

Circassian Beauty: A Myth in Turkey

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In 2006, a book titled “Being a Gypsy in Turkey” gave a list of artists and politicians who were originally Roma.² Among the list was Türkan Şoray, who is considered the Sultana of the Turkish cinema since the 1960s and until then considered a typical Turkish woman (Büker 2002:158). A month later, Şoray rejected the claim that she was Roma and declared that she was Circassian and that her beauty made her Circassian origins obvious.³

While announcing her ethnic origins, Sultana deployed a notion of beauty with reference to a well-known “Circassian Beauty” -- a historical image of idealized feminine aesthetic that has been attributed to the women of the Caucasus for centuries. Circassian Beauty is an Orientalist figure that finds its place in both European literature and art and Turkish popular culture. This presentation will focus on Circassian beauty as an item on the agenda of Circassian diaspora nationalists. I use the image of the Circassian Beauty as a heuristic tool to explore the gendered relationships between the Circassian diaspora in Turkey, host community and other geographies.

Circassian Beauty

The image of the Circassian Beauty can be found as early as the 17th century European art, but consolidated in Europe in the 18th century when Circassia became part of European knowledge due to the perpetual conflicts of Circassians with Russia. Hence, knowledge on Circassia intertwined with the construct of Circassian Beauty that was associated with female availability (see for instance Diderot and D’Alambert 1778, 105). In the “Circassian Beauty” Orientalism and the theme of whiteness as a racial category intertwined (Bendyshe 1865, 269).

The construct of Circassian Beauty emerged also through commodification processes in 19th century Europe (Schick 2004, 36-37). Circassian Beauty took its place in the commercialization of entertainment. A brochure announcing the opening of Barnum’s American Museum of Living Curiosities in London promised “a marvelous assemblage of strangest human beings and a world of oddest and most

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² See “Çingeneler Kitap Sayfalarına Girdi,” Sabah, 14 September 2006, <<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/09/14/gny/gny119-20060914-200.html>> (17 April 2009).

³ See “Ben Bir Kabartay Çerkezi’yim,” Sabah 16 October 2006, <<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/10/16/gny/gny115-20061016-200.html>> (20 March 2008).

amazing physical exceptions.” Among the last of the mysterious Aztecs, the tiniest and prettiest dwarfs, and most enormous fat folk were the celebrated beauties of Circassia (Schick 2004, 110). In this, Orientalism, scientific racism, commodification, and an interest in geography as a mechanism of imperial knowledge production all contributed to the idea of Circassian Beauty in the European imagination.

The image of Circassian Beauty is also related to the historical fact that throughout the 19th century Circassians had comprised the human stock of the Ottoman slave market (Erdem 2004, 80). Circassians were traditionally regarded as the most-preferred slaves by the ruling elite (Erdem 1996, 61). Yet, even as the practice of Circassian slavery and involuntary marriage decreased (in theory) since the end of the 19th century, the idea of Circassian Beauty remained alive and Circassian Beauty is the theme of several poems and classical Turkish songs⁴; the image also appeared in other musical genres.

In 1999, Songül Aktürk, also known as Sultana and of Circassian descent, and the first woman MC⁵ in Turkish Rap Music, produced an album called *Circassian Girl* (Sultana 2000). Her song *Kuşu Kalkmaz* [Your Bird Can't Fly] was the first rap song banned by Radio and Television Supreme Council. The song is about a man who cheats on his wife, batters his wife who was “sold in exchange for gold.” It is ironic that this banned song was sung by a Circassian woman using the name of Sultana just like Türkan Şoray. Through Sultana, the “Circassian Beauty,” until then defined by the Orientalist gaze and contemporary popular and folk culture artifacts, gained her own voice.

Circassian Beauty on the Agenda of Diaspora Nationalists

Interestingly, Circassian Beauty was celebrated and commodified in Europe and Ottoman Empire during the time when Caucasus had been the target of an expanding Russia. Hence, the image of Circassian Beauty has always been related to the Circassian nationalist agenda among Circassian diaspora--the fall of the nation pertained to the fall of its women.

In 1914, Mehmet Fetgeri Şoenü (1890-1931), a Circassian intellectual, wrote an article called “Circassian Women in Ottoman Social Life” (Şoenü 2007). This article aimed to reply Celal Nuri, an Ottoman intellectual who, as Fetgeri claimed, regarded Circassian women as one of the reasons of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Fetgeri explored the implications of the existence of Circassian women in Turkish society:

I wonder if the girls of this high nation have become only the tools of entertainment for the Turks. ...[I wonder if] They caused social disintegration of the Turks. ...Never... It is probable that Turks took these girls as a tool of entertainment, but they fulfilled their educational duties –maybe unconsciously; thus they ensured the beautification of the spiritual purity and physical appearance of the Turks. ...Circassian girls did not harm

⁴ Such as “Kız sen Geldin Çerkeşten,” and “Çerkez Kızı” by Selahattin İnal.

⁵ MC means master of ceremony in rap music.

the Turks in terms of civilization and development; on the opposite, they changed their nation towards beauty and maturity. ...[Even if that is not true], who is responsible for that? For that, one should look ...at Turkish social life and Turkishness (Şoenü 2007, 17-18).

For Fetgeri, it was the Circassian nation that was harmed by these practices. Hence the problem of slavery and the practice of human sale were seen as issues of nationalism by the Circassian diaspora of the Ottoman era. These same themes became significant for the second generation of Circassian nationalists that emerged after the mid-1960s. Cemil Kanuko's poem in 1976 employed themes of forced marriage and human sale:

Far away...
 ...Circassian girl is in the arm of the foreigner
 Circassian girl, the mother of the future
 The father of her child should be Circassian
 In the spring of her life
 Circassian girl was 19 years old
 When she was sold shamefully
 ...Another signature of dissolution
 It is sad but its reflection is true
 ...The master is on the mirror of shame (Kanuko 1976, 38).

Hence for Circassian diaspora nationalists, the problem of slavery and involuntary marriage in exchange for money was not only a problem of human rights; rather, it was a national problem since the way Circassian community “mixed with the foreigners” was seen as a route to assimilation.

For Circassian diaspora nationalists in Turkey today, “Circassian Beauty” has two facets: it is an image that makes them simultaneously proud and ashamed. On the one hand, difference from the other ethnic groups in Turkey is celebrated, as İzzet explained:

But despite all, Circassian girl as a spouse is different. ...Especially when we look at the society within which we live. ...The general structure of Circassian girl, her sense of responsibility in the family, her support of her husband, her ability in forming a family... With these qualities, she is not similar to any of the ethnic groups, there are 25-26 ethnic groups in Turkey, she is different.⁶

The image becomes more than simply an ideal type of beauty and femininity, it becomes a construct through which Circassians in Turkey situate themselves in the host community. As Şener states, the idea of Circassian Beauty plays a significant role for the Circassians in Turkey:

⁶ İzzet, interview by author, 10 February 2008, Ankara.

I think that the appearance of Circassians in popular culture as on good terms with the establishment and the state is partly due to Circassian girls. But when we think about it, it is not much to be proud of according to me. [Çok da yüz ağartıcı bir şey değil bence.]⁷

Through the construct of Circassian Beauty, Circassian diaspora nationalists are able to situate their nation in the Ottoman history, in the palace, harems, and ruling elites' households.

On the other hand the construct of Circassian Beauty is generally narrated in terms of a national mistake by the diaspora nationalists. Especially those over 60 years old who were born in Anatolia explore the mistake and their own reactions. Nezih, for instance, explains his experience of Circassian Beauty:

Our Circassians survived a full drama of selling their daughters. ...7 or 8 people, some religious people at our house were discussing the issue. My uncle was a good imam there and he said that "who will marry whom is written on the receipt. Saying that I gave [my daughter] to the Turk or else is against Islam." ...It was 1958 or 1959. I asked whether I could ask a question. ...I asked whether God was a Turk. That was the question. ...I told them that there were at least 20 Circassian girls in this village and no bride who was Turkish. ...I said that among these 20 Circassian girls there was not anyone who married a bachelor. ...The price was 3000 liras back then, it was the price of the girls. ...I said that among these girls, there was none who was not raped by the sons of her husband. I asked them whether God was acting so partially. [Allah bu kadar mı yanlış davranıyor dedim.] ...This is a naked truth, and we survived that as a very degenerated and a very dirty reality. This did not get erased easily. This is why the Turks have stigmatized us that Circassians are selling their girls. Well, it is true.⁸

In both of the discourses, the construct of Circassian beauty is an integral part of the relationships of the Circassians with the host community and peoples of Turkey.

Conclusion

The existing studies on diaspora with a focus on gender have revealed that the way the nation and the diaspora are interlocked is shaped by particular gender ideologies, constructions and relations (Yeoh and Willis 1999). Diasporic identities and belonging are contested, forged, negotiated and reaffirmed through and alongside gender (Siu 2005). I argue that the image of Circassian Beauty is a contested image through which Circassians in Turkey, as an ethnic group in Turkey, relate to the peoples of Turkey and other geographies and vice versa. It is a historical category, which is crucial for diaspora to locate itself vis-à-vis and through the homeland, host community and other geographies such as Europe.

⁷ Şener, interview by author, 18 June 2008, İstanbul.

⁸ Nezih, interview by author, 17-18 August 2007, İstanbul.

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