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Clawing the Way to a New Life: Narratives of Divorced Women in Turkey

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Abstract:

Based on her MA research in critical and cultural studies, M. Esra Yıldırım unrolls the life story narratives of 28 divorced women in Turkey. Departing from an analytical framework of age and gender hierarchies in Turkey, the author tackles the participants' experiences with fatherhood in their families of origin, with masculinity and femininity in marriage, and with diverse peculiar forms of sexism after divorce. Through a variety of narratives that captivate the reader, *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak* not only contributes to cultural studies and feminist literature but also speaks to a large non-academic audience.

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Yıldırım, M. Esra: *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak*. Kadınlar Anlatıyor: Babalık, Evlilik ve Boşanma. İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık A. Ş., 2017. 159 pages, 19 TRY. ISBN: 978-975-05-2239-0.

Abstract:

Based on her MA research in critical and cultural studies, M. Esra Yıldırım unrolls the life story narratives of 28 divorced women in Turkey. Departing from an analytical framework of age and gender hierarchies in Turkey, the author tackles the participants' experiences with fatherhood in their families of origin, with masculinity and femininity in marriage, and with diverse peculiar forms of sexism after divorce. Through a variety of narratives that captivate the reader, *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak* not only contributes to cultural studies and feminist literature but also speaks to a large non-academic audience.

To grasp the academic and political importance of M. Esra Yıldırım's book, *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak*, one should first consider the conditions under which it was published. In the scholarly field, divorce is largely scrutinized with quantitative lenses rather than qualitative. In Turkey, the academic works including divorced women's experiences can often be misused for discriminative policies or introduced with denunciatory forewords. Eventually, what we witness is the continuing stigmatization of divorce and especially of divorced women as dangerous to society. Through 28 divorced women's own narratives and voices, Yıldırım highlights exactly why divorce is not only a necessity for some women but also a long and carefully managed struggle. Dwelling on Kandiyoti's and Duben's take on the patriarchal relations in Turkey, the narratives are analyzed primarily in the light of age and gender hierarchies that move women from fathers' families to husbands' families (p. 14-15). Hence, I will review the book here in three stages of before, during, and after marriage.

The first two chapters tackle the lives of divorced women in their families of origin. Yıldırım's insights in these two chapters about the phase before marriage opens with a historical feminist analysis of fatherhood in the context of gendered power relations and religion, with a special focus on Muslim

societies and Turkey (p. 19-21). Through the participants' narratives about their own encounters with fatherhood (p. 22-30) we see how the father's right over the last word affects women's experiences of home and family and their transition into new families. With a Lacanian approach to the father's love (p. 31), Yıldırım scrutinizes women's experiences of their self-images as women, romantic relationships, and sexuality (p. 32-38). Participants consider their own gender and bodies to be subordinated until after divorce; their intimate and sexual encounters are often carried out to substitute the lack of fatherly love and approval. Hence, she offers four grounds for marriage: being forced, as an escape plan, out of necessity, and for love. Challenging the traditional versus modern dichotomy, even the marriages which involve more agency of the women require negotiations with similar societal constraints and gender inequalities (p. 52, 55).

From the third chapter to the fifth, Yıldırım invites the reader to a theoretical debate on three aspects of marriage, each corresponding with cultural and political means of women's suppression in marriage. Yıldırım first tracks the imperatives and limitations of being the "female bird" (*dişi kuş*) (p. 57), a culturally specific image of wives building their nests. In a combined framing of the works of Hochschild, Comte-Sponville, and Bourdieu, we see how the burden of "feeling rules" (p. 59) and the conditions of the "female art of living" (p. 64) lead to cracks and conflicts in divorced women's narratives on what it means to be obedient, happy wives and mothers. The main conflict, however, surfaces due to a demasculinized unemployed husband; women are willing to come to terms with the "female art of living" as long as the husband carries his duties of providing for the family. The author thus underlines the "fatherly womanhood" (p. 83) of the participants who both shoulder the housework and earn a living for the family. Drawing on class unconsciousness as a requirement of manhood and the Islamization of wage labor relationships – which leads to a "utopic reconciliation" between the worker and the employee – Yıldırım points to the class dimension of violence against women (p. 87). Hence, cultural means of accepting, legitimating, veiling, and enduring domestic violence are reproduced by various agents in society.

The last two chapters, which are about clawing a way out of marriage, start with women's decisions to get divorced. Emphasizing the "unique rhythm" of each woman's oral history (p. 105), Yıldırım unrolls a variety of narratives of divorced women and the patterns they share. The decision to get divorced has to first overcome the father and other father figures in this society, such as a lawyer. Women's learned talents to act as happy wives here function to convince the husbands to get divorced (p. 116-117). Receiving the biggest support mostly from their children, the participants narrate their journeys of building a way out and a life outside the marriage. As "patriarchal bargains" do not end with the marriage, divorced women continue to negotiate various new forms of sexist encounters, this time not within the closed site of the family but with the society in general (p. 130-133). Yet divorced

women emerge from their own narratives as role models of bravery, self-confidence, and joy, also in the eyes of other women.

The book is based on Yıldırım's MA thesis in critical and cultural studies (which is available in English), but also directed at a larger non-academic audience with a shorter methodological section. Yet again, I expected the book to give more space to the narratives about the phase starting with the decision to get divorced and following with the narrators' lives as divorced women. While the title of the book indicates building a new life, Yıldırım's main theoretical arguments and more than half of the book revolve around 'the old life.' Since her approach to the narratives is highly influenced by Kandiyoti's framing of patriarchal age and gender hierarchies in Turkey, the author's theoretical discussions mainly focus on fatherhood. I thus would have liked to see her thoroughly analyzing the narratives that are rather about motherhood or the divorce process beyond women's confrontations with father figures. Nevertheless, *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak* is an interesting read not only for the fields of cultural studies and feminist research, but also for those who are interested in or share the experience of divorced womanhood in Turkey. By quoting the participants at length, Yıldırım opens up a vast space for the narratives of divorced women in the academic and feminist literature. Given the conditions mentioned at the beginning, I claim that the main importance of this book is giving such narratives of divorced women a place on the shelves.

German Abstract:

Mit Mühen in ein neues Leben: Narrationen geschiedener Frauen in der Türkei

Basierend auf ihrer MA-Thesis in „Kritischen Kulturwissenschaften“ geht M. Esra Yıldırım in dem vorliegenden Buch auf die Erzählung der Lebensgeschichte von 28 geschiedenen Frauen aus der Türkei ein. Ausgehend vom analytischen Rahmen geschlechts- und altersbezogener Hierarchien in der Türkei, setzt sich die Autorin mit den Erfahrungen der Teilnehmerinnen zu Vaterschaft im Elternhaus, Maskulinität und Femininität in der Ehe und den unterschiedlichen Formen von Sexismus nach der Scheidung auseinander. Mit einer Vielzahl von Erzählungen, die die Lesenden in ihren Bann ziehen, trägt *Yeni Bir Hayat Kurmak* nicht nur zur kulturwissenschaftlichen und feministischen Literatur bei, sondern spricht auch ein größeres nicht-akademisches Publikum an.

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