

The Social Presence of Turkish Women in TV Series Shown in Spain

Nesrin Karavar. Professor of Turkish language and literature and researcher, University of Barcelona

This article analyses two highly successful Turkish television series in Spain: *Ethos* (2020) on Netflix, *Woman* (2017) on Antena 3, and also *Lovebird* (2013), subtitled in Spanish, to analyse the process of modernisation of the Turkish Muslim woman through the small screen. The three soap operas reflect different female issues, as well as dealing with the difficulties women experience in reconciling their personal and professional life as something normal. Moreover, they take the problems of non-dominant groups very seriously and explore subjects of public interest, such as the existence of strong and single women, while acting as a social mirror that reflects and feeds public conversations and debates of great importance for much of the population.

There is nothing in Constantinople as mysterious and unattainable as women.

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez

We can provide an extensive definition of art, religion or cinema, as well as all those habits, customs or knowledge that identify a person as a member of a society, and therefore, of a certain community. The members of any society have the same needs for food or protection from the cold. In any case, what interests cultural theorists are the modulations, so to speak, that are revealed to be different depending on the societies and the periods analysed. As Julio Camba (1884-1962) argues in the case of Turks: “The public life of Turks will be perfected a little. The soul of the East will be the same” (Camba, 2015: 229).

If, when looking at an intentional definition of culture, we ask about the first of the cultural signs that can properly illustrate it, we will end up with television series. It should be noted that Carlos Saura does not believe that naturalism exists on the screen, since in the cinema everything is false as it tries to create a naturalism in the characters that they actually lack because they are actors and are performing. Having clarified this, Saura believes that both naturalism and realism can be right or wrong, depending on the director (Saura, 1973: 19).

Throughout history, the image of the Turkish woman has been portrayed in different ways

and varying contexts, not least on television. Turkish women have a notable presence in current television series and, particularly, in terms of main characters, they have played an active role in the construction of gender stereotypes that, in some way, shape and influence our perception of reality. Thus, this construction gives back to society a transformed look that both exists and does not exist.

The history of Turkish modernisation can be identified with the struggle between two currents: the Westernist and the traditionalist, which over time have evolved in terms of notions of identity and equality. From the 19th century, Ottoman society underwent a series of changes. The issue of women was at the very heart of the debate: in a Muslim country, the role of women in society defines the very challenges of Westernisation, as we see when we look at the life of the poet Adile Sultan (1826-1899), the novelist Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), the traveller Zeynep Hamm (d. 1923) and other women of their time.

In 1893, Clotilde Cerdá (Esmeralda Cervantes, 1861-1926), the harp teacher in the harem of the Yıldız palace in Istanbul between 1890 and 1893, expressed her opinion about the change in Muslim women at that time: “Today many, most Muslim ladies speak French, English or German. This very instruction they receive makes them forget their religious education and national customs, wanting to live in the European fashion; you cannot get a real idea of the principles of Muslim life from these women because they do not know it themselves” (Cervantes, 1893: 2).

Female Gender Stereotype and Turkish Social Change

As the researcher Elena Galán (in Gallo, 2009) notes, women are becoming the leads in many drama series as a consequence of their greater

acquisitive power and social changes. This not only concerns the presence of women as major characters but also the type of stories told in these series, framed in the context of the struggle for social freedoms. The question is whether the proposed model is capable of echoing the changes that society is progressively experiencing until achieving the female leader. The female characters of the three Turkish series chosen for this article closely resemble the Turkish reality. From an aesthetic point of view, they have a fairly standardised beauty. They are attractive women but they do not try to create a feeling of inferiority in female viewers and you often have to wait twenty episodes for the first kiss, as happened in Spanish films of the sixties.

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According to the Istanbul correspondent of the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, Jordi Joan Baños, Turkey combines hard power and soft power like few others to sell its soap operas (Baños, 2020). The series are very powerful products because they help to construct the “social imaginary” according to the European image of the female characters forged in the Kemalist ideals of civilisation, which reach the egalitarian ideal. Thus, progressive men determine the participation of women in public life, and through their participation in social life the women of the Republic, under the protection of a man and above all of Atatürk (1881-1938), the father of all Turks, take on the civilising mission of civilisation presented to them (Göle, 1991: 89).

Turkish women with a hijab are less visible in Turkish soaps and are normally relegated to secondary roles; in fact, when they appear,



Mujer, a Turkish TV series shown in Spain.

they are not even portrayed correctly, as they are shown with quite uncommon clothing or headscarves. Even their hair can be made out behind them, which is quite unusual among conservative women (Otero Soliño, 2016). The hijab, as a symbol of Islamisation for Turkish directors of soaps, expresses rejection of Western civilisation.

This issue, explored in the last series in 2020 from Netflix, *Ethos*, was very controversial in Turkey among secular people and conservatives. The main character, Meryem, is a young single woman wearing a hijab who works as a cleaner, while other women without a hijab from higher economic classes have better education and jobs. As Margaret Mead comments: “Culture has its own set of rules, by which the power and complementary balance between the sexes is maintained. But these rules differ, and are sometimes even contradictory, as between different national groups or economic classes” (Mead, 1950: 283).

Accounts of Turkish Women by Spanish Travellers

The social presence of Turkish women in the works of Spanish travellers, as well as those of other Orientalists, was a mystery and gave rise to a fascination with the exoticism of the East. These emotions are still present in the

collective imaginary, as shown in the following sentence from an article about the protagonist of the series *Woman (Kadin)*: “A drama that perfectly reflects the situation in which thousands of women in Turkey live every day” (Llorente, 2020).

In *Viaje de Turquía*, a literary work written between 1557 and 1558, Pedro Urdemalas writes about how European Western culture has been reworked by the imaginary female discourse about the East:

“Mata: Are Turkish women very dark?

“Pedro: Not even the Greeks or Jews, rather all are very white and very beautiful.

“Juan: Even being so far from the Orient they are white? I thought they would be like Indians.”

In his written chronicles from Istanbul in 1908, Julio Camba, another 19th century traveller, describes Turkish women thus: “Turkish women are, truly, impossible to win over, and I do not say this as someone who has not won the heart of any: after all, this would not be feasible in six days, because this would only be enough for the real Don Juan [...]. I hope that the Constitution will resolve this matter a little. The Constitution must be good for women” (Camba, 2017: 134).

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said shows how the West has shaped the identity of the East: “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 2003: 3).

In particular, the Turkish woman’s relationship with her body and man is surprising and uncomfortable, as Julio Camba shows: “The Turkish woman has always been for the Turkish man. No European has ever lifted the veil that covers the face of a Turkish woman to look into her eyes with an expression of love” (Camba, 2017: 132). Vicente Blasco Ibáñez confirms Julio Camba’s words in this way: “Living here, the European man has

become convinced by the blatant lies of the novelists and poets when describing romantic engagements between Turks and Christians” (Ibáñez, 2016: 199).

One of the main novelties of this phenomenon is that, on this occasion, it is not foreigners who create the image of the Turkish woman but Turks themselves who do so through the series

For this article we have chosen two Turkish television series that are very popular in Spain: *Ethos* (2020), on Netflix, and *Woman* (2017), on Antena 3. We will also mention the series *Lovebird* (2013), subtitled in Spanish, to analyse and find a common framework of stereotypes in the process of modernisation of the Muslim Turkish woman through these series. One of the main novelties of this phenomenon is that, on this occasion, it is not foreigners who create the image of the Turkish woman but Turks themselves who do so through the series.

Lovebird (Çalikuşu) (2013)

Lovebird (Çalikuşu) is a series set in the 1920s and adapted from the novel by the Turkish writer Reşat Nuri Güntekin, published in 1922, still in the period of the Ottoman Empire. The protagonist, Feride, represents the first image of modern women in novels written by men. Feride is receiving a Western education at a French secondary school in Istanbul. The first episode in the series is set in a school garden, with her French teacher speaking in Turkish and French and accompanying the girls, dressed in Western uniforms. Through the screen, details of the modernisation process are seen not only through the character of Feride but also in the decoration of the house, new eating habits, table manners, furniture, male and female clothing and the characters' gestures.

The character of Feride is a prototype of the new Republican woman: she speaks French, is independent, works to earn her own money, is idealistic, and travels alone to Anatolia to teach and share her education. Feride is not simply a fictional character. At that time, the novelists Halide Edip Adivar (1884-1964) or Suat Derviş (1905-1972), to cite two examples, led an idealistic life very similar to Feride's. The character fights against the macho customs of the Anatolian people, although she wears a hijab to protect herself from male attention. Clotilde Cerdá, in her speech at the Chicago Congress of 1893 entitled “Education and Literature of the Women of Turkey”, explains the influence of these reforms on the lives of women, as we can see on screen through Feride: “I can confidently say that the level of education and development [of these women] is in no way inferior to the education of our most intelligent ladies. Various European authors have constructed a misconception of female education in the East based on completely false interpretations of the Koran, which, according to them, condemns women to ignorance” (Cervantes, 1893: 3). With the advent of the Turkish Republic in 1923, women like Feride became present in the urban space and participated in social life, while customs of foreign origin prevailed.

Woman (2017)

Before the screen, the new image of the independent Turkish woman was brilliantly manifested for the first time in the novels and life of the writer Fatma Aliye (1862-1936). An example is her novel *Udi* [The Lute Player], translated into French by Gustave Seon in 1899. In *Udi*, a young widowed woman gives private lute lessons to earn money to buy her own home. Fatma Aliye's characters are always independent women who feel united with the people, have a strong personality, and fight

against the archetypes of the “woman in need of protection” and the “sensitive woman”. Her book about the first women of the Islam era, *Namdaran-ı Zenan-ı İslamiyan*, is one of the first mentioned by studies about the history of Turkish feminism (Karavar, 2020: 122).

Undoubtedly, the female characters of television series are adapted to very appropriate roles to determine the gender values of society. The success of the Turkish soap opera *Woman*, an adaptation of a Japanese drama of the same name written by Yuji Sakamoto, is defined by its embracing of transformation and its open attitude to social changes because it takes into account other distant cultures and realities and adapts to them. It also connects with the global tastes of an audience that is more open and multicultural than ever, and hungry for passionate stories. Despite this transformation, women are still frequently portrayed in relation to the world of emotions or motherhood, while protection is the responsibility of their husband – her protector –, as shown by the Turkish academic Yeşim Arat in relation to the women who become part of social life (Arat, 1989).

Women are still frequently portrayed in relation to the world of emotions or motherhood, while protection is the responsibility of their husband

The main character of *Woman* is Bahar, a young widow with two children living in Istanbul. At first she seems very Western to us, but after losing her husband – that is, her protector – she begins to live with her two children according to the values imposed by society: she forgets to smile, forgets to be happy. From the loss of her protector begins a life full of struggles against a despotic God, mixing Western equality with Turkish tradition. Resigned to her fate, she is strong but passive, sweet and obedient.

According to the academic Rodrigo Mesonero, the series *Woman*, the second Turkish soap opera seen in Spain, is revolutionising national audience levels, as it easily attains over 17% of viewers with every broadcast. According to Mesonero, the keys to this success can be attributed to the technical and narrative quality of the series (Mesonero, 2020).

Furthermore, in the soap operas *Lovebird* and *Woman* we can see the process of change in ideas of beauty by comparing the characters of Feride and Bahar. For centuries, to Turks, beauty has suggested whiteness and long dark hair, but this conception has been gradually displaced by European beauty. Thus, the active woman, who works alongside men, has narrower taller hips and reflects the new European aesthetics, far removed from the women of Orientalist painting.

Ethos (Bir Başkadır) (2020)

In Turkish TV series, the independent and combative model of the modern Turkish woman cannot be applied to the definition of modernity. The history of Turkish thought reflects the permanent debate between progressives and conservatives, between two different projects of society, as we can see in the series *Ethos (Bir Başkadır)* (2020). As Nilüfer Göle argues, the concept of civilisation (comparable to Western, and specifically French, civilisation) has impregnated the intellectual and social life of Muslim countries and has altered the customs to the point that being civilised equates with being Western. In other words, the appearance of the Turkish woman in the public space and the mixing of the sexes in that space form the touchstone of this voluntary Westernisation (Göle, 1991: 11).

In this respect, English traveller Lucy Garnett (1849-1954) said of Ottoman children: “Now, current Ottoman culture has lost its

own identity and is only imitating the West. The method of education has changed. At least children's schools have a more European teaching" (Garnett, 2019: 521).

Ethos provides a magnificent portrait of progressive and conservative women. Through the figure of the lead character, Meryem, the adoption of the hijab represents a simple return to the past, to traditions. Behind the hijab is an unassuming Muslim woman, passive and uneducated, yet combative when it comes to earning her own money. Thus, the series does not break with the image of the traditional Muslim woman, but has been considered an offence and a perversion by conservatives, which may seem like a political protest movement. It seems that certain limits cannot be crossed to avoid upsetting the Turkish audience and advertisers, such as the fact that the daughter of the imam of the neighbourhood mosque, Hayrünnisa, is a secret lesbian. Turkish soap operas increasingly show the human body but the Muslim body follows the rhythm of a discipline imposed by morality and faith and turns this difference with Western civilisation into a political issue.

This series tries to highlight the social and cultural meaning of the women's movement, which not only concerns politics but also gives it a different meaning. It is not made from a feminist, progressive or Islamic point of view. Quite the contrary, it is the product of a look rather than an affirmation of convictions, which fills a void in political and religious issues.

Conclusions

Among the protagonists of the three series, an evolution is perceived in the female characters that materialises in two aspects: the visibility of female issues, and normalisation when facing the difficulties of reconciling personal and professional life. The female characters

are stronger, more independent and determined, but they are still the main caregivers and responsible for the home and bringing up children. Professionally, they must show that they can be successful despite their family responsibilities. They continue to appear as eminently sensitive, and have often been abandoned or betrayed. When they have more open relationships, they have to justify themselves and fight against the opinions of others.

The three male directors of the soap operas endeavour to use their camera to show the truth contained in the following words of the Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle: "The history of Turkey can be seen as a wilful effort to launch a cultural bridge to the western shore and the status of women in Turkey has been shaped by Westernisation. For this modernist project, women occupy a central place" (Göle, 1991: 8).

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In the end, the directors of the new Turkish Constitution answered Julio Camba's question to his Madrid readers from Istanbul: "Will the new Constitution rip the veil from Turkish women? If so, what new emotion of beauty would the world experience?" (Camba, 2015: 135).

The three soaps analysed take the problems of socially non-dominant groups very seriously. In addition, they represent issues of public interest such as the existence of strong single women, while acting as a social mirror that reflects and feeds conversations and public debates of great importance for much of the population, such as gender and social inequality in Turkey. Finally, they clearly serve as a mechanism to "normalise" a country with a language and culture different from those of Arab countries.

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Atelier d'écriture de femmes, Forum Femmes Méditerranée.