

INTRODUCTION

The Solitude of the Stateless: Kurdish Women at the Margins of Feminist Knowledge

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W*omen of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds.* This is the first edited, English language, collection of papers about the women of Kurdistan. It is usually difficult to find a telling title for an edited work. I can, however, readily think of a dozen, equally good, or even more relevant titles for this book. But why should the women of Kurdistan be identified by and with statehood and nationhood in a book that deals with issues ranging from health choices to Sufism to sexism in language? Indeed, as editor, I did not ask the authors to address the question of statehood and nationhood in their study of the lives of Kurdish women.¹ Uninvited, however, the state is prominently and, often violently, present in Kurdistan, a territory without ‘recognized borders.’ In this ‘borderless’ land, however, the borders are more visibly marked than most internationally recognized borders: it is a land whose ‘borders bleed’ (Kashi 1992).

The Kurds constitute one of the largest non-state nations of the world. With a population of approximately 25 million, they are the fourth largest ethnic people in the Middle East, outnumbered only by Arabs, Turks and Persians. They were forcibly divided, in 1918, among the centralist ‘nation-states’ of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with a population of about a million dispersed in Caucasian countries such as Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and in old and new diasporas in Central Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, Central Asia and elsewhere.

While the ‘international order’ and its United Nations have regularly denied the Kurds the right to self-determination, the states that rule over them are free to exercise what Leo Kuper calls the sovereign state’s ‘right to genocide’ (1981: 161-85). Indeed, Turkey established itself as a modern nation-state in part by creating, in the words of Mark Levene (1998), a modern ‘zone of genocide’, from 1878 to 1923, in its Eastern Anatolian

provinces where Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds had coexisted since ancient times. In this zone, the Armenian nation was eliminated (1915), the Assyrians were massacred and dispersed (Levene 1999), and the Kurds were subjected to various degrees of genocide, ethnocide and linguicide (see, for example, Fernandes 1998-99, on the genocide of the Kurds in Turkey from 1924 to 1998; White 1999, on the exclusion of the Kurds from citizenship). Genocide in the region is not a product of the misjudgment of a dictator, or the errors of army commanders; it has been, rather, a venue of state building; here, 'genocide *is* the mainstream' (Levene 1999: 20-4). For reasons that are not difficult to understand, Western powers and some academics specializing in the region deny that the Turkish state, past and present, has had the 'intent' of unleashing genocide. The Iraqi regime's 1988 genocidal campaign, *Anfal*, was recognized as such *only* after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, an event which instantly turned him into an enemy of the United States.

Feminists and Marxists, among others, reject the ideological claim to the neutrality of the state. However, if the class, gender, national, and ethnic constituents of state power are theoretically contested, the patriarchal nature of the state in Kurdistan does not lend itself to much doubt, reservation, or uncertainty. I will refer, in the following section, to one case, the exercise of gender power in the multi-ethnic state of Turkey. I will then look at the ways Turkish feminists and Kurdish nationalists have responded to the patriarchal rule of Kemalism, the nationalism of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

Turkish 'Feminists' Against the Kurdish People

Turkey is, according to its admirers, 'the only Muslim democracy' with an adequate secular, modern political system (Lewis 1994). The formation of this state and its continued presence entailed for many Kurds the destruction of their people and homeland, Kurdistan, and forcible Turkification. Resistance to the state-building project of Turkish nationalists was extensive in Kurdistan. The first major revolt occurred in 1925, two years after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. The suppression was violent; this was followed by other revolts throughout the 1930s. The most important uprising was in Dersim in 1937 and 1938. The suppression of the people, combatant and non-combatant, was even more violent. The policy and practice of the state constituted genocide (Beşikçi 1990 cited in Bruinessen 1994a: 183; McDowall 2000: 210; see, especially, Bruinessen 2000: 11, comments on his 1994a and 1994b).

If the physical violence of Kemalist Turkey reached genocidal proportions, its symbolic violence was no less ruthless. State propaganda, widely disseminated through print media, radio, and schools, constructed Kurdish resistance as religious fanaticism, tribal and reactionary politics, banditry, backwardness, and opposition to education (see, among others, Yeğen 1999). The mainstream Western media rehashed the propaganda.

Writing under the headline of ‘Kurds who object to Education,’ *The Times* (June 16, 1937) quoted Prime Minister and General İnönü’s claim that the ‘disturbances had been due to the hostility of the local population towards the introduction of compulsory education and other reforms.’ It was thereby constructed as a conflict between the civilizing Turkish nation, led by their modernizing generals, and an uncivilized people led by fanatics. The generals invoked Turkish women they had recently ‘liberated’ in order to highlight the wide gulf that separated Turkish modernity and Kurdish reaction. In a country where women had been denied presence in politics and war, the ‘father of the Turks,’ President Kemal Atatürk (*ata* ‘father’ + Turk) dispatched his adopted daughter to undertake the final solution. According to *The Times* correspondent, reporting from Istanbul (June 16, 1937):

During the Dersim operations Sabiha Gökçen, one of Atatürk’s adopted daughters, who had volunteered for service in the Turkish Flying Corps, so distinguished herself that she has been awarded the Flying Medal set with brilliants. This, the highest honour which can be won for aviation in Turkey, is rarely awarded.

Sabiha Gökçen is 22 years of age and holds a Turkish military pilot’s certificate. She is stated to have shown the greatest bravery and resource throughout the operations and to have dropped the final bomb which virtually put an end to the insurrection.

Two days later, *The Times* reported that ‘the Government decided at once on strong measures, and had dispatched some 30,000 men to the region and completely surrounded it.’ However, ‘owing to the absence of roads and the very difficult nature of the country, the movement took some weeks to suppress.’ Finally,

Sabiha Gökçen, the airwoman who volunteered for service with the expedition, is reported to have made a direct hit with a bomb on the house of the Seyyid Riza, one of the insurgent leaders which killed him and several of his principal supporters (‘Tribal rising in Turkey,’ *The Times*, June 17, 1937).

There is no need to deconstruct in any detail the propagandistic nature of Sabiha’s story. In fact, Seyyid Riza was not killed by Sabiha’s smart bombing. Two weeks after this story was published in *The Times*, Riza wrote a letter in which he described the context of revolt, and appealed to the British government for intervention. The Kurds had revolted, he explained in the letter, because:

For years the Turkish government has attempted to assimilate the Kurdish people and with this objective has been oppressing them, forbidding them to read newspapers and publications in the Kurdish language, persecuting those who speak their mother

tongue, organizing forced and systematic migrations from the fertile lands of Kurdistan to the uncultivated lands of Anatolia, where these migrants perished in large numbers.... Three million Kurds live in their country and ask only to live in peace and freedom while keeping their race, language, traditions, culture, and civilization.²

Indeed Riza began to negotiate a settlement with the government in September, but was arrested and executed in November (Kutschera 1979: 128-9).³ Resistance continued, however, and the largest army operation was conducted in spring 1938. According to a British diplomatic report, 'the military authorities have used methods similar to those used against the Armenians during the Great War: thousands of Kurds including women and children were slain.'⁴

Today, Sabiha appears in various websites ranging from that of the Turkish Air Force to 'Daughters of Atatürk' to 'Real/Virtual Aviation' where she is hailed, unanimously, as the world's 'first woman *combat* pilot.' According to the latter website, 'she joined a nine-plane force to subdue a revolt by Kurdish tribesman. Throughout the mission she was given the nick-name "Amazon of the air" by the press and gained fame among her fellow countrymen.'⁵ The 'Daughters of Atatürk' post her as 'The First Woman War World.'⁶ The stringing of the words *Woman*, *War* and *World* reveal more than errors of translation from Turkish.⁷ The Kemalist state was born in the wake of World War I and in the midst of a 'War of Independence' waged by the military led by Mustafa Kemal. It consolidated itself by internal wars against the opposition, especially the Kurds. The nation builders further modernized the old state structure by controlling the labor movement, peasants, women, students, and other sources of social and political activism. The official 'emancipation of women' was one means of subordinating women to the nation-state. This state 'feminism' could hardly be anything but patriarchal.

Sabiha, the hero of the state-sponsored 'emancipation of women', was, like the 'father of the Turks,' born in male-made warfare, and continues to live in it, in myth and memory. Some fifty years after engaging in the suppression of the Kurdish revolt, Sabiha defended the bombing and said, 'This was necessary for the protection and viability of the young republic.'⁸

Turkish nationalism shed all its feminist pretensions in the 1990s when thousands of Kurdish women joined the ranks of the Kurdistan Workers Party (known in its Kurdish acronyms as PKK) and its guerrilla army (for more information, see van Bruinessen, this volume; Galletti, this volume). The goal of the Party was, initially, no less than self-determination for the Kurds. If Sabiha's story was a lie, Kurdish women's armed uprising against her state was real. Kurdish female guerrillas appeared on the pages of Western print media, on the small screen of television, on video, and in various websites.⁹ The image of Kurdish women taking up arms against the

masculine army of the Turkish state was intolerable. In Turkey, the army is the guardian of ‘democracy,’ and in less than six decades conducted three coups d’etat in order to ‘restore’ the purism of Kemalist nationalism. It is, moreover, the second largest army of NATO, and has faithfully served the interests of the United States and the West. In this context, national and male chauvinisms combined forces to launch a vast propaganda campaign against women guerrillas. While official nationalism labeled the males as ‘terrorists,’ its patriarchal politics reduced the women to ‘prostitutes.’ From a male chauvinist perspective, women could hardly qualify as brigands or terrorists; their sedition, revolt against the ‘*indivisibility* of the Turkish nation’ and its ‘territorial integrity’, had to be vilified in sexist terms.

Turkish Feminism: Watchdog of Nationalism

Most feminists harbor no doubts about the patriarchal nature of the state. In Turkey, however, feminists are challenged to engage in more than a theoretical understanding of the patriarchalism of the nation and the state. They are also beleaguered by a powerful, ubiquitous cult of state worship. Instead of resistance, many Turkish feminists have faithfully followed the doctrine of the nation-state: there are no Kurds; there are no Kurdish women; all women are Turks.¹⁰ Until the 1990s, there was deadly silence, in feminist writing, about Kurdish women (see Alakom, this volume, for examples of the Turkification of the history of women’s movement of the late Ottoman period). Even when Kurds appear in such writing, Kemalist politics determines the range of debate, and its terms, concepts and problematizations. For one thing, feminists generally do not deviate from the state’s politics of denial of the ethnic and national diversity of Turkey. Even if the existence of the Kurds is not denied, they are not treated as a nation with legitimate rights to self-rule. In the same vein, the feminist literature tends to deny or ignore official policies and practices of genocide, ethnocide and linguicide perpetrated against the Armenian and Kurdish peoples (for brief reviews of Turkey’s feminist studies see, among others, Arat 1993, 1997; Sirman 1988-89; Tekeli 1995). A study of ‘modernization’ of rural women in ‘Southeastern Anatolia’ (that is, Kurdish provinces), for example, discusses the failure of state-sponsored policies of ‘national integration’ (Ertürk 1995) without remotely noting that these ‘development projects’ continue to be ingrained in policies of ethnic cleansing (Esim 1999) and forced assimilation.¹¹ A paper about ‘women’s sexuality in Eastern Turkey’ (i.e., Kurdistan in Turkey) mentions the Kurds as a tribal people, puts them on par with the Turks as ‘the largest ethnic groups’ in the region, and over-emphasizes the ‘multi-ethnic character’ of the Kurdish region (İlkkaracan 1999: 101).

In spite of the fascination of feminists with Kemalism, the failure of Republican Turkey’s project to eliminate the Kurds as a distinct people challenges women’s and feminist movements. Kurdish women continue to

assert themselves in the struggle for national liberation, democracy, and socialism. Resisting the state, in the absence of a civil society and public spheres, they are active in the arts, the media, the streets (see Wedel, this volume), and the parliament (see van Bruinessen, this volume).

In spite of its repressive policies, the Ottoman state tolerated the names Kurds and Kurdistan. There was a booming Kurdish press in the early twentieth century, and also a Kurdish women's organization (see Klein, this volume)—all of which were repressed by the Republican regime in 1925. By the end of the century, however, Kurdish women from Diyarbekir to diaspora to Istanbul were organizing, and some had launched feminist journals (Karaca 1997; see, also, endnote 14 below). One Turkish feminist critiqued Turkey's women's movement for failing to forge solidarity with Kurdish women. Pinar İlkkaracan of the 'Women for Women's Human Rights,' for instance, wrote:

The Turkish women's movement has also failed to bring a substantial critical approach to militarism and the on-going war in Eastern and South-Eastern Turkey, the rise of a new nationalism and the official discourses of the state on Turkish identity, in which it claims that all the citizens living within the boundaries of Turkey are 'Turks'. Aside from some initiatives condemning racism, there is almost no effort to solidarize and engage in networking with Kurdish women to bring solutions to their specific problems. (1997: 21)

Thus, nationalism continues to be the priority of feminists; in Turkey, as in other countries, it divides women along ethnic lines, and turns them into agents of the patriarchal, militarist state. Still, feminist resistance against Kemalism is emerging; Müftüler-Bac (1999) rejects Kemalism as an 'agent of oppression', while Zehra Arat (1994) critiques state feminism as 'Republican patriarchy', and Yeşim Arat (2000) endorses the diversification of feminist activism, and reports the emergence of dialogue between Turkish and Kurdish feminists.

Kurdish Women and the Nation-State in Iraq and Iran

Three of the four states that rule over Kurdistan—Turkey, Iraq, and Syria—are products of the dismantling of the Ottoman empire in the wake of World War I. While Republican Turkey inherited a piece of the Ottoman pie, Britain and France created Iraq and Syria out of the southeastern provinces of the empire when they defeated the Turkish sultan in 1917-1918. The result was a re-division of the Kurds among four countries with a small enclave in the Soviet Union. Kurdish women were thus put under the rule of five different political regimes.

In spite of the diversity of state structures, women in these countries had emerged as a new social and political force that the state had to control. In Iran, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), Reza

Shah (1925-1941), pursued a policy of centralization of state power, Westernization and modernization based on Persian nationalism. Much like Turkey, the monarchy used women as a vehicle of nation- and state-building by suppressing independent women's organizations and their journals, and, among other things, initiating forced unveiling. The militaristic, patriarchal, Pahlavi state showed off the unveiled, educated, professional woman as the icon of modernizing Iranian society. Although coercion was used to unveil women throughout the country, confidential government reports indicated that women in rural Kurdish areas had always been unveiled and that women in the cities should have followed their example (Iran National Archives 1992: 240). The modernization of women was not, however, reduced to removing the veil; it was also the use of 'unified' dress, that is, the European costume. Thus, the 'elimination of Kurdish and tribal dress,' declared 'ugly and dirty' (1992: 171), was prominent on the agenda (1992: 249). While unveiled women were arrested in the streets for wearing Kurdish clothes, people were also detained for speaking in Kurdish. The Pahlavi state, like Turkey, pursued a policy of linguistic and ethnic cleansing aimed at Persianizing the multinational country. Under these conditions, the Persian, urban, middle class woman of Tehran, dressed in the costume of the 'civilized women of the world' (1992: 249), was promoted as the vanguard of state-sponsored modernism.

The newly-founded Iraqi and Syrian states under direct Western rule (British rule in Iraq, 1918-1932, and French rule in Syria, 1918-1946) were less Westernizing than 'independent' Turkey and Iran. The colonial states did not launch state feminisms of the Turkish and Persian type. Indeed, in Iraq, the state could not cope with Kurdish demands for women's education. One colonial administrator wrote:

From the outset of our administration there was a constant and pressing popular demand for the opening of schools for girls, and in the villages (even in a town as large as Koi) it was quite usual for enlightened parents to send their daughters, up to the age of twelve or thirteen, to attend and sit in class with the boys. The right of women to equal status with men has long been a favourite topic for articles in the periodical Kurdish press. Owing to the political troubles and other unfavourable circumstances the provision of public instruction for girls was delayed in the Kurdish districts of Iraq.... (Edmonds 1957: 15)

The British administration looked at education as a source of sedition and resented the popular demand for more schools. The 1929 annual report of Britain about the administration of Iraq, which was submitted to the League of Nations, complained:

The opening of three new Kurdish elementary schools has not appeased the discontent of the Kurds with the general educational policy of the Government. This discontent takes the form of

complaining :—

- (a) that there are not enough Kurdish elementary schools,
- (b) that there is no Kurdish training college,
- (c) that there are not enough school books in Kurdish....

Britain rejected the demand for establishing more schools or a Kurdish college. The report about the administration of Iraq in 1923-24 had already warned everyone about the dangers of ‘the uncontrolled spread of education.’

The increasing control of education, as of other activities of the government, by ‘Iraqis makes it necessary to dwell chiefly on those dangers of which ‘Iraqis themselves are least aware. One danger is the belief held by nearly all, except the most obscurantist, that there is no limit to what education can do, and no limit to the money that might profitably be spent on education. There is no risk of too much money being spent on education, but there is real danger in the belief in unlimited education as the cure of every ill. Education is one of the influences, perhaps the most important influence, in the creation of sound citizenship and morals, and of industrial efficiency. But even the best educational system in the world cannot produce results immediately, and must therefore conform to the real, and not to the imaginary economic, political and social needs of the country.

The overcrowding of the clerical profession and consequent unemployment in a class productive of political agitators, is one of the results which may follow from the uncontrolled spread of education....¹³

Although Britain and France did not launch either ‘state feminisms’ or ‘state nationalisms,’ they did pursue a policy of installing Arab states, and integrating the Kurds as Iraqi and Syrian citizens. However, in both cases (nationalist and colonialist), it is not difficult to see that the institution of the state, contrary to the claim of state-centered modernization literature, has often lagged behind women’s movements and popular demands for transforming gender relations. The post-colonial Iraqi and Syrian states followed the Iranian and Turkish politics of state nationalism and feminism, and pursued, from the early 1960s, strong assimilationist policies.

The assumption of power by the Islamic state in Iran in 1979 affected the politics of nationalism and feminism in the Middle East and far beyond. In suppressing the Kurdish people, the Islamic regime was more aggressive than the Pahlavi dynasty. In gender relations, it imposed a system of sexual apartheid with forced veiling, stoning ‘adulterers’ to death, and other traditional forms of violence against women.

Patriarchy: Lap-dog of Kurdish Nationalism

In spite of its support for women’s emancipation, nationalism has worked

as a major obstacle to the development of feminist movements in the region. It has created a Great Divide, along ethnic lines, among the women of each country. Feminists of the dominant nations, Turks, Arabs, and Persians, have privileged the interests of their own patriarchal nationalism by supporting the state and its official feminism.

Kurdish feminists, too, have surrendered the women's movement to the interests of Kurdish nationalism. In all parts of Kurdistan, national liberation has fully overshadowed women's emancipation. To the limited extent that Kurdish nationalism has been in power (in the early 1920s in Iraq, in 1946 in Iran, and since 1991 in Iraq), its record is no better than paying lip service to gender equality.

The autonomous government of Shaikh Mahmud in the early 1920s was a typically male, patriarchal, feudal regime. The Kurdish Republic of 1946 took steps in the direction of women's participation in public life, mostly education and support for the political party in power (see Mojab, this volume). Some fifty years later, the parliament of the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan took many steps backward by refusing to repeal the misogynist laws (personal status and penal codes) of the Ba'athist regime. At the same time, the two Kurdish ruling parties allowed Islamic groups, funded by Iran and Saudi Arabia, to push for Islamization of gender relations in Kurdistan. Violence against women, especially honor killing, in Iraqi Kurdistan reached unprecedented proportions under nationalist rule in the 1990s (Mojab 2000a).

Other organizations that struggle for self-rule, with the exception of *Komele*, the Kurdistan organization of the Communist Party of Iran, have also pursued conservative gender policies. Bowing to tradition and culture, nationalist parties have relegated gender equality to the future, to after the achievement of independence. They promote the myth of the relative freedom of Kurdish women (for a critique of the claim, see van Bruinessen, this volume; Hassanpour, this volume). The PKK, which prided itself on recruiting large numbers of women into the nationalist struggle, often entertained traditional gender relations. For instance, guerrilla camps in the mountains were segregated along gender lines. Males and females were not allowed to enter into intimate relationships, or to marry even according to traditional norms. Criticism of the organization's gender policy was virtually stifled (for information and analysis about the position of women in PKK, see van Bruinessen, this volume).

The Theoretical Trap: 'Feminist Nationalism'

The Kurdish case sheds much light on the complex ties that bind feminism to nationalism and patriarchy. Nationalist conflicts make it much easier for feminist and women's movements to confine themselves within their ethnic shell, and participate in their nation's war against other peoples.

In the late twentieth century, critical feminist theory unveiled the

patriarchal texture of nationalism, especially in its 'civic,' that is, more democratic, form (see, among others, Nelson 1998). Nationalism in power in typical 'popular democratic' regimes such as France and the United States has been patriarchal. By contrast, another theoretical trend shelters nationalism, and encourages feminist compromises with ethnic, national(ist) and religious patriarchy. It calls for 'indigenous feminisms' and 'feminist nationalism' (see, e.g., West 1997).

The road to 'indigenous feminisms' is, quite often, paved with good intentions; it is, in part, a form of resistance against the ethnocentrism of Western knowledge and politics. However, much of this agenda consists of challenging Western ethnocentrism with non-Western counterparts. It is a 'nativism' that, in its conflation of Western colonialism with feminism, often celebrates the oppression of women by 'their own' religion, nation, tradition and culture. It emphasizes 'difference' at the expense of similarities in the oppression of women worldwide. In this glorification of difference, solidarity among women of different backgrounds disappears, and patriarchal oppression is vindicated. The celebration of the particular turns into the celebration of patriarchy, and the universality of oppression is ignored by demonizing all universals as 'totalization,' 'essentialism' and even 'totalitarianism.' While feminism has grown into an international body of knowledge and politics, theoretical positions such as identity politics, poststructuralism, postmodernism and cultural relativism prescribe its fragmentation along religious, ethnic, national, and cultural cleavages (Mojab 1998).

Statelessness and Feminist Research

Poststructuralist theories posit the 'withering away' of nations and nation-states, and the erosion of all borders in politics, knowledge and society. There is little evidence in the Kurdish context to support this optimism. In fact, the state of being stateless or, rather, forcibly incorporated into dictatorial states affects all aspects of the life of Kurdish women. It is generally difficult and sometimes impossible to freely conduct research on Kurdish women in these countries. While statistical and census establishments in all states are male-centered, there are no census or statistical data on the Kurds living within the borders of each state. As a result, Kurdish women do not appear in census figures or in other state-administered data.

The Kurds began studying their society seriously when, four hundred years ago, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, the learned prince of Bidlis principality, wrote *Sharafnameh*, the first detailed history of Kurdistan. In making this claim, I am ignoring the scattered but numerous references to the Kurds in works composed by neighboring peoples. During the twentieth century, considerable knowledge was produced in Armenia and the rest of the former Soviet Union and in Iraq, where research on the Kurds was tolerated by the state. In spite of deadly repression in Republican Turkey

(established in 1923), Iran (especially from the 1930s to 1941), and Syria (since the mid-1960s), the Kurds, risking their lives, engaged in publishing whenever conditions permitted. Researchers, readers, publishers, bookstores, and distributors alike were the target of repression.

In the West, there is a tradition of research on the Kurds. Missionaries, travelers, diplomats, philologists, and army officers loom large in Western studies, especially in the aftermath of the rise of capitalism in Europe. Today, this literature is growing at a faster pace in the wake of the Gulf War and the failure of Turkey to suppress the Kurdish nationalist movement. During this century, social scientists, especially a number of anthropologists (e.g., Henry Field, Edmund Leach, Fredrick Barth, Henny Harald Hansen, Wolfgang Rudolph, Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, Martin van Bruinessen, and Leszek Dzięgiel) conducted important field work, mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan. No one has attempted yet a serious critique of this literature. It is not difficult, however, to discern, impressionistically at least, that colonial interest shaped much of the earlier literature.

The social science literature, especially the anthropological field work, has received very little critical attention. Again it would be safe to claim that this research was shaped by its historical and intellectual contexts. In spite of references to women, the theory and methodology of these works is male gendered. Only the work of Henny Hansen, the Danish anthropologist, in the late 1950s was entirely devoted to the women of Kurdistan. Hansen's *Kurdish Woman's Life* is certainly a landmark in the study of Kurdish women. However, Hansen's work is not informed by a feminist perspective. Obviously, at that time, anthropology and other social sciences were not yet touched by feminist theory and methodology. Indeed, the literature examined the unequal distribution of gender power in areas such as family or kinship in the absence of feminist theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Kurdish studies is shaped by the status of the Kurds as non-state nation. The Kurds do not appear as a topic of teaching and research in the academic establishments of the Middle East except in Iraq where there are Kurdish literature and language programs at Baghdad University, and in the two Kurdish universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the late 1990s, there was more tolerance of Kurdish teaching and publishing in Iran. However, there are no women's studies programs or even courses in any of the few universities in Kurdistan.

The situation in the West is not much better. With a few exceptions, the Kurds do not have any presence in the Middle Eastern studies programs, especially in North America. The exceptions are few and all in Europe where courses on Kurdish language and history are offered: Free University (Berlin), Institut National des Langues et Civilizations Orientales (Paris), Uppsala University (Sweden), and Utrecht (the Netherlands). Middle Eastern studies programs are predominantly focused on Turkish, Arab, Persian and Hebrew studies, some of them with close

ties to the Middle Eastern states. There is, thus, a double exclusion at work. The Kurds are excluded from Middle Eastern studies establishments and Kurdish women are excluded from studies of Middle Eastern women. A third form of exclusion is the non-presence of diasporan Kurdish women in the women's studies programs in Europe and North America. In the absence of Kurdish (women's) studies, the publishing industry is less interested in producing literature on the topic; this means that research and academic libraries cannot offer adequate resources for researchers, and students will be less inclined to conduct research on Kurdish women.

Academic work in the Middle East is controlled by the state and, generally speaking, the Middle Eastern states do not issue 'research permits' to Westerners and others interested in the study of the Kurds. Another related limitation is the distribution of funding and scholarships, which are denied Kurdish research efforts. Under these conditions, engaging in Kurdish women's studies itself is a form of resistance against intellectual repression.

Many cyberfeminists are over-optimistic about the potential of feminist activism in cyberspace. Although the internet offers opportunities for promoting Kurdish women's studies and activism, women in the Middle East do not yet have enough access to the medium. Most of the initiatives in cyberspace are from the Kurds in their growing diasporas in the West. Thus, women's activism was more prominent, in early 2000, in print and audiovisual media than in cyberspace. There were only two Kurdish women's websites compared to about a dozen Kurdish women's journals published in Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Europe (Mojab 2001; 2000b).¹⁴ The uneven access to media can be seen in the rather unusual presence, for a non-state nation, of three satellite television channels.

The Book and Its Context

Kurdish women today face a host of obstacles such as the patriarchal politics of Kurdish nationalist parties, the misogyny of Islamic groups, the political repression of central governments, continuing war, and a largely disintegrated economy and society. While this situation attracts many women to political and military activism, a growing tension between feminist awareness and patriarchal nationalism is visible. Pre-modern gender relations persist in a society undergoing extensive urbanization and 'modernization.' While the majority of women are tied to domestic household work and, in rural areas, activities related to agriculture, the formation of a stratum of intellectual and professional women in urban areas is reshaping the political and social life of Kurdistan. The presence of several thousand Kurdish female guerrillas, visible groups of writers, poets, painters, journalists, teachers, physicians, and parliamentarians (in Iraq, Turkey, and Europe) constitutes an important context for the transformation of gender relations.

The potential political power of Kurdish women is, however,

constrained or, rather, drained by the violent war the nation-states have imposed on the Kurds. Living on the ruins of a civil society that was never allowed to emerge, women are resisting the status quo individually and on an organized basis.¹⁵ These resistances are increasingly visible in, among other indications, women's protest campaigns such as marches, vigils, and demonstrations, especially in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the past few decades, we have seen a feminist 'knowledge explosion' in the West (Kramarae and Spender 1992). Feminist scholarship, in translation and in indigenous undertakings, is spreading worldwide. However, given the conditions of Kurdish women's life outlined above, not a single work of feminist theory has been translated into Kurdish, which in terms of the number of speakers ranks fortieth among the world's 6,600 languages.¹⁶ As noted earlier, there is a cycle of exclusion which prevents the formation of a tradition of research on Kurdish women: no faculty members specializing in Kurdish women's studies, no students to write papers and dissertations, no library collections, no research grants, and no publishing interest.¹⁷

In spite of the formidable obstacles to the development of Kurdish women's studies, individual researchers of very diverse backgrounds, women and men, Kurds and non-Kurds, have engaged in research in this area. This book provides access to some of this literature, and I hope, together with a forthcoming bibliography (Mojab and Hassanpour), will contribute to the proliferation of research in this area.

The authors of the eleven chapters of this book have diverse disciplinary specializations, with personal interest in the study of women in Kurdish society. Eight are females and three males. Three are from the Middle East and two are Kurdish. While most of the chapters are based on the authors' ongoing research in their areas of interest (Alakom; van Bruinessen; Klein; Mojab; Wedel; Galletti), some of the topics (Böttcher, Hassanpour; McDonald; O'Shea) have not so far received research attention. As editor, I did not suggest any framework, theoretical or methodological, for the contributors to follow. The chapters reflect, to a large extent, the state of research on Kurdish women at the turn of the century.

Transliteration and transcription are a challenge in writing about Middle Eastern societies. The contributors have quoted written and oral texts in languages such as Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish, which use the Arabic alphabet and its variations. No attempt has been made to fully standardize the Romanization systems used by the contributors. Still, most of the Kurdish language texts (except, at times, proper names) are generally presented in the Roman Kurdish script that has been used, with minor variations, by the Kurds especially in Syria in the 1930s and 1940s, Turkey, and in the diaspora. The Romanization of the Ottoman Turkish texts follows the alphabet used in Modern Turkish since 1928. The Arabic and Persian texts are fewer in number (except for Arabic

material in Böttcher's chapter), and have been presented in a rather simplified transliteration system. The use of different wordprocessing softwares by contributors working in different parts of Europe and North America, and the final conversion of the chapters into Microsoft Word, created complications for letters with diacritical marks. I have tried to reduce the impact to a minimum. I am also responsible for most of the cross-references between the chapters of the book.

The chapters were written before the change of direction in Kurdish nationalist politics in Turkey that was in the making since 1993, and was launched by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party, after Turkey abducted him in 1999 (see, among a vast literature, Gilbert 1999). This development does not demand a rewriting of the studies presented in this book.

The first three chapters focus on aspects of the history of Kurdish women's movements in the Ottoman empire and Iran. Janet Klein has made effective use of the Kurdish press of the last two decades of the Ottoman period in order to analyze the nationalist 'discourses' on the 'woman question.' Due to the ethnocidal policies of Republican Turkey, these sources were not readily available until recently, and have not yet been adequately used by historians. Klein has uncovered fresh material that sheds much light on the ways the first generation of nationalists envisioned the place of women in their nation-building projects. Having established the uniquely Kurdish import of nationalist and feminist discourses of the period, she emphasizes their universality by putting them in the wider context of the history of nationalism.

Alakom's research on Kurdish women in Constantinople in the early twentieth century is based primarily on Ottoman sources, both Kurdish and Turkish, including a Turkish women's journal. While Klein focuses on nationalist discourses, Alakom provides information on who these nationalists, male and female, were and what they did. He provides fresh evidence about the first Kurdish women's organization established in Constantinople (Istanbul, 1919). He also refers to the deliberate omission of the Kurds in Kemalist historiography of the women's movements of the late Ottoman period. This chapter was written in Kurdish, translated by Dr. Michael Chyet, and edited for stylistic consistency.

My chapter is about nation and the politics of women's emancipation in the Kurdish Republic of 1946, which is regarded by nationalists as the most important event in modern Kurdish history. This study shows that Kurdish women's organizing in Iran began, under a regime of self-rule, a quarter of century after the establishment of the first women's organization in exile in Istanbul. The chapter underlines the conflict between nationalism and feminism, and notes that, in 1946, feminist consciousness was clearly lagging behind nationalist consciousness. It critiques cultural relativist and nativist positions, which entertain political compromises between women and the patriarchal order of 'their' nation, religion, and

culture.

Three chapters are organized under 'social, cultural and legal perspectives.' Martin van Bruinessen's study about women as political leaders draws on his previous study of 'great women rulers' in traditional Kurdish society and ends with Layla Zana, the former member of parliament in Turkey, who has been in jail for her support of Kurdish rights. Emphasizing the achievements of these women, past and present, he argues that the evidence does not support the claim to gender equality in Kurdish society.

Heidi Wedel's study of Kurdish migrant women in Istanbul is based on extensive field work. While Klein and Alakom study the lives of Kurdish women in early twentieth century Istanbul, Wedel brings the story to the end of the century under radically changed circumstances. She examines women's participation in politics in the 'squatter settlements' where life is much more complex than in the Constantinople of the early twentieth century. Her research records low levels of political participation in national and local politics, where ethnicity, religion, language, the state, and Kurdish nationalism interact in changing and perplexing ways. This study concludes that kinship, ethnicity and religion rather than feminist consciousness shapes the social and political worlds of the migrant squatter women.

Susan McDonald has written the first study of the gender dimension of Kurdish struggle for self-determination. She examines, in some detail, feminist critiques of male-centered approaches to international law, especially the question of self-determination. This study notes the exclusion of Kurdish women in the quest for sovereignty, and presents a feminist framework for 'accommodating women's voices.'

The five chapters in section III deal with cultural, social and linguistic contexts of women's lives. Maria O'Shea is the first study of women's 'health choices' in a society where medical treatment of illness is predominantly a male enterprise. She offers evidence about the coexistence of modern, Western, medicine and folk medicine in Sine, a large Kurdish city in Iran. Immersed in religion and magic, male-centered folk medicine constrains women's choices. Although a few traditional women doctors have practised in the city, there is little information about their lives.

Christine Allison examines the rather 'complex and multifaceted' presentation of women in the Kurdish oral tradition. She confirms the claim that women are prominent in folklore, with active roles in composition, performance and reception. However, she argues against conflating reality with fantasy, or 'equating importance with status,' and thereby conferring high status and power to women in their lived experiences.

Mirrela Galletti studies the works of Westerners who visited Kurdistan and wrote about Kurdish women. She notes that these visitors generally offered 'an oleographic representation of the Kurdish woman often

portrayed as antithetic to the Arab, Persian, and Turkish woman,' and found them enjoying 'enormous freedom.' This claim, accepted by nationalists as a faithful description of 'reality,' is challenged in some of the chapters in this book. She has drawn on a variety of sources, including Italian travellers whose works have received little research attention.

Annabelle Böttcher's chapter studies Kurdish women who are active in the Sufi orders or *tariqats* (religious orders) in Syria. It is a case study of the women's branch of the Kaftāriyya Sufi order. She notes that, under 'exceptional socio-political circumstance,' women have been accepted even as heads of a Sufi order. The activism of this female sisterhood is supported by the government as a 'cordon sanitaire' against the spreading of 'more militant forms of Islam.'

The book ends with Amir Hassanpour's chapter on the (re)production of patriarchy in the Kurdish language. He uses evidence from language, and oral and literary traditions in order to document the dominance of patriarchal power in Kurdish society, politics and culture. He critiques poststructuralist claims, which deny the presence of hierarchies of gender in language, and outdo liberal theories of power by replacing the dynamics of *domination* with the problematic of *difference*. The chapter treats the relationship between gender and language dialectically: language is both signficatory and referential, closed and open, changing and stable, and in unity and conflict with patriarchy. Consciousness about the power of language to reproduce patriarchy is, according to this study, beginning to emerge in the Kurdish context.

These studies present a complex picture of the lives of Kurdish women. The struggle for women's emancipation in Kurdistan was, according to the evidence in this book, inspired by the feminist movements of the West, although it is, at the same time, their own creative resistance to feudal, tribal and modern forms of patriarchy. The evidence, I would argue, questions the nativist position, which seeks, in vain, to excavate purely indigenous or national origins for non-Western feminisms. I contend that the nativist dichotomization of women's movements into 'authentic' (national or local) and 'derivative' (Western) is itself rooted in ethnocentric politics.

Earlier versions of some of the chapters (van Bruinessen, Galletti, and Wedel) have appeared in other places and in different languages. While the book may fill a vacuum in our growing knowledge about this understudied area of women's studies, Kurdish women continue to remain at the margins of feminist knowledge. Ironically, while the modern state is a major force in nurturing patriarchy and nationalism, the state of non-statehood reinforces the domination of nation/patriarchy in Kurdistan. However, Kurdish women have already made their own history by engaging in conscious feminist struggles against 'their own' national patriarchy. As members of the largest transnational, non-state, nation dispersed all over the world, they constitute a potentially powerful force in

the international women's movement.

Notes

1. While all research undertakings are political (Mojab 2000b), any writing on the Kurds invites confrontation from a host of conflicting interests. As editor, I did not set any framework, theoretical or political, for the chapters. In this book, as in many edited works, each author is responsible only for the contents of her or his writing.
2. The text of the letter, in Great Britain, Public Records Office (FO 371/20864/E5529, dated 30 July 1937), is reproduced in Meiselas (1997: 150); see, also, McDowall (2000: 208). *The Times* published a letter to the editor (July 22, 1937), written by B. Nikitine, a former Russian consul in Urumiya and an expert on the Kurds, in which he noted: 'It is an error to suppose that the Kurds object to education; what they are resisting is Turkification.' However, *Le Temp*, which had also recycled the official Turkish propaganda, refused to publish a similar letter submitted by Nikitine (1956: 302-4).
3. See a reprint of the daily *Cumhuriyet* report (November 16, 1937) about the execution in the magazine *Vate: Kovara Kulturi* (10, Zimistan, 2000: 91).
4. Pro-Consul in Trebizond to Sir Percy Loraine, 'Memorandum on military operations in Dersim, 27 September 1938' (Great Britain, Public Records Office, FO 371/21925), quoted in McDowall (2000: 209).
5. 'The First Woman Combat Pilot,' <http://www.mergetel.com/~shena/>, June 18, 2000.
6. [http://ww.dofa.org/Prominent_Turkish_Women/Turkey_N .../](http://ww.dofa.org/Prominent_Turkish_Women/Turkey_N.../), June 18, 2000.
7. On the militarization of women's lives, see Enloe (2000).
8. 'This was necessary,' interview with Reuters correspondent Hidir Gojtas, Ankara, February 8, 1996, quoted in Randal (1999: 260).
9. For reports about women guerrillas and their photographs, see, among others, 'Mountain life prepares female Kurd guerrillas,' *Middle East Times* 10(17) (April) 1992: 16; Border (1992); Ignatieff (1993a and 1993b); for a video documentary, based on Ignatieff 1993, see *Dreaming a Nation: The Kurds*, part of six-part series *Nationalism: Blood and Belonging*; for photograph of female guerrillas in captivity, see Associated Press picture in the print media of April 18, 1995, e.g., in 'Turks get tough: 25,000 troops launch deadly assault on 500 Kurdish rebels,' *The Toronto Sun*, 36.
10. Berktaş (1992: 9, 109) has critiqued the 'fetishism' of the state, which treats 'the state as god in Turkish nationalist historiography'. In a similar vein, Doğu Ergil (1996) comments: 'We Turks belong to a state-nation rather than a nation-state. It is not the nation that has created the state in Turkish history. At least our political philosophy emphasizes the primacy of the state over the nation. Once this is accepted as a fact, then the state acquires an omnipotent, omnipresent status. It shapes up the society, determines what culture is, how the economy should be run... We Turks could not wholeheartedly criticize the state or official policies because it was "sacred" (!). The

“sacredness” of the state was placed in the preamble of the Turkish constitution until the latest amendments’.

11. ‘Turkey and the Kurds: Ethnic cleansing,’ *The Economist* 333 (7894), December 17, 1994, pp. 52-3; see also Helsinki Watch (1988).

12. *Report by His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of ‘Iraq for the Year 1929*. London, His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1930, Colonial No. 62: 139-49.

13. *Report by His Britannic Majesty’s Government on the Administration of Iraq for the Period April, 1923-December 1924*. London, His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1925, Colonial No. 13: 214-5.

14. The Kurdish Democratic Party–Iraq published, clandestinely, in 1953 the first issue of *Dengî Afret*, ‘Voice of Women’ as the organ of the Union of the Women of Kurdistan (Yekêtî Afretanî Kurdistan); only six issues appeared between 1953 and 1990 (see *Dengî Afret*, 13 [August 15] 1997: 34). However, a Kurdish women’s press emerged in the 1990s, although most of the publications continued to be initiatives undertaken by the women’s organizations affiliated with political parties.

The following is an alphabetical list of some of the periodical publications I have been able to access. In Turkey, two magazines appeared in 1996. *Jujîn* appeared as a ‘bimonthly Kurdish women’s journal’ (Year 1, No. 1, December, Turkish/Kurmanji Kurdish, Istanbul, 40 pages). *Roza*, too, was launched as a ‘bimonthly Kurdish women’s journal’ (Year 1, No. 4, September-October, Turkish/Kurmanji Kurdish, Istanbul, 40 pages).

There was more journalistic activism in the flourishing media environment of Iraqi Kurdistan in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. *Ayinde*, ‘Future,’ was published in 1998 by the Unity of Islamic Sisters of Kurdistan (Yekgirtûy Xoşkanî Îslamî Kurdistan) as a ‘monthly general cultural newspaper’ (Year 2, No. 19, Kurdish/Arabic, March 1999, 8 pages). *Dengêk* (Back cover, *Dangek*), ‘A Voice’ is a women’s quarterly ‘cultural magazine’ published in Sulêmanî (Vol. 2, No. 4, July 1997). *Dengî Afret* (see above) continued publishing in the 1990s as a ‘general cultural magazine’ (No. 18, Kurdish, Hewlêr, 1999, 42 pages). *Dengî Jinan*, ‘Voice of Women’, is a ‘monthly cultural publication of Women’s Union of Kurdistan – Zhinan (Yekêtî Jinanî Kurdistan), Sulêmanî (Vol. 4, Special March 8 Issue, 1999, 4 pages, Kurdish). *Jîyanewe* ‘Revival’ was launched in 1997 by the Information Center of the Union of the Women of Kurdistan (Senterî Rageyandinî Yekêtî Jinanî Kurdistan) as a biweekly ‘cultural newspaper’ in Sulêmanî (1[4] [August 5], 1997, Kurdish, Silêmanî, 8 pages). *Mafî Afret*, ‘Rights of Women,’ was published in 1998 by the International Committee for European Security and Cooperation (Lijney Nêwdewletî Asayîş û Harîkarî Ewrûpî) as a ‘monthly general cultural magazine’ (1 [May], Kurdish-Arabic, Hewlêr, 32 pages). *Tewar*, ‘Female Goshawk,’ appeared in 1993 as a ‘quarterly cultural magazine’ published by the Union of the Women of Kurdistan (Yekêtî Jinanî Kurdistan) in 1993 (8 [September] 1994, Kurdish, Silêmanî, 94 pages). *Yeksanî* (*Yaksany*), ‘Equality,’ was launched by the Independent Women’s Organization (Rêxirawî Serbexoy Afretan) in the mid-1990s (39 [January 1] 2000, as in Silêmanî, 4 pages).

In Europe, a number of women’s journals have appeared: *Hanay Jin* ‘Appeal [for help] of Women’ is a ‘documentary periodical’ was published in Sweden by the Centre for Defence of Women in Kurdistan (Senterî Parêzgarî Jinan le Kurdistan), run by the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq (No. 1, May 2000, Sorani). *Jin: Kurdisk*

Kvinnobulletin, 'Woman: Kurdish Women's Bulletin,' appeared in 1994-1995 (No. 1, 1994, Swedish, Stockholm, 30 pages; 3 issues only). *Jina Serbilind*, 'Proud Woman,' was published in the early 1990s by the Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Jinên Welatparêzên Kurdistan) as a monthly magazine (4 [May] 1993, Leverkusen, Germany, Turkish, 30 pages). *Jiyan*, 'Life,' was published as the 'Magazine of Union of Women of Kurdistan' (KOMJIN: Yekîtiya Jinên Kurdistan–Kurdische Frauenzeitschrift) in the early 1990s (1 [March] 1991, German/Turkish/Kurdish [Kurmanji], Köln, 12 pages). *Yekbûn*, 'Unity,' appeared as the 'magazine of the Union of Kurdish Women' (Yekêfî Afretanî Kurd) in the Netherlands (No. 2, Kurdish Year 2600, Zoetermeer, Sorani and Kurmanji Kurdish, 40 pages; 2, 1990).

15. See a collection of articles on the 'crushing of Kurdish civil society' in *War Report*, Bulletin of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting 47 (Nov.-Dec.) 1996: 21-54.

16. I am referring to book-length sources, either translated or compiled in Kurdish. The number of articles translated or written in the language is also quite limited.

17. Here is some evidence about the un-commodified, non-marketable, state of Kurdish women's studies: the editors of a major Canadian feminist journal enthusiastically agreed to publish a special issue on Kurdish women. However, the guest editor in collaboration with the editor were to have raised \$35,000 toward the cost of publishing. Even if published, they were not sure whether it would sell. I must emphasize that Canada is one of the G7 countries, but its media culture, its academic and non-academic publications, are under the pressure of the powerful market of the United States. In the 1990s, some Canadian journals perished or were barely surviving.

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