

LETTERS TO THE AUTHOR: LATE-OTTOMAN DEBATES  
ABOUT EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES, AN EXTRACT  
FROM HALIL HAMID'S *MÜSAVAT-I TAMME*

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## LETTERS TO THE AUTHOR: LATE-OTTOMAN DEBATES ABOUT EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES, AN EXTRACT FROM HALIL HAMID'S *MÜSAVAT-I TAMME*<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

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The 1908 restoration of the Ottoman Constitution had a transformative impact on the values associated with notions that had long been in circulation and under deliberation. Among them were liberty (*hürriyet*), equality (*müsavat*), fraternity (*uhuvvet*), and justice (*adalet*), along with the constituency's role in their achievement and maintenance. First published in 1910, Halil Hamid's *Müsavat-ı Tamme* [Complete Equality] provides a glimpse into some of the many debates surrounding the implementation of one of these aspirations in a single sphere of Ottoman society: equality among the sexes. Below is the translation of the first three letters by authors and activists that precede Hamid's own thoughts on whether 'complete equality' among the sexes is achievable. These are the perspectives of Emine Semiye (1864–1944), Mehmet Rauf (1875–1909), and Raif Necdet (1881–1936).

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid, Halil. *Müsavat-ı Tamme* (İstanbul: Leon Lütfi, 1328 [1912/13]).

## LETTERS SENT BY SOME OF OUR REFINED LITERATI REGARDING 'COMPLETE EQUALITY': FEMINISM IN ISLAM

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Wednesday, 5 *Mayis* 1326 [18 May 1910]

Those concerned with the progress and development of women, who make up the greatest component of human societies, are currently found to be occupying the highest ranks amongst the civilised nations. Because the soul of the family is woman, the womb of humanity is woman; the treasure of the abundance of hope is, invariably, woman!

At humanity's creation, woman held the rank of a beneficial animal. Nevertheless, life depended on her! In ancient Greece, wives being abandoned to their former status, the beautiful, coy, and guileful among them were elevated to such an extent that gods were virtually made in their names!!

When the Arab peoples appreciated that 'woman' was the most significant segment of the human species, they beamed with honour and glory! We can consider the following names as examples: heroes like 'Umm al-Hakim Makhzumi' who killed seven of the assailants with a tent pole in the midst of a 'battle;' great scholars like 'Umm al-Khayr' whose students, among the greatest of the *ulema*, included the likes of the brilliant 'Ibn 'Asakir' and 'Ibn Shuhnah;' 'Umm al-Khayr bint al-Haris' of Kufa, who, partial to the side of the exalted Ali during the Siffin Incident, impassioned and motivated soldiers with her poignant oratories. Oratory also brought forth those involved in politics, like 'Umm Salma' (of the pure and distinguished wives) under the caliphate of the exalted Uthman, who advised the aforementioned on emerging affairs, and 'Qahraman,' who, being the concubine and slave mother to the child of 'Muqtadir Billah' of the Abbasid Caliphate, achieved considerable dicta and personal influence in judicial affairs.

If we were to additionally consider 'Raziya' Sultan, the eleventh monarch of the 'Ghurid dynasty,' and 'Valide Kösem' of Sultan Ahmed (Khan) I's women, we would likewise be revealing the existence of quite a few politicians, as well as poets and scholars, within the remainder of the Islamic communities. It is precisely these women, in their concordance with men, who proved their feminism—unbeknownst to themselves...

I will presently answer the literary question that has been posed regarding equality between men and women, here: yes, sir, medically, there is no difference at all between the brain of a man and a woman.

"In the schools of America where there is mixed education for boys and girls, the noble teachers—who are careful to see that student numbers are always equal—have given the verdict that among those students who always gain distinction and achieve the highest grades, there is no difference between male and female."

Regarding this, I consulted the opinion of expert doctors at the *Aceze*. It is exceedingly said that ["the intelligence of women is high; their spirit is delicate and polished with transparent compassion." There are those who attribute this to our disposition and to our weakness as well!... With the increasingly established and witnessed proof of those of us who exhibit more courage and determination than men in the moment of necessity, however, we rebut that perspective!

After all, everything on life's path is a matter of habit!

In the eyes of those who have accustomed us to weakness and degradation in a constricted framework—those who have seen us brought up so powerlessly and have put confidence in men—the presumption is that women are the shadow of men!! Oh! Our careless men, showing civilised women who lack the hesitation to sacrifice all peace and welfare for the restoration of personal freedom, the façade of that constrictive framework, trying to put us to sleep—sometimes with threats, other times, with gentlemen’s lullabies!... You are labouring under a delusion... Perhaps today’s mothers will be able to remain this ignorant and numb under your hand of domination. And, perhaps, having been defeated by the embrace of this sweet slumber, others can be kept idle and forget womanhood!... The young ladies who circumnavigate an enlightened civilisation, on the other hand, as they illuminate with the page of knowledge and science which has been laid open before them, they are certainly going to feel the need to finally remove this fanatical and heavy collar forced upon womanhood, the source of humanity! They are screaming so!

Prior to speaking a few words on how feminism can be implemented for the women of Islam, I do not consider silence [e.g. on precedence] as permissible: Islam has not precluded women from commercial, agricultural, and military demands, from going to war to provide encouragement and treatment for the wounded. Mentioning cases pertaining to this would be the subject for a substantial history book. What we are trying to say is that during—and following—the time of the exalted Prophet, women were esteemed and completely free in their honourable conduct. When the age of debauchery that was the reason for the downfall of the Abbasids commenced, ‘womanhood,’ too, began to be shrouded in the adorned and gilded sheet of slavery! It is clear that our present state is a condition that is not religious, but accidental.

What we need is the purified freedom that is permitted by the *Shari’a* [divine law] of Islam. Otherwise, the point of excess (de)generated by civilisation’s exaggerated progress is also being woefully observed and contemplated by moralists in the West!!

To cast aside the benefits of civilisation and to only learn from its vanity will, of course, dim the light of the sanctity of womanhood—we would consider that an equal tragedy. What is ‘civilisation’? For contemporary women who do not yet understand its essence, to civilise irrationally (God forbid!) will add immorality atop immorality!!

Together with education, we need to be inoculated with the true feminism that is productive with virtue—Alas! Contrary to our hopes, since the commencement of our constitutional era, education is not even able to diffuse a light equivalent to its former, dim, intensity!

Seeing the existence of our zealous champions, who, hearing our whimpers from under a shroud of ignorance and fanaticism, pity us (the helpless), and labour towards our progress, we can at least become hopeful of our consolation and future—the venerable feminists in Europe, too, gained great strength from the advocacy of men, and, by those means, tried to prevail over tyrants!

After offering gratitude with the sentence, womanhood, ‘may your favours endure’, across patriots, the champions who are our assistants extend a virtuous hand, and shake.

Emine Semiye

[Undated]

Complete equality... what a splendid, what a great law! Alas, simultaneously, what a lofty, what an unattainable fantasy. Since Adam's creation to our own day, humanity is striving to achieve that fantasy. Despite the succession of so many centuries, and so much progress, however, humanity is unable to attain it—is it even possible for it to?... When considered from the perspective of ignorance, which will always govern amongst people to some extent, nature, and human nature, the answer that can be given to this question is reduced to a howl of anguish. The implementation of complete equality is impossible. But let us forget this sad truth; let us try to forget. With the ambition of reaching the mirage of gardens that form true civilization, if we were to speed up our pace a little more every day and demonstrate a little more devotion, perhaps we will come close; we may be able to come close... Human history will deliver us. The hard obstacles that have arisen (in my path) until now, like slavery, *derebey*-ism, oppression, and war, have sequentially collapsed, and are collapsing... Socialists, feminists, and suffragettes, in various groups, are battling and labouring inexhaustibly to neutralise economic and sexual domination. Even if their triumph is impossible, the smallest achievement they will attain will carry the same value as the most glorious victory. Woman should be entitled freedom to the extent permitted by the capacities of her particular natural constitution and setting. Neither must we forget these two conditions. The consequence can be more calamitous, because women are not identical in natural disposition, nor are they subject to the same social conditions everywhere. Not even an English or a German woman has yet been able to arrive at the point of maturity of being able to demand her right.

The screams echoing in our ears are not in the service of the present, but of the future. Even in the most advanced states, men are not equipped with an intellectual discipline that will defeat personal interest. Before our eyes are men who, having affixed parties to themselves, will also frequently give cabinets for the sake of securing their positions and the ambition of fame; men who raise hell; deputies who seduce clients with feasts, gifts, rhetoric, and charlatanry to attract their votes; ministers and prime ministers who, having been a socialist deputy, suddenly become conservatives with the aim of strengthening their position... The drolleries and tragedies that occur in the election field are also observed daily... When the state of affairs is such, always, how can we give the women who just yesterday appeared at the cultural stage the right to vote and the right to civil officialdom?

As for the hope of the immediate implementation of 'feminism' in our nation, it is a poisonous and dangerous vision, replete with demise and decline.

Regarding complete equality, even the progressive nations before us, whose monuments we have not been freed from being observers of, can presently only demonstrate sincerity and good intention. And there are still many successive periods of development that will pass with the slavery of women intact, because this slavery is under the provision of the helping hand a father extends to his child. As generations follow, however, and the light of knowledge wipes the records, like age and frailty, similar to the children freely able to attend their schools today, women, too, will be released from familiar slavery and attain their canonical rights to a degree commensurate with ability.

M. Rauf

3 *Nisan* 1326 [16 April 1910]

Halil Hamid Bey,

You are asking whether or not complete equality between men and women is possible. This question of yours is truly an important scientific and social matter... The sages of Europe have hitherto taken long scientific and philosophical journeys around this issue and have consequently arrived at various intellectual positions.

In my own opinion, above all else, it is *La nature* or ‘nature,’ that presents an obstacle to the establishment of an absolute equality between men and women. From every aspect, ‘nature’ is inclined to destroy equality. That having been said, with their intelligence, people have been able to slightly modify this destructive inclination extant in nature.

It is strength, the constitution of women’s bodily organs—their ‘physiology’—that engenders the considerable margin between the sexes. And this governs everything.

From the perspective of the harmony and the order of social bodies, too, the social duties of woman and man need to be different.

The natural and social duty of ‘woman’ can be summarised as bringing up the children she will gift humankind, in a manner favourable to the material and immaterial interest of ‘humanity.’ In this respect, the place of ‘woman’ in society is quite important. One should appreciate and honour women in a manner that is in accordance with the significance of this place they occupy in social life. One should work towards compensating women for the ‘inequality’ produced by nature—which is therefore necessarily considered natural—by bestowing upon them respect, comfort, and consideration. For men, this is a civil and human duty. To scorn women and their social and patriotic duties is nothing more than a sign of barbarity and negligence.

Nor can I restrain myself from uttering that, in reprisal for this inequality extant in social life, I am in favour of advocating complete equality supported by intimacy and compassion between husband and wife in their life of matrimony. A virtuous wife whimpering beneath the oppressive claw of a severe and arrogant husband is earnestly deserving of mercy. As for a husband like this, he is surely worthy of abomination.

Raif Necdet

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A. Ebru Akcasu is a PhD candidate in the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Her research evaluates migration and national identity formation in the late-Ottoman context.