

From Shy Feminist to World Citizen

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Cet article nous présente la biographie de Sirin Tekeli, une importante femme de lettres de Turquie, une féministe et activiste que la narratrice a rencontrée récemment en France. L'auteure conteste la pratique habituelle des biographies posthumes des femmes notoires alors qu'elle favorise plutôt des extraits de leur biographie.

Wrestling with worn-out metaphors used for women in literature is not the aim of this essay. But I am bound to begin with this because of the photograph. I have been staring at this picture that I took on January 26, 2013, at a flower market in Nice (*Cours Saleya*), before venturing my first lines. I can close my eyes and tell you all the colours, the order and the shapes of the flowers that accompany her smile and red leather gloves. The “flowery” background of an intellectual and activist feminist whose life journey took her temporarily from Turkey to France, only to relieve her soul that has refused to belong to one nation or culture. Moving is good for the restless.

Men’s love for women can be like a “red red rose” but some women are better off when they are likened to mimosas or snowdrops since their achievements in society herald new eras and ideas and they challenge the status quo. The life story I am going to tell you is destined to be incomplete. Still, it is worth taking the risk because Şirin Tekeli, a famous and highly respected feminist scholar from Turkey, should also be introduced to a non-Turkish feminist community. Especially because Tekeli believes in the power of global support and network among feminists regardless of the differences and culture-specific issues we have to focus on from time to time. This may sound second-wave and this is fine with me. She is capable of

being critical of her own generation to the extent that she can sometimes be cruel to herself and cannot enjoy the long-deserved prestige and the compliments she receives from others. I have witnessed this more than once.

After meeting Tekeli at the International Multidisciplinary Women’s Congress in Izmir in 2009, where she delivered a speech as one of the plenary speakers, I promised myself I would write her life story one day. Not in an obsessed way but only if she agreed to talk to me about her life over the years, and only if we could develop a relationship based on mutual trust and understanding. After all, I could be her daughter. She does not have children and I haven’t yet asked her whether this was intentional or not. I am almost forty years old and have been “recruiting” family members who are not born out of blood-ties. That is intentional. If I were *Cours Saleya* in my next life, they would all be my flowers except that they would not be for sale. I enjoy this international spiritual family made up of multiple mothers, dozens of sisters, lovers, dead or alive. Tekeli doesn’t know that I am dedicating this mini-biography to her as one of my mothers. If she gets upset because I haven’t asked her permission like a “good daughter” should, I know how to fix it. Because she told me about her favourite flower as we were sharing stories of love and life over grappa.

It is usually only after someone dies and when it is too late for the subject matter to contribute (be it a milestone figure in Turkish feminist history or not) that most of us begin to compose works of praise or introductory texts for the person. I am also one of these: I like archival work and excavating feminist ghosts from their buried and forgotten spots. Now I have to lay my concerns aside



Şirin Tekeli at Cours Saleya, the flower market in Nice where the mimosa can be found.

about what Tekeli is going to think or how inadequate and embarrassed I might feel after this piece of life writing is published. I have confidence in her that she will be supportive of me. Because she has been. Each time I have attempted to write something ... anything ... to express my feelings as a woman and expose my research she has told me to go for it.

Let us return to the photograph taken in the flower market. Just by looking at it, you cannot tell much about Şirin Tekeli except that she is elegant and charismatic. And yet she doesn't want to be in the center. Well, I could have told you more about her if there was no code of honour. However, for her generation in Turkey, she told me, it was not easy to talk about personal stuff regardless of how well you are known. In other words, in contemporary Turkish literature, we do not have Anais Nîns. The reasons for this can be speculated in another project. My apologies for not decorating this introductory life writing with some gentle or titillating stories of love or romantic escapades. Blame it on our cultural background. I do. The "honour" issue is deeply ingrained in our genes as women even as we fight against it and claim that we should not care.

Şirin Tekeli is one of the most powerful voices in Turkish feminism. If you type her name in the Bogazici University Library catalogue, you will encounter 23 titles of the books she has written, (co)edited and (co)translated. If only you had met her during her years of feminist activism in the 1980s, you would wonder how on earth it was possible to organize people, attend all those meetings, publish feminist 'zines and other magazines before the Internet era and still have this strong presence in print in the richest

library of Turkey. Discipline combined with intelligence and dedication to a cause (or causes) would be my guess. Yet, she is humble and acts as if she hasn't lived a culturally and politically flourishing life. As she pronounced in an interview, she began as a *mahcup* feminist, which means "shy" in Turkish. How could a woman like Tekeli feel *mahcup* in the midst of seemingly progressive left-wing groups whose male members were educated at university halls in Turkey, if not in Europe or England? To answer this question, we need to take a quick look at the political background of the times and at the personal (the family, etc.). In Turkey, as feminist activists and scholars, we also love to combine and study these two terms together: the personal and the political.

Born in 1944, Tekeli's childhood witnessed the struggles between westernization of the Turkish Republic and the traditions of Islam and her Ottoman heritage. Her father was an intellectual educator and administrator, who became engaged in politics through CHP (the center-left party in the Turkish politics founded in 1923). He was soon discarded as he suffered from the slander of "being a communist" and was exiled to a small town in Anatolia as a consequence. The separation from her father, Tekeli says, was traumatic for her as an only child and she actually rebelled against God after his death when she was only thirteen years old. Her mother, a philosophy teacher, and her grandmother, whose preferences about how to raise her reflected more than a generational gap, were influential in her formative years. The grandmother saw nothing wrong in listening to regional folk songs with Şirin whereas the assigned (!) daily music by her mother included a com-

pletely different repertoire ranging from Mozart to Bach. This small anecdote from the 1950s is indeed symptomatic of the struggle between westernization and old customs and also reflects the paradoxes of Turkish nationalism and the construction of an identity for the citizens of a new nation. Tekeli's parents were adopting a positive stance in life that affected how they raised their only child, and they had likely become intolerant towards the religio-mystical traditions, distancing themselves from religious elements in the culture (unlike the grandmother). Thousands of

France, Switzerland seemed like a paradise for her. The university was founded in 1537 and was boasting of a new and liberal faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the time of her arrival. Her eyes still shine when she refers to those years and names all her professors (Bridel, Zwahlen, Perrin, Rieben, Schaller, Aguet, Oulès) and their areas of expertise one by one. After she had graduated with this amazing intellectual arsenal and languages, she returned to Istanbul University, where she began to teach and work as a research assistant. She remembers rather sadly that in

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children then, who are now in their seventies, will tell you similar stories. It was also Şirin's father who gave her the first taste of wine! An open-minded father with progressive ideas about education and a good library can shape his daughter's identity even in a very short time. Tekeli became an avid reader of literature during her high school years, enjoying the novels of André Gide in particular. Gide's fiction (*Nourritures terrestres* holding a special place), Tekeli says, probably laid the foundation for her being against all kinds of dogmatic thinking and strengthened her continuous efforts to achieve intellectual honesty.

In 1960, when Tekeli was sixteen years old, the young Turkish Republic was hit by its first military coup, which inspired her to study political science. There was a competitive exam held by the government for talented students with the highest grades, giving them the opportunity to study abroad. Although the quota was very limited especially after the coup, Tekeli succeeded in earning a scholarship. Thanks to her mother's support and permission, she left for Paris, to a brave new world... Not knowing a single word of French was not an issue for this bright woman who learned the language in two years at an advanced level so that she could follow university lectures in the Law School with hundreds of other young and restless students. When I say "young and restless," I mean it. Despite the fact that she fell in love with Paris, Tekeli would soon realize that the violent demonstrations, in particular the Charonne Metro Station Massacre in February 1962, were too much for her, and she felt it would be better to continue her studies in a more peaceful place. She chose to enroll in University of Lausanne. After the tense political atmospheres of both Turkey and

the Faculty of Political Science, she was treated as if she was an "absolutely ignorant person" only because the rest of the faculty was in great admiration of the American system and its educational methods. Inevitably, when it was time for her to choose a topic for her dissertation, it had to be on America. She wrote on the systems theory of David Easton.

You might still be wondering when feminism comes to the picture. It was in the year 1978. Tekeli wrote the first thesis (for her promotion to the associate professor rank) on women in her discipline and department in Turkey through a feminist perspective. Because of her research topic, there were some backhanded comments from most of the faculty in her department. She became even more aware of the discriminations against women that had been covered insidiously behind the discourses of Marxism or "the democracy" constructed by the founders of the Turkish Republic. Once she began to read French, Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* became one of her most-referenced books, but it was not until the United Nations meeting in 1975 that women's issues were highlighted in her own agenda. Not having the conceptual tools was not a major problem when she decided to prioritize women in her research. She used what she refers to as an "eclectic methodology" in her studies. Participation of women in politics was the topic of her promotion thesis and after completing it, Tekeli says she was no longer "the shy feminist;" she proudly came out. However, soon after, she quit her position at the university in order to protest the 1980 military coup, which introduced a monitoring institution called YÖK (Council of Higher Education in Turkish), which restricted freedoms of speech and research

in many areas at the universities. Because offering courses on women and from a feminist perspective was frowned upon, she didn't think that it would be possible for her to give the courses she really wanted to, regardless of the coup and its crippling outcomes. Her scholarly freedom, productivity, and feminism were strengthened (ironically, I guess!) after quitting her position in academia.

Tekeli had to make a living and understandably tried to remain in the social security system until her retirement. Thus, she began translating important feminist authors into Turkish such as Elisabeth Badinter (*L'un est l'autre: Des Relations entre Hommes et Femmes*), Diana Scully (*Understanding Sexual Violence: A Study of Convicted Rapists*) and Germaine Tillion (*Le harem et les cousins*) among many others. However, one of her most important works is actually a collection of articles that she edited, *1980'ler Türkiye'sinde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar*. This collection was published in German and English as well, entitled *Frauen in der Türkei der 80er Jahre* and *Women in Modern Turkish Society: A Reader* respectively. This book is considered groundbreaking in women's studies in Turkey, bringing twenty Turkish researchers and academics from different disciplines together with feminist viewpoints. It is still widely used as a reference book in gender and women's studies courses, and social sciences in general.

Beginning in the mid-eighties, Tekeli's involvement with NGOs increased. She is among the founding members of the Human Rights Association in Turkey, The Women's Library and Information Center, Istanbul Purple Roof Women's Shelter, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, KA.DER (Association for the Support of Women Candidates) and Anakültür, most of which are still active and effective NGOs. It is breathtaking, I know, and makes you wonder what kind of multivitamins she used! In a recent project application, I had a few phone conversations with women I haven't met before for bureaucratic reasons and some paper work. When I mentioned Tekeli's name as one of my referees, the tone on the other end of the receiver suddenly became friendly and helpful. I could not help but respect once again the positive impressions that she must have left on the people she cooperated with and administered in the NGOs listed above. Some of the demonstrations she supported are ingrained in the public memory, such as the "purple needle campaign" against sexual harassment, especially in crowded buses run by the municipality or on the streets. It was really in May 1987 that feminists literally took to the streets; some 3000 women marched in Istanbul to protest against the physical abuse of women and in particular the battering of women. Tekeli was one of the organizers and the public speakers of this significant event in Turkish feminist history.

At the beginning of this essay, I wrote that moving is

good for the restless. Well, Şirin Tekeli moved more than once. After she got tired of the political turmoil and the direction that the Turkish government was heading towards, she decided that it was time to leave the fight (the hard-core activism) to the younger generation in the big cities, and move to a more peaceful location in Turkey. In Bodrum, she could focus more on her translations and articles for journals and newspapers. She is much closer to nature and the milder climate of the Aegean is a better option for her health problems, which got more serious as the years go by. Thanks to the Internet, she can stay in touch with the rest of the world, although she refuses most of the invitations to conferences and other events related to NGOs or universities. She constantly reads, translates, follows certain programs on French TV channels, and keeps her languages and knowledge always fresh. Her small studio in Nice is a retreat for her body and soul, and she welcomes several friends and acquaintances around the world. She also corresponds by email or phone calls with many young women who take her as a role model.

Her mimosa-like qualities have a memorable impact on those who meet her in person. In the same way that feminists spread around our lonely planet have to adapt themselves into the local realities of the daily lives, mimosas also differ in colour and size depending on geographies in which they grow. In the Mediterranean, be it Istanbul or Nice, they bloom in bright yellow and herald the coming of spring. Sometimes they blossom even in the middle of the winter, as we witnessed in Nice. The very last image of my trip to Nice was a stranger in her sixties pulling a carry-on suitcase in one hand and a big bouquet of mimosas in the other at the Nice Airport. Traveling mimosas, I thought; travelling feminists, crossing borders while pollinating ideas and emotions around the globe. How brightly they reflect their sunshine colour in that enclosed space, challenging all the artificial lights of the airport. How empowered I felt after spending only a few days with the woman with a mimosa-soul. She convinced me that it is not about the differences but the similarities that we need to focus on in our struggles as women. "Nation-states are collapsing," were her final words before she wished me a good flight, "but feminism is becoming stronger." I looked her in the eye. "You belong to a borderless nation," she continued, "that is, of womanhood." I smiled at her and nodded after she said: "Become a world citizen in your heart and don't be a shy feminist!"

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