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“Women started marching towards each other. We started walking to each other... Once upon a time we were there, on the roads that you'll take, in the places you will pass today. On the road you will take are our voices, our stories and our traces. You wouldn't have heard us before because we were silenced, we were scared. Now we are walking with you so that we can overcome our fears. Let's hold each others' hands and shout and let our screams merge into each other. Let's raise each others' voices. So that no one will suppress our voices against violence any more.”

This was the letter by *Hay Gin* Armenian Women's Platform to the organizers of “Women are Marching Towards Eachother” campaign that took place in 6-11th July 2002. The idea of the campaign was that “messengers” from various cities would go through the cities, towns and villages on their roads, collecting letters from women about their problems and demands; arrive at Konya, the geographical center of the country, to hold a conference where they would read their reports and letters and discuss the problems and possible solutions. I will tell about this campaign in details in the following lines.

Departing from the question “how will we live together with our differences?” that we, as activist women, have been dealing with in various women's organizations in Turkey within the last decade, in this paper I will try to discuss how the dialogue between women of different identities that come together to create networks of solidarity for struggling against violence and talking about peace could be considered as a powerful challenge to the newly emerging discourse of liberal identity/cultural politics and the destructive effects of the neoliberal policies in Turkey.

Within the last decades in Turkey a strong intellectual and activist opposition has become visible/audible in the public sphere against the nation-state project dwelling on the imaginary of a unified ‘national identity’ based on one ethnicity, one language and one culture, grounding its legitimacy on a nationalist, militarist historiography. The line of critique problematizing the exclusive, repressive and violent sovereignty of the ‘national’ has developed in relation to various grassroots movements around the world, the intellectual and political language shaped by these movements as well as the demands of the groups struggling for recognition in Turkey. The discussion on the issue of “differences” introduced us a new concept that has long been in circulation in global scale: “Multiculturalism”. The term started to be used by activists, intellectuals, columnists, by people from different backgrounds with different political stances in Turkey, regardless of the history, the very social contexts within which the concept and the politics of multiculturalism was shaped in countries such as US, Europe and Australia, as well as the meanings attributed to it by different groups in different geographies. Obviously, in a context marked by war, violence against Kurdish people struggling for recognition, violations of minority rights in every sphere of life, ongoing imprisonment of people due to their political opinions and activities, and many other violent militarist policies of the state, the definition of “multiculturalism” became a contested space. Because the idea of multiculturalism in Turkey was directly related to the remembrance of the violent annihilation of “difference” in Anatolia with the establishment of the nation-state, many intellectuals and activists took a strong critical stance for bringing the violence and discriminations in the past and the present into public discussion. But on the other hand simultaneously, a liberal stance evolved among various media, academic and arts circles that has fashioned a discourse of “how tolerant we are towards our minorities”, especially referring to non-muslim groups regarding them as the “vanishing colors of Anatolia” or a part of “the Anatolian mosaic”.

This liberal way of speaking about cultures as “colors” that dominates the discourse on cultural politics today is clearly a continuation of the hegemonic nationalist cultural politics in its attempts of suppressing the past and present experiences of the people with different ethnic identities. This perspective dwelling on the idea of dead cultures closes all the spaces of vocalizing the fact that today in Turkey the conditions of living for different cultures has already been lost. This discourse tries to cover the long history of displacement and loss that people in Anatolia has been experiencing. In the picture it presents there is no possibility of expressing the fact that for decades people had a restricted relationship with their cultures, histories and memories because the “national identity”, the “national culture” and the official “Turkish History” were constructed by repressing, denying or assimilating the “different” ethnic identities and cultures in Anatolia. This “new” discourse of cultural politics is another attempt for repressing the memories of Turkification with regard to the cultural heritage of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Kurds, Zazas, Assyrians, Arabs, Circassians and other ethnic and religious groups.

Just because the very result of the Turkification practices during the institutionalization period of the republic has been the displacement of different ethnic groups from the collective memories of people living in Turkey and the cultural representations of the Anatolian geography, this new discourse of “cultures” pretending a “naivety” with an “interest” in “ethnic cultures” could become quite well commercialized and consumed by masses without questioning. Although the intellectuals and activists have been trying to make visible the processes through which non-muslim groups started to be regarded as “foreigners” in their homelands and how they experienced various otherization practices, discriminations and violence, these voices are either marginalized or incorporated into a discourse of justification. In the cases that are not considered to be “damaging” the state’s image and sovereignty, we hear a cynical apology. But of course the apologies always go to the ones who has already left the country and don’t have any possibility to have any claims. And of course the whole idea

of “the empire of tolerance” is involved with the fetishization of a nostalgia. The experiences of non-muslim groups started to be spoken about in Turkey in a period when they have been already expelled from the Anatolian geography and their cultural heritage was nearly lost.

Unfortunately, this perspective is not challenged by many people of the left. Many academicians, many intellectuals who claimed to be the defenders of “minority rights” as well as the members of “minority” groups themselves started to fill the subject positions opened up by the “colors” discourse that tries to present living cultures as frozen museum pieces detached from their meanings, contexts, histories, social relations and specific geographies.

The issue of “minorities” in Turkey cannot be discussed without taking the relations with the European Union into consideration. Although many oppressed groups benefitted from the regulations EU has set as political requirements for Turkey’s membership to the union, the model that EU foresees for Turkey’s democratization is far from challenging the existing asymmetries of power between state and the people. This is because the way the term “minority” is used in Turkey falls short in representing the experiences of violence, oppression, invisibility, alienation, uneasiness and so on, that the non-dominant groups experience within nation-states. There is the tendency towards reducing the issue of democratization and the discussion of “difference” into a problem of “rights”, formulated by way of stating that there is a nation-state, which is supposed to represent all of its citizens and the only problem is that this state does not grant equal rights to its “minority” citizens. This perspective obviously does not question the processes within which the states claim the lands where different ethnic groups have been living as their “national territory” and falls short in understanding what does being a “minority” in Turkey actually means. I argue that the experiences of displacement and loss define the sense of being a “minority” in Turkey. I believe without focusing on these experiences it is impossible to talk about any non-dominant ethnic group in the country. To be able to understand these experiences, one has to hear the

narratives of the people without translating them into her own power position. I argue that the only space where this is tried to be achieved in Turkey is the women's movement.

Searching for answers to the questions "How will we stand side by side? How will we stand as one?" "How will we recognize each others' different experiences and struggle for each others' rights?" "How will we get organized around our gendered identities with our ethnic, cultural, class, sexual, regional, religious and bodily differences?" has become a central issue in the agenda of women's movement in Turkey within the last decade. Starting with 1990s, as a result of the struggles of Kurdish women who have challenged the homogenous categories of womanhood by underlining the existing power relations among women and by talking especially about the military violence they have been facing in their region, women's movement had to consider critical multiculturalism, anti-racism and anti-militarism as a part of its immediate political agenda.

Within women's movement in Turkey today, among its diverse components, we witness a constant attempt for creating a model for "being together" for finding the ways of "living together in peace", which is mostly because of the urgent need for peace in the context of the ongoing war. In the following lines I will be explaining how women's strategies of dialogue posit strong challenges to the above mentioned liberal identity politics.

Women's movement is the only space within the oppositional politics where multiculturalism is considered as an immediate political project. Moreover, it is the only space where the liberal discourse of "cultures" can be challenged. For example, within women's movement there is always the attempt for having a multilingual public appearance. I consider this as a potential resistance to the "colors" discourse that tries to represent cultures as dead entities and closes all the channels for speaking about the state's prohibitions against the practice of ethnic languages and cultures. Fighting for the linguistic rights has been a crucial issue for women from different organizations collaborating with Kurdish women. As a protest against the restrictions of the public usage of the Kurdish language, the public speeches and

slogans in women's demonstrations, the press releases and the scripts on the flyers are most of the time both in Turkish and Kurdish. After the participation of the Armenian women into several organizations, Armenian and Greek slogans and scripts too started to appear on the covers of the brochures and flyers.

The most important criticism to the liberal cultural politics by women is that they vocalize their awareness of conflicts and injustice between different ethnic groups. Women try to unlearn the official narratives of history and uncover the silenced layers of the past that are taboo issues in Turkey. In several occasions we, Armenian women were invited to Amargi Women's Academia Initiative in order to talk about the Armenian women's history and feminist activities during the Ottoman period, about the discriminations non-muslim minorities faced throughout the republican history in Turkey and about our familial stories of surviving the Genocide.

Aside from the networks we had in Istanbul, by creating networks we tried to get in touch about the actual problems and demands of women throughout the country. I believe these networks themselves through which women get informed about each others' activities, organize and cooperate can be considered as very influential channels of resistance against liberal politics, which operates on the basis of dividing, isolating and governing the different groups one by one. The most dangerous deception of liberal multiculturalism is that it provides representations of different cultures in the public sphere in such a way that we forget to ask the questions "where are the actual producers of these cultures?" "what kind of problems they face in their everyday lives in practicing their identities?", etc. Women by stressing the problems and demands of different ethnic groups in Turkey disrupt this deception.

Here I would like to explain about the "Women are Marching Towards Eachother" campaign in detail. I tried to explain the purpose of the campaign above. In this campaign we mainly tried to vocalize the problems of women from different backgrounds, but at the same

time we tried to reach women and be there in order to support them. I consider the very practice of hearing the stories, experiences, problems, desires and demands of women in different locations as a very important life experience but besides that, I think it was a very creative feminist method of political action. Through our bodily experiences, our being there, hugging each other, holding each others' hands, sometimes singing together, eating together, through all these practices we were touching eachothers' lives. We were telling our own stories and stories of other women that we had visited.

What was so important about the campaign was that, it created networks in two levels. One level was the networks created among women's organizations that hosted us in each city. This network is somehow institutionalized today through internet listserves and other channels of communication. Second level was more of an informal network, which was experienced among the messengers coming from different cities. I consider the experience of having sleepless nights together with women in a dormitory room, where we were reading the letters and trying to categorize them in order to be able to write our reports as a provocative way of doing feminist politics. At some points we were discussing about the things such as if it is a good idea to categorize the letters or should we just read the most striking ones, should we publish all the letters in a book so that each voice could be heard.

Despite the police intervention and not being able to realize our conference, our coming together in Konya was significant because for the first time women from earthquake region, war region and from different parts of the country could have a conversation about the possible ways of solidarity. After returning back to Istanbul, for months we worked on the letters that we had collected in order to publish a detailed report. What was very powerful about this process again was that the report was written by various working groups in different cities communicating, discussing through the internet and deciding on the content and the language of the report. The report booklet finally had two parts: Problems and demands. Besides the common problems of all women, we wrote specific problems of each

group or each region. One of the reasons why this report was so important for me was that for the first time in Turkey, Armenian women had their specific demands publicly visible in a political manifesto declared by women of different identities. I believe women's efforts for vocalizing each others' problems and demands is a great challenge to the policies trying to repress the interaction and communication between different groups by closing all the channels of politicization. I would like to read the part of the report on Armenian women in order to give you a sense of it: "We, Armenian women, have shouldered a heavy weight. Our load is silence. Even we ourselves become alienated from our history, stories, and songs that are considered dangerous. Since our identity is confined into the pages of history books or international law debates, our contemporary problems become invisible. Our neighbors, friends are alien to our language, culture and existence." And the demands part goes like: "we want to live in a society respectful to differences. We want the means to develop the Armenian culture as a living entity in order to live together with the other cultures in Turkey. We don't want the Armenians living in Turkey be considered as foreigners or enemies. We don't want these kind of things to be used as justifications of violence. We want to practice our equal citizen rights. We don't want to be insulted, discriminated, or threatened because of our ethnic identity. We want that the physical and verbal violence against Armenian institutions stop. We want that the discriminatory laws are rearranged. We want history books that do not include discriminatory expressions against Armenians. History should be discussed freely within a democratic discussion. We don't want the restrictions against expressing the past experiences of Armenians. We want academic departments in universities for the Armenian language instruction and we need teachers for the Armenian schools."

I don't have time for providing more examples from women's gatherings but I don't want to conclude my words without mentioning the "Organizing Our Liberation" conference which was held in Istanbul between 21-22 December 2002 with the purpose of discussing the current issues of the women's movement. Over 200 women from various

universities, gay and lesbian organizations from Ankara and Istanbul, feminist networks, Armenian women's platform, Kurdish women's organizations from Istanbul, Diyarbakir, Batman and other cities, women's organizations from Antakya, Mersin, Bursa, etc, leftist women's organizations, small and large scale institutionalized and uninstitutionalized groups, women's journals, leftist journals, Kurdish journals, solidarity centers, women's shelters, filmmakers, political parties from center to radical left as well as from workers' unions participated into the workshops where we discussed about difference, new directions in the women's movement, methods of organization, etc. There are many more things to say about the networks and platforms we have in Istanbul such as "Women Against War" platform, re-named as "Istanbul Women's Platform", which have been a very powerful component of the anti-war demonstrations in Istanbul that have risen with the beginning of the Iraqi war.

I would like to conclude my words by saying that I don't argue that the different components of the women's movement in practice could achieve resisting against the liberal multiculturalist discourses but I believe that the specific methods women try to develop within the movement can be considered as significant tools for the formulation of an alternative model of multiculturalism. Thus, I believe, doing politics on the basis of experience is the only way we can achieve critical and substantive multiculturalism. Experience enables us to share the way we live our identities in our everyday lives with all the senses, emotions, desires and pain and as an analytical and political tool it enables us to understand the way subjectivities are created through these elements within certain temporal and spatial configuration of the subject. And I believe, the power of feminism in challenging liberalism comes from the centrality of experience to its methodology.



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