



Emine Semiye Önasya

1864-1944

Emine Semiye Hanım, a writer, teacher, and activist, was the daughter of a prominent intellectual family. One of the first Turkish women to be educated in Europe, she studied psychology and sociology in Switzerland and France. Her sister Fatma Aliye Hanım is considered the first Turkish woman novelist.

Excerpts from “Deprived of the Right to Live” which was originally written in Ottoman print. *Gayya Kuyusu* was transliterated and reprinted in 2015 by Homer Yayınları.

Translated by: Selen Erdoğan and Roberta Micallef

Excerpt From “Hayat Hakkından Hariç” Gayya Kuyusu, by Emine Semiye

Deprived of the Right to Live

Translated by Selen Erdoğan and Roberta Micallef

In late June 1914, this poor family which had fallen on hard times was forced to move to a dilapidated house behind *Yeni Cami*, just beyond the fountain. Halime Hanım’s family residence in Şemsi Paşa had been sold, and after the money from the sale quickly dwindled, they couldn’t afford to rent a comparable house. Apart from its decrepit condition, the location of the new house was unsuitable. The most wretched prostitutes lived by the fountain which they made even filthier by scattering their louse while nitpicking, and washing their scabies and wounds without soap. This disgusting fountain area witnessed prostitutes crying out of hunger at night, and it also served as a bargaining site for their equally despicable friends seeking their services. How these common soldiers and shabby, dubious men negotiated in the most wicked ways there! They degraded the honor of womanhood, and they mistreated these fallen women who were begging for a bite of bread. The poorest creatures amongst them were given a good thrashing in addition to their meager fee of sixty pennies. To avoid a second beating at the hands of the innkeeper, they cowered like dogs near the foot of the fountain, tormented by hunger pains that couldn’t be quelled even by drinking water. While the flatness of this neighborhood was convenient for Halime Hanım to go shopping, the dangerous environment robbed Rezin of her freedom, leaving the older women regretting the move. Unable to visit the marketplace, Rezin spent all of her spare time after housework either reading novels or observing the incidents occurring around the fountain. As she witnessed the wretched conditions of these women and their half-naked, scar-covered bodies, Rezin began to view her own miserable life as a blessing. Oh God! What a state of happiness that was!

In the year 1914, the depression and days of hunger, when even the strongest stomachs struggled to digest the loaves of rationed bread that were kneaded with a kind of of millet and even its refuse, those streetwalkers, who had been deprived of their right to live,

were not given ration cards of their own, but each one was considered the responsibility of the innkeeper with whom they were associated. During the nights that these unfortunate women were unable to sell their wretched bodies, they were beaten instead of being provided with bread. They had to spend the night curled up in the courtyards of mosques, against the walls of desolate streets or at the feet of fountains. Meanwhile, Tarhan, who escaped from prison for the second time, was captured by the constabulary and sent back to jail. This terrible news caused Halime Hanım to once again experience a heavy nosebleed. Consequently, as the poor lady couldn't go shopping, Fitnat and Rezin took on the responsibility together. During their early morning shopping trips, they saw prostitutes rummaging through the greengrocer's garbage, attacking watermelon and melon rinds lying in front of the grocery counters like a pack of wolves due to their hunger. They snatched pieces of bones discarded by butchers from one another faster than dogs. Rezin and Fitnat were deeply saddened by such displays of animalistic behavior from humans. Halime Hanım, driven by compassion, was swift to show mercy and help these women who did not possess anything but their diseased bodies. Although her family was no longer powerful, she collected whatever remained of their God given daily sustenance and she put in a clay pot named "the prostitutes' bowl." She placed tiny pieces of bread on a piece of paper and handed them out. She made sure that everyone in the house refrained from touching the bowl, which she cleaned herself with a piece of cloth wrapped around a stick. Also, she occasionally threw pieces of soap to the women. While the prostitutes received their pickings, they earnestly prayed for the lady:

"May God not reduce you to hell on earth like us. May your daily bread be halal and abundant."

One day, as Rezin was watching her grandmother offering food to the prostitutes, she inquired why they did not work. Hanife, the bigwig of all those prostitutes, aged between twenty-five and thirty, with a flat face, and relatively fewer scars, always merry, burst into laughter and said:

"Oh, little miss, who would accept us with our ailments into their homes so that we can work?"

Hanife had a Çankırı accent. Because Rezin was ignorant, she asked in a pristine manner

again:

“Wouldn’t your illness get better?”

Hanife, laughed even longer:

“My dear lady, you have no idea about our condition, and may God spare you from experiencing it”

Surprised. Rezin asked:

“What do you mean?”

From a distance, Hürmüz, the tall and emaciated prostitute holding her left side to alleviate her pain, chimed in with a Diyarbakır accent:

“No need to ask, little lady. Don’t dig too deep! We’re treated worse than the animals! Can’t you see that we eat street scraps because we don’t have ration cards?”

Halime Hanım, with a compassionate look in her eyes, said:

“God is the most merciful. He would accept your penitence if you repent sincerely and then you could find people who would accept you into their homes, but only if you truly desire this.”

Two younger prostitutes cried out:

“Oh, our great lady! We are so regretful that we are willing to become the slaves of the person who would throw us a piece of bread as if we were dogs. But, people do not even want to feel sorry for us, let alone take us into their homes!” Halime asked: “Don’t you have any relatives?”

Hanife responded:

“I have an aunt. She is a religious and morally upright woman. She brought me from my hometown, took care of me, and raised me. I had an accident. Her husband is Leblebici Tosun Aga. After nearly beating me to death, he forced me to marry a seventy-year-old carpenter. I could only tolerate him for one year. I thought my lover would marry me. But when my husband divorced me, I had no choice but to walk the streets. My aunt sends me money as charity from time to time. Her husband died last year. If I repent now she might accept me.”

Suddenly her sorrow diminished and she remarked:

“What would you do, my lady? I have become used to this wickedness, I might

not be able to go straight. Why would I break my aunt's heart again?"

Halime Hanım said:

"May God guide you all to the right path! How many of you are there?"

Hanife replied:

"We are countless. No one can endure this job of cemetery exchanges for more than three months. A prostituteeee (they pronounced the word prostitute in Turkish and extended its pronunciation) who falls here drops dead either in a cemetery or in a rubbish dump."

But, Hürmüz, pointing to Hanife and using her nickname, Y, added: "This Crooked Y and I have been dragging on for seven years neither illness nor poverty has managed to kill us."

Crooked Y leaned heavily on her left side and said:

"Oh, there is a customer for me every day! I'm not allowed to die!" Hanife, her belly full, and a seemingly happy expression on her face, laughed at Hürmüz with a suggestive tone:

"You can't die, you hot-blooded bitch! Every customer is looking for you!"

Mmm...

Halime Hanım silenced Hanife and Rezin had already gone up. When the prostitutes left the food bowl in front of the door, a thin, and ugly woman jumped to the ground like a ravenous wolf and licked the bread crumbs.

As Rezin was watching all this from the window, she cried out:

"Oh my God! This is Cilve!"

And Halime Hanım from the street:

"Oh, my dear girl, she doesn't look like her at all!"

The prostitute, a skeletal figure devoid of any shame, got up, raised her hideous forehead to the window, put her hands on her hips and said:

"Rezin Hanım, take a look..." and she started dancing around.

Fitnat, who had reached the building's door, exclaimed:

"Is this woman Cilve or a freak? Oh my! I swear to God, it's her! The same old cheeky one! Damn you vile creature!" As Rezin berated her, shameless Cilve went on

dancing.

Halime Hanım ran to the kitchen, grabbed two slices of bread that were meant for her own dinner, and gave them to Cilve:

“Do you remember? Together we ate the bread you took from the emergency crew that came to our neighborhood during the fire? Now it’s payback time!” * On the fifth day of August 1914, Yekta arrived in Üsküdar from Bülbül Deresi with the help of the milkman. By the time she reached Üsküdar, Rezin had already finished her household chores and was in her usual spot by the window, watching the prostitutes wading in the muddy waters of the puddle in front of the fountain attempting to clean themselves. In between their quarrels these women were fooling around, joking, yelling, and laughing. Perhaps due to the cacophony resembling cries of torture, an infuriated Fitnat grabbed her broomstick and stormed toward the door: “You swine, you rascals! We’ve had enough! Be quiet, or I’ll knock your heads off!”

She turned to her mother who appeared in front of the kitchen and exclaimed:

“What kind of house did you rent? This is a brothel!” She yelled, consumed by rage.

From the upstairs window Rezin shouted:

“Oh my God! I cannot believe my eyes! Who is that I see?!”

Rezin’s outcry interrupted the racket and swearing, and all eyes turned toward the young woman being led there by Cilve. Although she had fallen on her way there and become dirty, her appearance was of a flower that had not yet lost its beauty. The prostitutes licked their lips as they eyed her attire. She wore a maroon blouse adorned with cream lace, which was visible through the torn crepe de chine cape. Her elegant, buckled loafers were made of patent black leather, and the translucence of her matching silk stockings showcased her beautifully shaped small feet. Her black veil was made of an expensive tulle. Hanife, as was her custom, named her as everyone was watched:

“Oh! Here is Tango Y, who came to join us! Hey Sister Cilve, where did you find this dove?” Hanife asked cheerfully.

Cilve brought her prey to the fountain to wash and narrated her story while laughing unpleasantly:

“She ran away from home last night. You know that troublesome neighborhood, Bülbül Deresi? When she ended up there the crows pecked at her. I found her by the sea. She gazed at it as if contemplating jumping in. After treating her to a nice feast of cheese, grapes, and a small roll, all for sixteen pennies, I brought her here.