra Ahmed examines in detail the work of no small number of writers without, however, losing the thread of her research interest - the dialogue between outmoded social orders and the quest for renewal and freedom. I would place special emphasis in this section on a process similar to what happened in Bulgarian Renaissance literature, when instead of imitating the high literary models of the West, mainly French, a number of writers appealed to the richness of vernacular language and folklore (Rakovsky, Chintulov, Karavelov, etc.). Thus the idea of a national literature of its own was already taking shape in Turkey, supported by the events after 1908 (the Young Turk Revolution). The turning point (and the problem) at the border of the 19th and 20th centuries in Turkey lay in the complexity of the task of finding "the formula of synthesis between the two opposing cultures, the Eastern and the Western, which would build the modern cultural image of the Turks with a national content" (p.33).

The second chapter, "Women's Presence in Modern Turkish Fiction," outlines the problematic of the dissertation: how the transition to Europeanization or modernization of Turkish culture in general and Turkish literature in particular was born from the bowels of a centuries-old Islamic tradition. Initially, the place of women in this process was neglected and

seemed to go unnoticed. A study cited by Semra Ahmed is significant, providing a simple statistical overview of the novels published by women writers between 1924 and 2008. Not only do they turn out to be many, but they are scattered thematically, from historical to romance to social to crime to science fiction. The transition is not an easy one, rather a painful and agonizing one, though the writers seek to achieve it through tolerance, understanding and support. And for women writers it is even harder to assert themselves and be understood and supported.

The example of the writer Khalide Oedip, one of the few I know, is typical, due to the fact that "Sinekli Bakal" was read in the 1970s in my family (the 1971 edition of "People's Culture") and was not inferior in popularity to "The Lark" by Reshat Nouri. Her personal story, refracted in her novels, shows the inner fluctuations of a Turkish woman pressed by the demands of tradition, mainly through religion and family, and the desire to touch and immerse herself in the achievements of the West through education, the courage to express oneself, the freedom to choose, the opportunity to explore other worlds.

What do the examples of women's writing show us - the presence of a genuine feminist movement or a struggle against traditionalism and patriarchal mentality? Semra Ahmed stays more in the field of the second answer and proceeds to analyze the fiction of women writers such as Khalide Oedip Adawar, Samiha Ayverdi, Leyla Erbil, and others. Central to this part of Semra Ahmed's dissertation is the figure of Khalide Oedip Adavar. This is because it is in the novels of Halide Edip that the theme of synthesis (as desirability) and opposition (as reality) between Eastern and Western aesthetics in Turkish society stands out. The main thesis of Halide Edip's novels, according to Semra Ahmed, is that neither the East is so bad nor the West so good.

The paragraph "Modern Dialogues in the Fiction of Turkish Women Writers" is, in my opinion, central to this chapter and to the dissertation as a whole. Here, the most prominent works of selected women writers, such as Halide Edip Adawar, Samiha Ayverdi, Suat Dervish, Leyla Erbil, and Adalat Ağaoğlu, are precisely and comprehensively presented.

The third chapter, "Intercultural Dialogues in the Works of Turkish Women Writers," also contains the most interesting, from my point of view as an expert, section on the connections between folklore and literature in the works of two women writers, Nazlı Eray and Latife Tekin. Where women look at coffee, where djinns and peris roam, the realm of the

everyday, not of high culture, another clash takes place - between the magical aura of the traditional Turkish village with its superstitions and the pragmatism of the metropolis with its scholarship and calculatingness. In Latife Tekin's novel, the family of Atiye and Huvat travels outwardly from the village to the city and inwardly from the past to modernity. And although in the city the characters also have visions, talking either to the moon or to the snow, the jinn no longer visit them so often, and figures like that of the yellow girl, the seductress of men, fade away completely. It is the dialogue between folklore and literature that gives rise to the Turkish version of magical realism. And if Nazlı Eraj rather timidly tries to weave myths, superstitions, magic, prophecies, etc. into the fabric of his novels, Latife Tekin makes them the main instrument of her storytelling gift.

The theme of the clash between rural and urban culture is the subject of the analyses of the novels of Swat Dervish and Pendar Kur. The drama in Punar Kur's A Woman to Hang presents the pressing 20th century problem of what is the place of women in a world still dominated by men. Including the judiciary and public opinion. At the same time (mid-20th century) not a few Turkish women writers were creating abroad. In the novels of Oya Baidar, Foruzan we see people from a community in a foreign cultural environment trying to fit in while also wanting to keep their identity. This situation makes new demands, draws new boundaries, but also opens up new possibilities. Although she ended up in Berlin by chance in 1980, Oya Baidar took advantage of the prospect of remaining in Germany (after the coup in Turkey on 12 September 1980) and wrote some of her most inspired novels, which have been translated into more than 20 languages. One of them, Cat Letters, is familiar to Bulgarian readers, and Semra Ahmed sums up his main message this way - no matter where we are in the world, we all carry our homeland in our hearts, which is the foundation of our identity, that's why we strive to return there again. This is what the characters in Cat Letters do, and this is what happens in the life of Oya Baidar herself.

I will try to list some of the main contributions of Semra Ahmed's dissertation:

First of all, this is the first major study of the work of Turkish women writers on a significant time scale, from the mid-19th century to the present.

Secondly, the thesis problematizes the place of women in Turkish society and, in particular, that of women writers in contemporary Turkish literature.

Third, the thesis defines and analyzes major dilemmas in a sociocultural context - East-West, traditional-modern, rural/rural-urban.

Fourth, a personalized representation of key writers who have shaped the new Turkish literature, such as Halide Edip Adawar and Samiha Ayverdi, has been chosen, while others less known, such as the writers of the so-called rural institutes, have been brought out of anonymity and fairly covered.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the role of this work in popularizing the work of significant Turkish women writers among the Bulgarian reading public. In this sense, Semra Ahmed's work brings not only research value but also applied value to the knowledge of a neighbouring and close culture.

Semra Mustafa Ahmed participated in the procedure for obtaining the degree of Doctor of Education and Science with eight publications. Only one of them is co-authored, one is in Turkish. The publications are in refereed and peer-reviewed collections at high academic level in university presses and the BAS publishing house.

The description of the contributions is correct and comprehensive. The same applies to the submitted Abstract.

Semra Ahmed's dissertation is excellently structured, written, I would say, in fine literary rather than dry academic language. The literature cited and appended is impressive, both in terms of its volume and the dissertator's ability to navigate the wide range between literary texts and research on them by Turkish and foreign authors.

Semra Mustafa Ahmed is a full-time PhD student at the Balkan Culture Section of the Institute of Balkan Studies with the Center of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She was admitted in 2017 and graduated with the right to defend in 2020. She graduated from Medical University - Varna. Semra Ahmed graduated as a Bachelor of Arts from Shumen University in 2014 after the restoration of the Turkish Philology studies in Bulgarian universities. There she also obtained a Master's degree in Balkan Studies.

Her main research interests are contemporary Turkish prose and women's writing in contemporary Turkish literature. Semra Ahmed is also a respected translator from Turkish. She has translated 11 novels so far.

I did not know Semra Ahmed personally until the internal defense, and I take my participation in this procedure also as an opportunity to fill a gap in my literary interests, both from her translations of Turkish literature and from at least some of the books by contemporary Turkish women writers cited, to which what I have read in this dissertation has provoked me.

I recommend with full conviction that the distinguished members of the scientific jury award Semra Mustafa Ahmed the degree of Doctor of Education and Science for her dissertation, "Intercultural Dialogues in the Fiction of Contemporary Turkish Women Writers."

12.07.2025

Reviewer:

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