

Şima İmşir. *Health, Literature and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey: Bodies of Exception*. New York: Routledge, 2023. 202 p., ISBN: 9781032009438.

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Medical humanities, as a relatively newly emerging field, is inherently multidisciplinary as it explores the intersections of medicine, health, and humanistic disciplines, such as literature, history, cultural studies, and ethics. Şima İmşir's *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey: Bodies of Exception* is one of the few that grasps this intersection remarkably, especially concerning Turkish literature. İmşir's book offers an extensive and insightful exploration of the complex interplay between health, biopolitics, literature, and gender in Turkey throughout the twentieth century. With meticulous research and detailed analysis of several literary works of different genres, the book navigates through the historical and sociocultural landscapes of Turkish modernity and uncovers the multifaceted ways in which women's bodies are constructed and how literature responds to this construction.

*Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey* comprises four main chapters, in addition to its introduction and conclusion. The primary aim of the book is to analyze "illness and its literary representations, by specifically following the image of the sick woman"<sup>1</sup> within the context of the formation of the nation(-state) of Turkey and its discourse on health and the female body. It also traces the evolution of these representations over time and across various literary understandings and generations of writers. The book particularly scrutinizes the representations of female bodies, which were seen idealistically healthy, "treasured, and celebrated as the signs of a civilized nation, as well as primary ensurers of healthy new generations,"<sup>2</sup> and those that were ill, exceptional, and distant from what was desired by the national-collective imaginary.

In this regard, *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey* discusses the perception and representation of women's bodies, particularly in the works of female authors such as Halide Edib, one of the most canonized writers, Kerime Nadir, the best-selling author of the 1930s and 1940s, and key modernist writers like Tezer Özlü, Sevim Burak, and Aslı Erdoğan. The variety of the texts also embraces a wide range of periods and various generations of women writers, covering the late Ottoman era to some extent to 1990s Turkey. This variety encapsulates the significant strides made in certain periods, (sub)genres,

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1 Şima İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey: Bodies of Exception* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 2.

2 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 14.

and literary tendencies while discussing the representations of various illnesses (e.g., tuberculosis, cancer, asthma, losing an eye, neurological diseases), also acknowledging the persistent challenges, paradoxes, and inequalities that continue to exist. Accordingly, İmşir's book offers readers a nuanced exploration of how women's bodies, whether healthy or exceptionally sick, have been constructed, contested, and reclaimed throughout Turkish modernity by its sociocultural and discursive practices. The book also challenges readers to envision a more inclusive and equitable future for women's bodies and their literal and symbolic meanings, as well as the shifts in them so much as depicted in the analyzed works.

The book begins with a comprehensive overview of the sociopolitical and cultural context of twentieth-century Turkey by examining official speeches and publications of several prominent figures, including the founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk; physician and anthropologist Şevket Aziz; sociologist Afet İnan; and psychiatrist Mazhar Osman Usman, who founded the first modern style psychiatric clinic in Turkey. This overview serves as a basis for understanding how literary imagination responded to such official discourses in the context of cultural nationalism, which shifted towards racial nationalism in the 1930s. Thus, the first chapter, titled "Who is Inside? Who is Outside? Limits of Healthy and Sturdy Nation," lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of women's health, its representations, and the various issues surrounding it, particularly exploring "the exclusion of sick bodies from the definition of what constitutes the ideal citizenship as healthy and sturdy."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, İmşir scrutinizes the role of the medical profession in shaping women's (ideal) bodies and health experiences in Turkey. She examines how medical discourses emerged and primarily influenced public perceptions and policies regarding interrelated issues, such as reproductive rights, maternal health, beauty standards, sexuality, bodily behaviors, and even mental illness.

The second chapter, titled "The Making of the Healthy Woman: Halide Edib and the Politics of Medicine," examines Halide Edib's portrayal of women's bodies in her highly canonized *Handan* (1912) and *Ateşten Gömlek* (The Shirt of Flame, 1923) and discusses how "she formulates women's bodies in relation to national-collective."<sup>4</sup> This chapter also involves a closer examination of Halide

<sup>3</sup> İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 16.

Edib's play *Maskeler ve Ruhlar* (1937) and its English edition *Masks or Souls* (1953), particularly considering "her understanding of material bodies set in relation to the concept of soul,"<sup>5</sup> as well as readings of *Tatarcık* (1939) and *Mev'ut Hüküm* (The Promised Verdict, 1917). Through the detailed analyses of these works, along with crucial references from Halide Edib's life, it becomes apparent that desire plays a significant role in these narratives, and it is also related to the formation of the nation. In this respect, İmşir argues that Halide Edib presents two contrasting kinds of desires: "one physical desire or the call of the flesh, and the other idealism or desire aligned with the needs of the community," and the characters who follow the former type of desire are "often punished by death, illness, madness, and poverty."<sup>6</sup> In other words, female desire is directly linked to the image of the ideal Turkish woman in these texts and, to a large extent, to that of the nation itself.

İmşir also claims that Halide Edib eliminates "fleshly desire and worldly satisfaction" in her novels, along with a strong influence of Émile Zola. However, her approach to health and the female body in and through her novels and plays differs from Zola and his deterministic naturalism "by placing the idea of a soul against worldly materialism."<sup>7</sup> This distinction underlines, as argued by İmşir, that Halide Edib's quest for "'the higher truth' is not a determinist but a spiritual one," and her search for such spiritual truth pertains to self-devotion "to a higher cause beyond one's personal needs and desires."<sup>8</sup> This chapter masterfully points out the difference between Zola's materialist determinism and Halide Edib's interpretation of this determinism, which is also associated with the divine or the mystical. Seeking a balance between spiritual and material matters and its depictions in Turkish literature indeed requires more attention, as shown in this chapter.

The third chapter, "Almost a Man, But Not Quite: Medicine and Gender in Melodrama," delves into two melodramatic novels by another woman writer, Kerime Nadir. This chapter first discusses the role and function of melodramas as a popular genre in Turkey until the 1950s (when films arguably replaced it)

5 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 16.

6 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 60.

7 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 62.

8 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 62.

and how this popular genre aligns with the official state ideology on health and the bodies of Turkey's citizens. In this regard, the chapter mainly focuses on exploring "how the heightened meanings of physical gestures and excessive emotions in melodramas correspond to the changed meanings of the bodies of the members of the nation,"<sup>9</sup> particularly in *Hıçkırık* (Sobbing, 1938) and its rewritten version *Posta Güvercini* (Carrier Pigeon, 1950).

As skillfully shown in this chapter, melodrama as a genre embraces the Republican ideology of Turkey's modernization and comforts and serves didactically by portraying such lifestyles and values through female characters and their illnesses (tuberculosis and cancer) for the readers who are mostly literate, urban, and possibly female. The profile of the literary characters fits that of the reader to a large extent. In her detailed analysis of the two novels through close reading, İmşir contends that Kerime Nadir uses "illness as a sign of necessary sacrifice by women to create the moral occult for the heroes to regain their power and find their moral balance –marking the crisis as one of masculinity and virility."<sup>10</sup> In this respect, illness, which makes the women characters' sacrifice visible, "turn[s] them into symbols of a promised future and render[s] them passive."<sup>11</sup> From another perspective, the masculinity crisis described and symptomized by İmşir is then "solved through sacrificing women's bodies"<sup>12</sup> in these novels.

The fourth chapter of the book, "Adhered to the Flesh: Lived Bodies in Modernist Literature after 1960," shifts its focus to the modernist literary works produced by three different female authors after 1960, particularly Tezer Özlü's *Çocukluğun Soğuk Geceleri* (Cold Nights of Childhood, 1980), Sevim Burak's *Afrika Dansı* (African Dance, 1982), and Aslı Erdoğan's "Yitik Gözün Boşluğunda" (In the Void of a Lost Eye, 1996) and "Tahta Kuşlar" (Wooden Birds, 1997). In this chapter, İmşir discusses the materiality of the sick bodies in these texts and claims that "sick bodies become zones of transformation and metamorphosis, opening the gate to becoming"<sup>13</sup> in these writers' works.

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9 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 17; 101.

10 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 104.

11 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 130.

12 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 180.

13 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 17.

One of the most fascinating aspects of İmşir's analysis in this chapter is her exploration of how literature has both reflected and influenced societal attitudes towards women's bodies, whether glorified or (ab)used for such glorification, and how health is quite masculinist in any case. İmşir argues that "feminist criticism found a position from which to approach Kemalist female identity critically"<sup>14</sup> due to left-wing criticism emerging in the 1960s, highlighting how Turkey's sociocultural trajectory has been shaped by the global context, particularly considering the setting of the Cold War. This chapter then scrutinizes how certain modernist literary works have challenged traditional gender roles and the idealized healthy body and even offered alternative narratives of female agency and empowerment constructed by the sick bodies themselves. Özlü's novella presents the body "as an active desiring body," while Sevim Burak's "text embraces the sick body and patient-hood, turning it into a weapon to disrupt the order and system."<sup>15</sup> In Aslı Erdoğan's two stories analyzed, women's bodies are "not flawless representations of the norm, but rather bodies in pain. Exactly at the point when the bodies make themselves felt through their failure of fulfilling normative expectations, the protagonists find themselves in metamorphosis."<sup>16</sup> In sum, this chapter offers readers a deeper understanding of how these writers have grappled with the complexities of gender, body health, and the power of agency.

Another significant feature of the book is its wide variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which also shape the structure of the research methodology. *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey* utilizes Michel Foucault's discourse analysis on gender and health, Judith Butler's formulation of biopolitics, and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "exception," which revolves around the idea of inclusion throughout the book. Emile Zola and his naturalism bring up the issue of determinism, social Darwinism, and heredity in chapter one, while Çimen Günay-Erkol's term "liminal masculinity" is employed in the following chapter. The book also draws on the ideas of Giles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding health and the body in chapter four.

A central concept in İmşir's analysis is that of "bodies of exception." She argues that women's (sick) bodies in Turkey have often been treated as exceptions

14 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 138.

15 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 156; 166.

16 İmşir, *Health, Literature, and Women*, 170.

within the broader societal frame, subjected to various forms of medicalization, pathologizing, and regulation in the process of nation-making. Through this lens, İmşir examines how women's bodies have been constructed as sick, abnormal, or deviant and represented in various literary works, particularly concerning physical and neurological illnesses. This concept provides a powerful framework for understanding how gender, health, and power intersect in Turkish society and invites readers to critically reflect on the underlying structures of oppression that perpetuate these processes. In this regard, İmşir's remarkable book, though limited to the works of women writers, paves the way for a rich and largely unexamined base for comparison with other Turkish literary texts and genres written by male, female, or non-binary writers. It also serves as a beacon of opportunity for comparative case studies with other literatures.

Like any book, *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey* has its limitations and shortcomings despite its significant strengths and elaborate analysis of the texts. The literature analyzed is limited to female writers, although the book includes numerous non-literary texts, sources, documents, official speeches, and publications. These literary texts also depict only urban characters and settings, even outside Turkey, particularly in Aslı Erdoğan's former story, thereby neglecting the rural elements and background of Turkish modernity, which could have enriched the discussions with both similarities and differences in terms of health and womanhood. However, as Turkish modernization, at least in its early decades, propagated the cities and urban inhabitants, the choice of literary works and its specific limitations are quite understandable and acceptable. Indeed, one cannot cover all aspects in a single study, and future studies should address the relationship between the representations of illness, womanhood, and nationalist modernization in literary works published from the 1950s onwards, filling the gaps left by this book and benefiting from its conceptual and analytical framework.

Additionally, the sociocultural links to modernist literature could have been more thoroughly explained in relation to the developments in Turkey's literary field during that period and its particular cultural dimensions rather than primarily on the Cold War setting discussed in the fourth chapter. While this focus is relevant, it may not (arguably) provide a sufficient basis for understanding the changes in modernist literature and shifts in representing illness and female

characters in those novels. Furthermore, just as in Halide Edib's life, notes, and other sources richly employed in chapter two, the other chapters could have benefited from more personal and archival sources from Kerime Nadir as a true(!) Republican woman of modern Turkey, as well as from the three other writers analyzed in the fourth chapter, each of whom had critical approaches to the ideology of modernization, along with innovative and formalistic literary attempts. This approach could have better contextualized these texts and enriched the depth and quality of the analysis of the literary works in the chapters, each of which is already thoughtful, rich, and insightful.

Overall, *Health, Literature, and Women in Twentieth-Century Turkey: Bodies of Exception* is the first groundbreaking study that makes a significant contribution to the intersection of medical humanities, Turkish literature, and gender studies. İmşir's rigorous research, sophisticated analysis of the literary works, abundant use of historical sources and documents, and engaging writing style make this book essential reading for scholars, students, and anyone interested in understanding the complexities of women's health in the context of Turkey and Turkish literature.