

MELODRAMATICS OF TURKISH MODERNITY: *Narratives of Victimhood, Affect, and Politics*

The 2016-17 Jane Grant Fellow takes on the relationship between fabricated stories and politics

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In 2013, at the height of the Gezi Park protests, several national media outlets reported a shocking case of public harassment in Kabataş, a central neighborhood of Istanbul. The alleged account that approximately a hundred shirtless male protestors attacked a veiled woman with a six-month-old baby was immediately taken up by the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. “They attacked my veiled sister,” said the injured Erdoğan repeatedly in a brotherly alliance with the victim of the so-called Kabataş attack. Although the alleged incident was later proven to be an invention by documented evidence, Erdoğan even to this day mobilizes the story to push his conservative politics.

However, what was striking to me about this story had actually less to do with its fabrication than its historical resonance. The sensational narrative struck me with its resemblance to the plotline of Halide Edib’s 1923 novella *Vurun Kahpeye* (*Strike the Whore*). Set in a small village during the Turkish Independence War, the novella recounts the lynching of Aliye, a recently appointed teacher working undercover for the nationalists unbeknownst to the locals. Incensed by a clergyman who slanders her as a whore, the villagers publically stone Aliye to death.

For me, the two stories clearly partook in the world of melodrama, both incorporating a narrative of victimhood framed within chaos, conflict, violence and pathos. As a comparatist, I was understandably intrigued by this common narrative structure pertaining to “melodramatic imagination” shared by Erdoğan’s story and Edib’s novella; it epitomized the link between historical narrative forms and contemporary discursive strategies. At the heart of this melodramatic world was a particular use of gender that knitted together the two traditionally opposed political camps of Turkey. It seemed to me that the deployment of female victimhood in these narratives animated respectively the ideological agendas of Islamist conservatism and secularist modernism.

Let me briefly put this claim in context. Coeval with the new Turkish Republic, Edib’s melodramatic tale prescriptively pits the good, secular moderns against the evil, backward populace through the mutilated female body. Evoking sympathy and outrage through a melodramatic identification of victims and perpetrators, gender becomes a key agent through which the public affectively experiences the modernizing project of the Republic. Eighty-seven years later, Erdoğan adopts the same narrative structure to activate the same affects, only now inverting the political ideologies of the hero and villain by refashioning the female figure as a pious subject. Brutally invaded by hysterically secularist moderns, the woman is once again a victim.

My dissertation, “Melodramatics of Turkish Modernity: Narratives of Victimhood, Affect, and Politics,” follows the transplantation of this victim from secular aesthetics to conservative politics. Identifying melodrama as the paradigmatic narrative mode of Turkish modernity, I embark on this project to recover the aesthetic history of Turkish politics with reference to narratives of gendered victimhood. My project takes seriously the primacy of personal and social imaginaries in shaping our everyday reality, as noted by feminist



Baran Germen on location in Turkey

scholar Gloria Anzaldúa: “Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.” As the abovementioned examples attest, the instrumentalization of gendered victimhood participates in the formation of heteropatriarchal social imaginary and state politics in Turkey by rendering the vulnerable female body as the bearer of national values in need of protection. For this reason, a project that investigates how the masculine world of politics is able to capitalize on the feminized position of victimhood codified by melodrama becomes crucial to identify—and later challenge—“the images in our head,” the images of the many women, as well as trans and queer people, victimized in the name of heteropatriarchy.

To this end, I am currently conducting my research in Turkey for this trans-medial and genealogical project thanks to the generous support of CSWS. What is the process by which victimhood begins to signify politically? How does the transfiguration of the victim take place so that it gains political purchase itself? By what means does politics invest in melodramatic affects? I am pursuing these questions to flesh out the affective as well as performative fashioning of a national affect of gendered victimhood. As the 2016 Jane Grant fellow, I see my project contributing to the scholarship that invites the reevaluation of the field of politics as very much indebted to melodrama and affect. ■

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