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**Social Change and Urban Transformation in Early Republican Turkey:
an “Epidemic” of Women Suicides**

Nazan Maksudyan, PhD
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation
Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin), 33 Kirchweg, Berlin 14129
maksudyan@gmail.com

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Une explication de l'épidémie de suicides à Constantinople

L'opinion turque s'est alarmée à bon droit d'une épidémie de suicides qui sévit spécialement à Constantinople. Un jeune professeur français, M. Max Bonnafous, s'est livré à ce sujet à une grande enquête l'augmentation des suicides affectait surtout les Turcs musulmans.¹

Turkey Seeks to Curb Increase in Suicides

The Government has set out to fight Turkey's rising suicide rate. It has designated a professor of Stamboul University to prepare a course of public lectures aimed at preventing suicides.²

Turk puts dynamite in ears and explodes

New Turkey, still in the throes of transition is becoming used to an unabated epidemic of suicides through drowning, poisoning, shooting and stabbing. But a method of self destruction unique to Anatolia broke the monotonous suicide chronicle recently...³

In the early 1920s, women suicides in Istanbul caught the attention of public intellectuals and political authority as a serious problem for the new nation-state. Max Bonnafous, professor of sociology in *Darülfünun* (University of Istanbul), undertook a detailed survey of the suicides that took place in Istanbul in the decade between 1916 and 1926. As he started publishing his findings both in French and Turkish from 1927 onwards, his research became the topic of a heated debate in the latter half of the decade among the “scientific elite” of the state, also causing uneasiness on the part of the new political regime.

Underlining that young Muslim women feature an exceptionally large proportion in the suicide statistics, Bonnafous claimed that the drastic changes introduced by the new Republican regime were the main reasons for these female suicides, since these women were entrapped between the emancipatory promises of the new political authority and the persistent traditional nature of the society. What is more, Bonnafous suggested an urban-geographical explanation to

^ 1 “Une explication de l'épidémie de suicides à Constantinople », *Les Faits Sociaux*, Paris: Comité national d'études sociales et politiques, 1926, s. 307.

^ 2 “Turkey Seeks to Curb Increase in Suicides”, *New York Times*, 10 April 1927.

^ 3 “Turk Puts Dynamite In Ears and Explodes”, *The Washington Post*, Jul 29, 1928, p. 2.

make sense of young women's suicides. Based on his statistical data collected from the police department in 31 quarters of Istanbul, Bonnafous argued that in Muslim neighborhoods that were open to the impacts of Westernization and modern life, the suicide figures showed an increase. These places included Üsküdar, Kadıköy and Beşiktaş (and for this reason suicide rates were low, for instance, in Eyüp).

Built around this interesting, pioneering, and controversial survey, this paper discusses how the Turkish political and scientific elite interpreted urban development, openness to outside world, and women's relative emancipation in the late 1920s from a negative point of view assuming that they had lethal consequences for women's lives. I aim to analyze the intricate relations between social change, suicide, gender, and urban reorganization in the context of relatively homogenized, but yet still multi-ethnic and multi-religious city of post-Ottoman Istanbul.

Young Women's "Sorrows" or "Morbid Temperaments"

In the early years of the new Turkish Republic, the news regarding suicides, especially that of young Muslim women, occupied a disproportionately large space in Istanbul newspapers. As a striking example, in April 1927, feast following Ramadan, Candy Feast (*Şeker Bayramı*) was dubbed by the press as the "Suicide Feast", since there were 6 cases within 3 days and 3 more the day after the *Bayram*. This prevalence was in a way understandable, since Turkish press of the time often prioritized and exaggerated tragic stories of broken love affairs to increase their circulation.⁴ Yet, the volume of suicide news (both attempts and deaths) became especially remarkable after 1926 such that the observers started to speak of an "epidemic". The "Vukuat"

⁴ Love affairs were not only accused for causing a significant number of suicides among the youth, they were also the motivation behind a number of crimes of violence. Murders caused by jealousy or unrequited love have figured rather frequently in the press. W.G. Tinkom-Fernandez, "Suicides in Turkey Show an Increase", *The New York Times*, 25 March 1928.

(Incidents) section of *Cumhuriyet* was filled with reports of suicide. It was possible to read up to four such stories each day in the daily newspapers such as *Akşam* and *Vakit*. In one typical example, for instance, there was the story of two young girls who jumped into water from the Princess Islands ferry.⁵ According to the quite long news item, behind the suicide attempt “there was, as always, a love affair” (*her zaman olduğu gibi bir gönül macerası*). Miss H. and Miss M. were from respectable families and they were university students at the *Darülfünun* (University of Istanbul). Yet, after Miss H. falls into an unrequited love, she becomes obsessed with idea of suicide – “her nerves had always been weak anyway”, the reported added. Her best friend, Miss M. agrees to go along with her, not for reasons of solidarity but rather for purposes of fame and acting as movie actresses.⁶ Actually, jumping out from the ferry, seems to be a very common and assumed to be “ladylike” method for women especially during warm months, compared to “winter styles” such as poisoning, hanging, and shooting.⁷

Another typical suicide plot was not “unrequited love”, but “over-consummation” of love, in other words getting involved in premarital sexual affairs in a society, where virginity is a matter of family honor and respectability. Again in an exemplary story, a young girl has an affair with a prestigious employee of a big company in Haydarpaşa and with the promise of marriage, she agrees to “go all the way”.⁸ When young man abandons her, she realizes that she can neither “amend her situation” (*vaziyetini ıslah edemez*) nor confide in her family. In the end, she cuts her wrists with a razor blade. There were also other examples of non-virgin girls, who killed themselves in the first day of their marriage with another man, when their situation was

⁵ “Deniz'e atlayan ve kurtarılan kızların hikayesi” [The story of the girls who jumped into sea and were saved], *Akşam*, 4 March 1927.

⁶ Ibid. “... maruf sinema artistleri gibi bir rol oynamak, onlara benzemek ve şöhret kazanmak hevesiyle..”

⁷ From a cartoon ridiculing suicide. **

⁸ “Bir genç kız, namusunu temizlemek için intihara teşebbüs etti” [A young girl committed suicide in order to restore her honor], *Son Saat*, 3 June 1927.

discovered by the latter.⁹

In addition to numerous news items, the newspapers and journals started to publish opinion pieces by their columnists and also certain “experts”. First such article (“Why the suicides are increasing?”) was published by *Hayat* in March 1927.¹⁰ The author, Necmeddin Sadik, was a graduate of Université de Lyon and at the time he was a professor of sociology at the University of Istanbul. He rejected the idea that there was a relation between suicide and mental weakness on the part of young females, as was repeatedly suggested by many journalists and doctors. He underlined that suicide had very stable statistics across time and space and its increase was always related to “political and social depressions” in societies, which trigger “winds of pessimism” (*bedbinlik rüzgarlari*). Therefore, the real problem in the case of Turkey was the weakening of “ideals” (*mefkure*) and, thus the real solution was to find ways to attach those alienated individuals into collectivities and save them from the feeling of emptiness and non-sense. His Durkheimian sociological approach would soon be shared by his colleague Max Bonnafous, yet remain exceptional among different “medical experts”.

One such early intervention came from Dr. Cemal Zeki, a gynecologist, who already had publications on women, birth, and child-rearing.¹¹ On the “suicide epidemic” he published two articles in April and August 1927 in journals *Resimli Ay* and *Türk Kadın Yolu*. Later, he published an extended version of these as a book.¹² “Suicide epidemic”, this “disaster” among young girls and women, he argued, was a manifestation of weakness, incapacity and mental imbalance on the

^ 9 “Güzel bir kız, düğünün ertesi sabah mecburiyetten feci bir surette intihar etti” [A beautiful girl tragically committed suicide urged by necessity at the first day of her marriage], *Akşam*, 5 June 1928.

^ 10 Necmeddin Sadık, “İntiharlar Neden Çoğalıyor?” [Why the suicides are increasing?], *Hayat*, 3 March 1927, pp. 1-2.

^ 11 For more information on Cemal Zeki and his involvement in the “suicide epidemic”, see Zafer Toprak, “Dr. Cemal Zeki’nin ‘Delişmen, Çılgın Kızlar’ı – Cumhuriyette Genç Kız ve Kadın İntiharları,” *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 87, March 2001, pp. 25-29.

^ 12 Cemal Zeki, *Genç Kız ve Kadınlarda İntihar – Sebep, Korunma Çareleri – İçtimai-Tıbbi*, İstanbul: Kader Matbaası, 1927.

part of the victims. He listed three types of suicides: 1. ordinary suicides (that of a commander, a spy, a bankrupt, a gambler); 2. suicides caused by mental diseases (relating to heredity, syphilis, alcohol); and 3. suicides caused by puberty depressions. These young girls, therefore, were victims of “a morbid condition” (*halet-i maraziyye*) of age.¹³

Another medical “expert”, Prof. Mazhar Osman, the founder of the discipline of psychiatry in the new Republic, claimed that women were inclined to have problems with their nerves and commit suicides, due to their “morbid temperaments” (*marazi mizac*). He declared that “50 % of women throughout the land were either insane or neurasthenic” and this was the reason for the increase in suicides.¹⁴ Mazhar Osman's loyal disciple and also heir, Fahreddin Kerim Gökay, who followed the public controversy quite closely with his public lectures and articles, also claimed that suicide resulted from a problem in “mental health” (*selamet-i akıl*) and “psychological [im]balance” (*muvazene-yi ruhi*).¹⁵ The largest group of those who commit suicide were “mentally ill” and “insane” (*emraz-ı ruhiyye müptelaları ve mecanin*). The obvious reasons were heredity (*veraset*), disposition (*mizac*), genetics (*irsiyet*), family invalidity (*ailevi maluliyet*), alcohol, and various mental illnesses (*emraz-i ruhiyye*). After them came the “mentally unbalanced psychopaths” (*muvazenesiz psikopatlar*).¹⁶ Fahreddin Kerim underlined that those who commit suicide in Turkey in the last couple of years were most frequently the “weak-willed” (*zayıf iradeliler, zayıf muhakeme-yi fikirliler*), who were morbidly influenced from the changes in social life in this period of transition.¹⁷ All these medical doctors, therefore, treated suicide as a form of “mental epidemic” (*ruhi salgın*) contagious (*sirayet*) among the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Turkish President Seeks Woman's Aid: Belgian Educational Expert called to help women in New Freedom”, *The Washington Post*, 16 Decmeber 1928, p. 8.

¹⁵ Dr. Fahreddin Kerim, “İntiharlar Karşısında Ruhiyatçı”, *Hayat*, 12 May 1927, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dr. Fahreddin Kerim, “İntiharlar Karşısında Ruhiyatçı-3”, *Hayat*, 2 June 1927, pp. 7-8.

“weak souled” young women. As I will discuss towards the end, they argued that in order to prevent “contagion” among the youth, it was necessary to intervene in the public sphere for society’s sake with mechanisms of censorship and indoctrination.

The Suicidal City: “Lack of Ideals” in post-Ottoman Istanbul

Max Bonnafous received his PhD in 1924 from l'École Normale Supérieure (Paris) and came to İstanbul in 1926 to teach. His first research project in the Institute of Sociology (*Istanbul İctimaiyyat Enstitüsü*) at the University was upon the question of “suicide epidemics” that caught his attention in the Istanbul press from the moment he came to the city.¹⁸ As a first grounding rule, he stressed the necessity of using a Durkheimian sociological perspective to approach the issue, instead of one that prioritizes the role of insanity, heredity, mental illness, and even consumption of alcohol.¹⁹ The comprehensive social changes that took place in the new Republic of Turkey, he claimed, were much more relevant variables in explaining the drastic changes in the suicide figures.²⁰ Bonnafous also emphasized that decrease and increase in suicides can only be analyzed by sociology, since psychiatry or psychology focus on a rather stable human psyche. Given the fact that the suicides in Istanbul have increased by 4 to 6 times in the past decade, it would be impossible to relate this to heredity or insanity. In an ironic way he asks: “Did all these insane people get married and have 4 to 6 children in the past years, such that all committed suicide?”²¹

With these defining principles he engages in his statistical research on the suicide cases in

¹⁸ “Depuis deux ans environs, la presse constantinopolitaine semblait s’alarmer d’un accroissement anormal du nombre des suicides.” Max Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique et essai d’interprétation sociologique », *Türk Antropoloji Mecmuası*, no. 5, October 1927, pp. 22-43, 22.

¹⁹ Max Bonnafous, “İntihar ve Cinnet” [Suicide and Insanity], *Hayat Mecmuası*, vol. I, no. 20, İstanbul, 1927, p. 386.

²⁰ Max Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique ..., p. 22-23.

²¹ Bonnafous, “İntihar ve Cinnet”, 386.

Istanbul for a decade from 1916 to 1926. According to Bonnafous, this interval comprised all the great changes in the city and country in general – namely, the end of the Great War, the Armistice, Allied occupation of the city, nationalist movement, the war of independence, proclamation of the Republic, and the new reforms of Mustafa Kemal – which no doubt had an impact upon the increase in suicides.²² With the permission of the Istanbul Police Department, he went through the registers of 31 police stations in different quarters of the city. In total, he collected 1161 cases of suicide that took place in the decade. The statistical tables that he prepared with this data suggested that there was an obvious increase in the suicides in general after 1922, more specifically among young Muslim women.²³ In concrete terms, while in 1916 Muslim women made up only 18 % of the total suicides, this percentage increased to 33 percent in 1921, and even to 40 percent in 1925. Moreover, while the distribution of suicides were more or less equally distributed between Muslim and non-Muslim women in the first part of the interval, following 1923, Muslim women figured much prominently, with 85 % in 1925 (Table).

Following Durkheim, Bonnafous concludes that these young women committed *suicide anomique* which resulted from social crisis, disorderliness and especially “lack of ideals” in society. However, he noted, given the huge “national ideal” surrounding Turkey throughout the last decade, what the analysis suggested required further explanation.²⁴ He claimed that since what is called “the Armistice Istanbul” to a large extent was left or stayed out (*tenue a l'écart*) of the Turkish nationalist movement, the inhabitants of the city, even if many of them supported the

^ 22 Bonnafous , « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique... », 22: “Cet intervalle coïncidait d’ailleurs avec tous les grands événements qui ont affecté Constantinople et la Turquie : la fin de la guerre générale, l’armistice, l’occupation alliée à Constantinople, le mouvement nationaliste, la guerre de l’Indépendance, la proclamation de République, l’organisation de l’ordre social nouveau par Moustapha Kemal pacha et ses collaborateurs. »

^ 23 Max Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », *Türk Antropoloji Mecmuası*, no. 6, March 1928, pp. 20-30, 21.

^ 24 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 23.

nationalists in their hearts, did not embrace the same passion as the rest of the country.²⁵ The city occupied by the Allied Forces from November 1918 to October 1923 could take no direct part in the national struggle and thus was not part of the collective enthusiasm of the masses.²⁶ As the historical record points out, Bonnafous definitely exaggerated the inertness of Istanbul regarding the resistance movement. Researches on the period show that especially *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (CUP Intelligence Organization) and *Karakol* (Black Arm / Police) were very significant centers of organization for the national struggle, which in a way acted as the clandestine Ministry of War, smuggling men and arms to Anatolia.²⁷ Moreover, the idiosyncratic position of Istanbul compared to the rest of Anatolia was only partially true. For example, the French troops not only occupied Cilicia proper (roughly Mersin and Adana) at the end of 1918, but also took control of the provinces of Antep, Maraş and Urfa in southern Anatolia at the end of 1919, until late 1921.²⁸

However, one thing was definitely true: after the withdrawal of the Allies, Istanbul was neither prepared to go back to its glorious days as the imperial capital of the Ottoman Empire nor the new nationalist forces considered to give the city's prestige back. Now the “center of the state” was Ankara. After leaving Istanbul for Samsun in May 16, 1919, Mustafa Kemal changed his headquarters to first Havza and then Amasya, and finally on December 27, 1919 he installed himself in Ankara, which was at the time a town of 40,000 inhabitants, backward, wretched in

^ 25 “Constantinople s'est en quelque sorte tenue à l'écart du grand mouvement nationaliste turc. » Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 23.

The specific situation of Istanbul and psyche of the people in the city during and after the First World War has been a popular theme for Turkish novelists. Mehmet Törenek, *Türk Romanında İsgal İstanbul'u*, İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2002.

^ 26 « ... la ville elle-même, qui était occupée par les Alliés, ne prenait pas une part directe au mouvement et ainsi ne participait pas à cet enthousiasme collectif qui animait les combattants de l'Indépendance », Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 23

^ 27 Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul Under Allied Occupation, 1918-1923*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 94-139.

^ 28 Robert F. Zeidner, *The Tricolor Over the Taurus: The French in Cilicia and Vicinity, 1918-1922*, Ankara: Atatürk Supreme Council for Culture, Language and History, 2005.

appearance and devoid of the most elementary amenities.²⁹ Yet, after the elections in Anatolia for a “Grand National Assembly of Turkey”, the elected deputies met in Ankara on April 23 and on May 5, 1920. The town became the seat of government, as large numbers of officials, many of whom had fled from Istanbul, came and settled there. In republican Turkey, the past was not to be written on Ottoman urban histories. Clearly, Ankara also had an Ottoman history; it was an Ottoman *vilayet*, its regional economies were well integrated with those of the larger empire, its populace was as ethnically and as religiously diversified. Yet, Ankara’s histories, while infused with Ottoman aspects, were not so inextricably tied to future remembrances of the Ottoman state or the caliphate. Thus, after an intense press campaign to prepare the people for the big change, Mustafa Kemal had a law passed by the Assembly, declaring Ankara as the administrative capital in 1923, short before the proclamation of the Republic.³⁰ Therefore, the relief and happiness that the inhabitants of Istanbul should have felt after the retreat of the Allied Forces was an ambivalent one. The occupiers were no longer there, but the city could not be restored to its pre-occupation circumstances. In the past five years that had elapsed, she was subjected to various forms of expropriation, not only in the hands of foreign powers, but also by the founders of the Republic as well.³¹

In addition to the crisis of “lack of ideals” in the post-Ottoman, in other words

^ 29 In fact, all the descriptions of early-twentieth-century Ankara, like retrospective accounts of other designed capitals, emphasize prominently remote and nonurban characteristics. Ankara’s genesis is represented as the awesome visitation of modernity’s supreme expression (i.e., a nation-state’s capital city) to an indefinite space that was both rural and premodern in form and character.

^ 30 Kyle T. Evered, “Symbolizing a Modern Anatolia: Ankara as Capital in Turkey’s Early Republican Landscape”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2008, pp. 326-341.

^ 31 Not all people – both foreign and Turkish – appreciated this shift. American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859–1952) expressed his own misgivings: “That during a period of military stress and during a period of occupation of Constantinople by foreign forces, the country should find the seat of its recuperation in the remote interior is understandable. But that when this period was finished, the new leaders should continue seriously to turn their backs on a city which with Rome and Peking is one of the great capitals of the world, is incredible.” John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World — Mexico, China, Turkey* (New York: New Republic, 1929), pp. 208-9.

Republican Istanbul, the city also “suffered” from over exposure to Western life-styles under British rule and the impact of large numbers of refugees. The fact that White Russians, together with the Allied forces, came to and lived in Istanbul for a quite long period, like six years, changed the way of living in Istanbul. They especially brought a new ambiance to the night life by opening restaurants, bars, *café chantants*, and nightclubs. The cultural life in the city was enriched with the shows of the Russian ballet and theaters with high quality performances.³² Another contribution of the Russians to the cultural life of Istanbul was pastry shops. The elites of the city gradually left their tradition of going to the *muhallebici*, Turkish dessert shops that sold milk-based dishes. The new trend was to visit the confectioneries of the Russians, especially for newly emerging practice of dating.³³ After a couple of decades, people started to associate Russian food, the *cafés* and old restaurants with *la belle époque d'Istanbul*.³⁴ However, the press of the time attacked especially the Russian refugees, arguing that they had increased the amount of immoral entertainments like gambling and prostitution.³⁵ The entertainment industry was also accused of contributing to the alienation of the inhabitants of the city.

Still, the significance of the social changes especially regarding the lives of women during the period could not be overlooked. First of all, as a result of wars and destitution, women who had been previously segregated now began to appear in the workplace and in other public spaces. Several women's journals started to voice women's criticism of their inferior status. Many educated women demanded the renewal of the codes concerning marriage and especially the laws on divorce. Family law, which defined unequal rights for men and women, was discussed

³² Vedia Dökmeci, *Tarihsel Gelişim Sürecinde Beyoğlu*, İstanbul: Türkiye Turing ve Otomobil Kurumu, 1990, p. 53.

³³ Zafer Toprak, “İstanbulluya Rusya’nın Armağanları: Haraşolar,” *İstanbul*, no. 1, 1992, p. 76.

³⁴ Criss, p. xiii.

³⁵ Mehmet Temel, *İşgal Yıllarında İstanbul’un Sosyal Durumu*, Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1998, pp. 115-116.

by upper-class women quite vehemently at the end of the Armistice period.³⁶ The demands in these journals ranged from arranged marriages, to abolishing polygyny, gaining equality with men in the realms of work, law, and family. Even a plea for women's suffrage appeared in one of these journals, *Türk Dünyası*.³⁷

The social rules regulating the relationship between men and women started to become more liberal in this period. As a result of this, it became easier to see married and unmarried couples on the streets. Moreover, the idea of marriages based on the agreement of individuals instead of the traditional arrangement by parents was being discussed, as more and more young men and women started to meet and get to know each other before the marriage.³⁸ An important place where the elite men and women of the time could come together to enjoy themselves were balls arranged by certain organizations or personalities. Women for the first time had the opportunity to attend places where they could talk or dance with young men. Moreover, many women who spoke foreign languages started to hold and attend balls and parties where they interacted with Allied officers. The novelist, Yakup Kadri argued that there were a group of women living in Istanbul who had no interest in following what was going on in Anatolia, devoting themselves only to the latest fashions and entertainments.³⁹ Salon life, in which men and women could meet and amuse themselves in the same place, was especially criticized for affecting the marriages in a negative way. Those “liberated women” who followed the salon entertainments, frequently became involved in extra-marital affairs and lived as mistresses. This

³⁶ Şükûfe Nihal, “Fırkamızın Mefkuresi,” *Süs*, no. 3, 30 June 1923, p. 3.

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³⁸ Zafer Toprak, “Cumhuriyet Arifesi Evlilik Üzerine Bir Anket: Görücülük mü? Görüşücülük mü?” *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 50 (February 1988), p. 32.

³⁹ In the novel, *Sodom and Gomorra*, Leyla, a Turkish girl from a well-off family of the time, was described as a snob, ostentatious and capricious character who desired to show-off using her relationship with an English officer. Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Sodom ve Gomore*, edited by Atilla Özkırımlı, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1998.

way, they not only “killed their own chances of matrimony”, but also “risked the dissolution of many happy marriages”.⁴⁰

From the other edge of the picture, Allied police reports showed that there was an increase in the number of prostitutes in red light districts.⁴¹ In the chaotic environment caused by the occupation of the city and the nationalist struggle going on in Anatolia, women in Istanbul, experienced extreme poverty along with liberty. Increasing number of lower class women were left vulnerable, unprotected and poor; thus, “moral decline” and prostitution were on the rise.⁴² While Galata and Beyoğlu were the main centers of brothels in which non-Muslim prostitutes worked, Muslim brothels intensified in Üsküdar and Kadıköy.⁴³ Popular press and novels emphasized the role of lower class women’s fascination with having a luxurious life-style as the most important reasons for the immorality in society.⁴⁴

In his attempt to account for the exceptional increase in the suicides of young Muslim women in Istanbul, Bonnafofus underlines the undeniable impact of most of these social changes, since recent past of Turkey had been “a theater of considerable social transformations” (*le théâtre de transformations sociales considérables*).⁴⁵ Even if the city did not take active part in the independence struggle, she felt the overreaching results of it. Nationalist takeover of power and proclamation of the Republic with a staunch secularist stance had deeply transformed

⁴⁰ Hülya Vecdi, “Ev Kadını, Salon Kadını,” *Süs*, no. 46 (26 April 1924), p. 4.

⁴¹ The number of licensed prostitutes in Istanbul in the occupation years was estimated as 2,171 by the *Sıhhiye Heyeti* (Sanitary Board) of the time. The total number of Muslim women in the business was given as 804, while Jews and Christians were counted as 1,367. The Allied forces also noted that the newcomers were mostly Russian women. Zafer Toprak, “İstanbul’da Fuhuş ve Zührevi Hastalıklar 1914-1933.” *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 39 (March 1987), pp. 31-40.

⁴² Zafer Toprak, “The Family, Feminism and the State during the Young Turk Period, 1908-1918,” in *Première Rencontre Internationale sur l’Empire Ottoman et la Turquie Moderne*, Istanbul-Paris: Edition ISIS, 1991, p. 442.

⁴³ Zafer Toprak, “İstanbul’da Fuhuş ve Zührevi Hastalıklar 1914-1933.” *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 39 (March 1987), pp. 31-40.

⁴⁴ Ahmet Vaid, “Bizde Kızlar Nasıl Düşerler?,” *Resimli Ay*, no. 8 (September 1924), p. 30.

⁴⁵ Bonnafofus, « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique..., 22.

lifestyles, daily habits and common ideas.⁴⁶ In fact, the absence of a remarkable increase in the suicides of the non-Muslim “minorities” (Armenians, Greeks, Jews), for instance, was related to the limited extent of social change in their livelihoods. Numerous social reforms that had deeply affected the Muslim community, such as the new dress codes, change of the alphabet and the calendar, or the new civil code, did not suggest anything new to the non-Muslims, these developments were already part of their everyday lives.⁴⁷

For the sociologist, Istanbul had a particular advantage to conduct a study of social change: religiously and linguistically diverse inhabitants of the city also lived in geographically different neighborhoods, each with an original character.⁴⁸ In that respect, the partition of the suicides to particular neighborhoods was quite revelatory. In neighborhoods like Péra, where principally Greeks, Armenians, Jews and foreigners live, the number of suicides remained almost the same in the decade that was under analysis. However, in the Muslim neighborhoods, which had been so far close to the outside forces of Westernization, and which recently became open, social change had more drastic consequences. This was especially the case for places like Üsküdar and Kadıköy, which were on the edge of the Bosphorus, from where people departed for Anatolia or Syria, either by train from the big station of Haydarpaşa or by boat. In other words, despite their inward character, these neighborhoods closely followed the new political and social developments and they became intensely open to the impacts of “modern life” (*la vie moderne*). It was, therefore, especially in these quarters that suicides augmented notably. While there were constantly 1 or 2 cases of suicide until 1921, in 1923 Kadıköy police department registered 22

^ 46 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 23.

^ 47 “Le nouvel état de choses n'a pas changé la façon de vivre de ceux qui forment aujourd'hui les « minorités » à Constantinople : grecs, arméniens, israélites. » Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 23.

^ 48 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique..., 22.

suicides, whereas there were 21 suicides in 1926 in Üsküdar.⁴⁹ On the contrary, in neighborhoods like Eyüp or Fatih, which were situated geographically far way from the centers of urban activity and where Muslim religiosity remained quite vibrant, there was no change in suicide figures (Table).

Although social geographic analysis helped Bonnafous to account for the proportionally greater numbers of Muslims in the suicide statistics, he still had to analyze the factors of gender and age, the victims being mostly young women. Although the lives of Turkish women were already under the impact of Westernization starting from the Young Turk revolution of 1908, Ottoman women were still living in a state of great dependence. They were supposed to avoid being present in public places and have contact with men. For instance, in means of public transportation, such as ferries or trams, there were special compartments reserved to women. More importantly, women were not masters of their own destiny. A typical Turkish girl was married off according to the decision of her parents, and so regardless of her consent, to a man she only met on her wedding day. Her dependent position also did not cease with marriage. She mostly stayed at home, while her husband could lead an entirely other life outside it. *Mecelle*, the Muslim civil code adapted from the sharia, which was in effect until 1925, also gave the man the unconditional right to divorce his wife(s). Bonnafous claimed that the Republic of Turkey had completely changed all these state of affairs and the situation of women has been altogether transformed both in practice and in law.⁵⁰

Turkish women, especially those from the enlightened sections of the society, now seriously took part in the social life: they receive guests in their homes, go to theaters and balls. The adoption of the Swiss civil code also gave them all the rights enjoyed by Western women

^ 49 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople : Etude Statistique... », 24.

^ 50 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 24-25.

and the true control of their own life. Bonnafous argued that the “emancipation of women” (*émancipation de la femme*) was certainly one of the most beautiful “titles of glory” attached to the young Republic. However, from the other side of the coin, liberty was not only a joy, it also meant assuming responsibility for the decisions taken. Liberation encumbered Turkish women with accountability that they did not know before. Therefore, their sensibility for the “mistakes” they made was exaggerated and this new situation was the reason for the increase of suicides among young Muslim women.⁵¹ However, one should not conclude that the new regime was responsible for this crisis. The real critical issue was the clash of novel institutions and ideals with persistent customs, values and ideas of the *ancien régime*. This generation of youth had to live through an early morning, a dawn (*l'aube*), they were entrapped between an established, yet collapsing order and a newly appearing one. The pace of the social change was an unbearable torment over their “weak spirits” (*esprits faibles*) and led some young people to commit suicide.

As a representative case for the in-the-limbo situation felt by youth, one could consider the militant secular politics of the early republican era and tearing down of many religious establishments in the society (closing down of religious schools, tombs, and dervish lodges; suppression of fez; change of the alphabet and calendar). The value system of the society was turned upside down (*bouleversement total*) and the religious beliefs of the youth was either seriously shattered or disappeared (*ébranlées ou disparaissent*): they were emptied from any sort of spiritual support.⁵²

However, what had particularly significant and tangible impacts upon their lives was controversies regarding love and marriage. Emancipation of women had transformed the understanding and experience of love among the youth. Now young people, especially those

^ 51 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 25.

^ 52 Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 26-27.

well-educated ones, were more and more intellectualizing and idealizing love, assigned to it an eminent place. Whereas for the traditional society, love only had a marginal role on other issues, including decisions of marriage. Therefore, when their expectations regarding love is not fulfilled, when they fell into a “romantic despair”, they felt that all was lost, their life had no longer any meaning, and could as well be ended.⁵³ That's why Bonnafous resembled the melancholy of the Turkish youth to *Raphaël* (1849) of Lamartine⁵⁴, *René* (1802) of Chateaubriand⁵⁵, and especially *Young Werther* (1774) of Goethe.⁵⁶

In sum, the weakening of parental and religious authority, together with the curtailment of female seclusion and imprisonment under the new regime increased opportunity for romantic love affairs. However, this “emancipation” was also the main reasons behind the depression and suicides among women: they suffered from “woes of freedom”.⁵⁷

“Return to Nature”: Vices of Urban Social Life for Women

Political and social implications of the conclusions suggested by Bonnafous had been disturbing for the new regime. The sociological interpretation of the increase in suicides implied a certain responsibility that the nationalist Turkish state was not willing to assume. Therefore, the

^ 53 Generational fights were among the most frequent reasons. Although new social order opened space for the meeting of young people, parents still insist on their right to decide for their children's marriages. Bonnafous, « Le Suicide à Constantinople (suite) », 27-28.

^ 54 Alphonse de Lamartine, *Raphaël: Pages de la Vingtième Année*, Bruxelles: Libraire de F. Michel, 1849.

^ 55 François-René Chateaubriand, *Atala, Rene, Les Aventures Du Dernier Abencerage*, Paris: Flammarion, 1996.

^ 56 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001.

^ 57 However, foreign observers criticized these conclusions as being exaggerated. Reporter of the *Washington Post* underlined that the discourse of “gigantic progress of women” in Turkey was a mere exaggeration. In fact, only 10 percent of women were literate, just a few of them took up professions, and 90 percent still wore veil. Upper classes were more liberal in their public presence with men, yet for their part they improved in “nothing but Charleston”, they were immersed with “decadent civilized life of dance and parties and nothing really virtuous”. “Turkish President Seeks Woman's Aid: Belgian Educational Expert called to help women in New Freedom”, *The Washington Post*, 16 Decmeber 1928, p. 8.

Durkheimian ideas regarding suicide as a social phenomenon slowly disappeared (or suppressed), leaving their place to mental, psychiatric and psychological interpretations.

Bonnafous left the county in 1929, while the medical doctors, especially “specialists of mental diseases” and gynecologists gained ascendance in terms of public visibility and in their relation to the political regime. Theirs was the “legitimate interpretation” of the problem and, thus, they would also devise the solution.

According to these doctors, women suicides was an epidemic that was contagious among those whose nervous system was not normal (*cümle asabiyesi normal olmayan*).⁵⁸ Fahreddin Kerim (Gökay), famous psychiatrist of the early Republic, clearly put forward that only those “mentally unstable people, degenerates and psychopaths, those who are weak and feeble willed” would commit suicide.⁵⁹ However, there were certain societal factors that push these symptoms to appear, and thus suicides could be prevented with specific measures. Cemal Zeki claimed that “morbid condition” of young women became manifest due to harmful effects of a certain type of romance literature – especially novels – and “vices of urban social life” –especially the new urban developments of fashion and dancing parties. In order to fight with the epidemic, he stressed the necessity of strong family control and repetitious warning of young girls against deceitful lovers and short-lived adventures.⁶⁰

Furthermore, according to Cemal Zeki popular love and romance literature, which was full of “disgusting obscenity”, should be totally banned, or at least censured, since these narratives represented suicide in a quite sentimental and encouraging way. Actually the attack against novelists and novels were quite strong at the time. The “experts” underlined that novels

⁵⁸ Dr. Fahreddin Kerim, “İntiharlar Karşısında Ruhiyatçı”, *Hayat*, 12 May 1927, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁹ Fahrettin Kerim Gökay, *Türkiyede İntiharlar Meselesi* [Issue of Suicides in Turkey], İstanbul: Kader Matbassı, 1932.

⁶⁰ Cemal Zeki, “Genç Kız ve Kadınlarda İntihar – Sebep, Korunma Çareleri – İçtimai-Tıbbi”, *Resimli Ay*, April, 1927.

were full of characters who either commit suicide or consider doing it. Therefore, the novelists were pushing the inexperienced and unprepared youth of the country into confusion and weakness. Mustafa Şekip (Tunç), from university's psychology department, claimed that the responsibility of preventing future waves of suicide belonged to the writers of novels.⁶¹ Fahrettin Kerim argued in a conference at the Turkish Hearths, the new cultural “national club” of the nationalist regime, that while novels present suicide as a form of heroism, they contribute to the suicide epidemic, since their naive readers imitate their protagonists.⁶²

The leitmotiv of killing oneself as a result of unfulfilled love affairs, or simply either unrealized or unwanted marriages, was common to *Tanzimat* novel and was still popular in the 1920s literature.⁶³ Moreover, stories of “fallen women” also became very frequent due to the obvious impact of such big novels as *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*. Those women, who emulated Western life styles and, thus, became less reserved in their relations with men, ended up abused and abandoned by the latter. Then, the only honorable solution ahead of them was suicide. For instance, in *Ateşten Gömlek* (Shirt of Fire, Halide Edip Adivar, 1922) Kezban jumps into river thinking that Mehmet Çavuş had menaced her chastity; in *Sözde Kızlar* (So-called Girls, Peyami Safa, 1923) Belma kills herself when she loses her virginity as she was striving to become an actress; in *Dudaktan Kalbe* (From the Lips to the Heart, Reşat Nuri Güntekin, 1925) both of the female protagonists, Lamia and Mahmure, have extramarital affairs and consider suicide as a solution to their shame. In other words, leaving aside the soundness of the analysis of the “experts”, it was actually a relevant observation that the Turkish novels of the 1920s were full of suicidal characters. Yet, it is noteworthy that the entire controversy was staged in a society

^ 61 “Novelists Urged to Prevent Turkish Suicide Epidemics”, *The New York Times*, March 9, 1930.

^ 62 Dr. Fahreddin Kerim, “İntiharlar Karşısında Ruhیاتçı-3”, *Hayat*, 2 June 1927, pp. 7-8.

^ 63 Nurullah Ulutaş, *Türk Romanında İntihar (1872-1960)*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Uludağ University, 2006.

where the art of novel was fairly undeveloped, and where literacy rate, especially among women, was embarrassingly low.

Fight against the most modern and urban form of writing, namely novel, was not the only frontline of the camp against suicides. Observers and “experts” from different specializations were in consensus regarding the harmful affects of the newly flourishing urban life and public activities. As we have seen Bonnafous argued along these lines, though he did not offered conservative measures. Cemal Zeki also claimed that modern life was full of social vices, such as fashion, parties, and love affairs, which pushed young girls and women into depressions and disaster. As a harsh method to rescue those “girls in danger”, he suggested the removal of them entirely from the urban setting. They should be encouraged to get married, have children, and move to the countryside.⁶⁴

Prof. Mazhar Osman argued that the increase in the cases of neurosis was correlated to the unhealthy practices and ills of the urban social life (*cemiyet hayatı*), such as pretentious behavior, artificiality, hypocrisy, and beauty concerns.⁶⁵ The idea of entertainment among urban middle classes was equal to smoky coffeehouses, balls, theaters and parties in noisy Beyoğlu clubs, in which one would spend his entire time with insincere conversations, drinking and smoking, in extremely uncomfortable clothing and shoes. Therefore, “civilization” was a serious cause for mental diseases, “chewing the nerves of humanity”. The doctor praised, on the other hand, the qualities of the countryside (fresh air, sportive facilities, being close to nature, “living like a peasant”) in order to calm down the neural system and have a peaceful state of mind. He

⁶⁴ Cemal Zeki, “Genç Kız ve Kadınlarda İntihar”, *Türk Kadın Yolu*, no. 30, 1 August 1927, pp. 2-3

⁶⁵ “Niçin Günden Güne Sinirlilerin Adedi Artıyor: Mazhar Osman Bey'in Herkesin İşine Yarayacak Fikirlerini Okuyunuz”, *Resimli Ay*, April 1928, pp. 29-32.

recounts the story of a patient as a representation of the “goods and evils” of the two sides.⁶⁶ The lady was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, seriously thinking of suicide, yet her husband could not make sense of it, since they were constantly entertaining themselves in operas, movie theaters and parties. Then, the young woman confesses her real need to the doctor: sports such as horse riding, swimming, or trekking. She concludes that her neurosis was related to her inactivity in the city (*...ben hareketsizlikten sinirlendim*). According to Mazhar Osman, urban life was dangerous especially for women, since they were more prone have problems with their nerves, due to their “morbid temperaments” (*marazi mizac*). Women were weak creatures, thus they should be especially kept away from lust and love that were inherent to modern social life. As part of the pro-natalist policies of the new Republic, the doctor emphasized the primarily biological role of women: What was best for them was early marriage, motherhood and family.⁶⁷

Further Medicalization and Eventual Silencing

As harsher and more politically organized measures taken against the “infection” of suicide, first of all in March 1930 a certain “Society of Mental Health” (*Akıl Hıfzıssıhhası Cemiyeti*) was established under the authority of Central Hygiene Institute (*Merkez Hıfzıssıhha Müessesesi*), with the leadership of Fahrettin Kerim, Mazhar Osman, and İhsan Şükrü.⁶⁸ The Society would open medical support centers, prepare reports and organize conferences to prevent the “suicide epidemics”.⁶⁹ Furthermore, in July 1931, a new press law was passed with the aim of checking “improper criticism of the government and to improve the moral tone of the press”.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Zafer Toprak, “The Family, Feminism and the State during the Young Turk Period, 1908-1918,” in *Première Rencontre Internationale sur l’Empire Ottoman et la Turquie Moderne*, Istanbul-Paris: Edition ISIS, 1991.

⁶⁸ “İntihara karşı mücadele için bir cemiyet teşkil ediliyor” [A Society is established to fight against suicides], *Vakit*, 2 March 1930, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Dr. İhsan Şükrü, “Akıl Koruma Cemiyeti kuruluyor, neler yapacak biliyor musunuz?” [A Society of Mental Health is established, do you know what it will do?], *Vakit*, 8 March 1930, p. 3.

According to the new regulation, accounts of suicide must not be published without preliminary authority; accounts of murders must be chronicled briefly; and under no circumstances must photographs dealing with suicides or murders be published.⁷⁰

Defined as an epidemic throughout the 1920s and 30s, suicide was at first analyzed as a social issue, which found its meaning in various social changes in new Turkey. Then, realizing the critical implications of this sociological interpretation, the regime chose to lean on to psychiatry and treated the cases of suicide as representations of a form of mental disorder or breakdown. Moreover, with the introduction the Press Law of 1931, the government prohibited the publication of suicide news in the press. By completely silencing the public presence of the issue, the regime reaffirmed its denialist attitude relating to any unpleasant reality that would cast a doubt on state's success and bright future.⁷¹

Conclusion

By 1923 Turkish national movement managed to defeat the Greek forces in Anatolia, and at Lausanne they had forced the Allied Powers to renegotiate the WWI peace settlement. After 1925, Mustafa Kemal consolidated his power and imposed a one-party system, where the scope for criticism was severely curtailed. In this context the regime carried out radical political and social policies aimed at weakening the power of religion, promoting modernization, and fostering Turkish national identity. Reforming the position of women was an important part of this program, and the regime undertook many measures that gave women new rights and facilitated their entry into the public sphere. The new Civil Code of 1926 banned polygyny, gave women equal access to divorce, and treated men and women as equals in matters of custody,

⁷⁰ Nurşen Mazıcı, "1930'a Kadar Basının Durumu ve 1931 Matbuat Kanunu", *Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Dergisi*, no. 18, November 1996, pp. 131-154, 148.

⁷¹ As a parallel example, the East German administration kept its very high suicide statistics as secret information for a very long time; and when the numbers finally leaked to the press, they created outrage. Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945-1989*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 90.

inheritance, the management of property, and bearing witness. Educational opportunities were expanded and women were encouraged to enter the workforce; in some workplaces even daycare was provided. Nevertheless, the primary role of women as wives and mothers continued to be emphasized. Women were urged to acquire education in order to be better companions to their husbands and better mothers to their sons. Abortion was criminalized and high fertility rewarded. A married woman needed her husband's permission to work outside the home, and men were recognized as head of the household. Sexual virtue in women continued to be of great importance and women's behavior was intensely scrutinized. "Frivolity" was discouraged in favor of an ethos of duty and self-sacrifice. This constellation of policies has led many to describe the situation of Turkish women as "emancipated but unliberated," and to argue that the changes in their legal and social status did not aim at their liberation.⁷²

One such critique, an exceptional woman, was also the one who interpreted the "suicide epidemics" from an exceptional perspective. Sabiha Sertel, who published several articles on the topic, saw the problem as one of too much family or state control over young women.⁷³ The older generation, she wrote, must learn not to view a girl's going out and having fun as sinful.

"Today's youth are in love with freedom and independence. For them life is something to be lived. But the family is conservative. Our young people want to experience all the pleasures of life... dancing, friends, and gadding about having fun. They want to share in all of it and they look at their friends who do so with envy. But traditional training reigns in the home. If our girls love a little or show some curiosity, we impede it. If they come home a little late, we are furious. If they want to go to a concert or a ball, we refuse permission. Eventually, these constraints reach such a point that girls begin to see life as unendurable, and death as preferable."

In the context of the crisis in values brought on by Turkey's revolutionary social changes, Sertel claimed adults must help young people find new ideals and beliefs to replace the declining

⁷² A. Holly Shissler, "If You Ask Me': Sabiha Sertel's Advice Column, Gender Equity, and Social Engineering in the Early Turkish Republic", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 1-30.

⁷³ "Gençler Niçin İntihar Ediyorlar?" *Resimli Ay*, April 1927, 37-8.

influence of family and religion. Thus, she saw the solution to the problem of women suicides first in redefining how society sees women and their activities, and second, in helping young people to define their own values as opposed to limiting their exposure to influences that might challenge received truths. However, as already underlined the government entirely rejected a sociological, let alone feminist, perspective and pursued one that medicalized the “problem” of young women and suppressed the public discussion of the question of suicides by complete censorship of the issue.