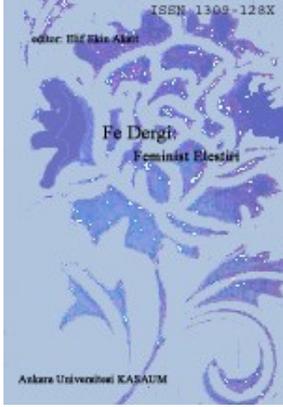


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The Militarization of Henna

Eda Acara*

Political science scholar Cynthia Enloe defines militarization as “a step by step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well being on militaristic ideas.”¹ She gives the example of a militarized tomato soup in which the pastas were cut in the shape of Star War satellites and emphasizes that in every stage of the production and consumption of this tomato soup many people were militarized. But how would a can of soup be militarized and more importantly, what does the promotion of weapon shaped noodles in a soup say about militarization? Enloe emphasizes that the use of weapons in the soup by the dieticians and designers of the soup primarily targets women consumers and entertainment of children while eating their lunch. In this example, the employees of the food company are militarized as they perceive nothing problematic with promoting militarized products; women and children are militarized as they become fascinated by the idea of weapons in the shape of noodles in a meal. In that sense, militarization is not only about joining the army but it is always an ongoing process which is based on consenting mechanisms and these mechanisms vary according to gender.²

There is a plethora of research in how women are victimized through murder, rape and torture during times of militarization³ and how women are integrated into the processes of militarization as supporters.⁴ My short reading of a newspaper⁵ in this article explores how women are integrated into the processes of militarization through the practice of henna applied on the body of the conscripts in Turkey. To this extent, I will first provide a brief summary of the article and then, move onto my analysis of it.

The newspaper article I am choosing concentrates on the ceremonies of henna, while sending the new conscripts off to military service.⁶ The article begins by drawing attention to the efforts of conscripted families in raising their children by numerous sacrifices and the hardship in sending off a son even against the operations of the Turkish army in the Eastern and Southeastern territories of Turkey against the Kurdish insurgency, known as Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK- *Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan*). Despite the *dilemmatic drama* of conscription at a time of militarization, the rest of the article focuses on the ceremony for the conscripts, which involves putting henna, that is prepared by the mothers and dancing just before a last farewell. The ceremonies in question took place in Bitlis Teacher's House (Bitlis Öğretmenevi) where government officials, such as the mukhtar of the village were present. The below quotation from the mukhtar's speech composes the problem of my article, pertaining to the integration of women into the processes of militarization as follows:

According to our traditions, we only put henna on three occasions. We put henna on the hands of the bride so that she will be close to her husband. We put henna on the hands of the conscript so that he will sacrifice himself for his nation. We put henna on rams when it is sacrificed for *Allah*. You can not see any other nation in the world that puts henna on their children when sending them off for military service. We went to the military service like that and our children will go the same.⁷

The ethnographic literature on henna emphasizes it as a feminine practice, which connotes a wish for good luck.⁸ However, the aforementioned example articulates the wish for good luck with the honor of sacrifice for the love of the nation within the context of compulsory conscription. Hence, henna is not a practice limited to women and femininity but it juxtaposes militarized femininity and masculinity. With the two different occasions, mentioned in Mukhtar's speech, firstly the loyalty and obedience of women to their husbands and then, the honor of death for the love of the nation are marked by henna. Even though these two different depictions of henna practice seem distinct from each other, they are juxtaposed through the militarization of gender that articulates with Turkish nationalism and patriarchy. In the article, preparation of henna that is put on the conscript by his lover, mother and father is presented as a part of mother's duty. Here, mother's duty symbolizes the consenting

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of women in military service and obedience of women to their husbands. This way, the conscript gets societal approval of defending and honoring them with his own death. Thus, the honor of the nation in relationship to the construction of masculinity and femininity is established by further articulation of hennaed bodies: women's hennaed hands symbolize loyalty and obedience to the husband and conscripts' hennaed hands symbolize their sacrifice to the nation.

While henna becomes the marker of the embodied military-nation, it also reveals the militarized gender narratives in Turkey. Altınay asserts that in Turkey there are three gendered narratives that are constructed in the authoritative discourse of militarism where in this example both *Little Ayşe* and *Kezban* narratives are represented:

Women within the construct of citizenship, which has been gendered, sexualized and militarized, until recently were given meaning through obedient wife (*Kezban*), altruistic mother (*Little Ayşe*) and the Republican woman, who will fight in war if needed (*Sabiha Gökçen*). While being *Kezban* and *Ayşe* are expected from all of the women without any exceptions, being *Sabiha Gökçen* was coded to be an exception and privilege.⁹

Militarism is a gendered discourse not only because women are actively involved in the militarization processes, but also it constructs hegemonic masculinity. In Turkey, compulsory conscription is the fundamental aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Human Rights Watch's researcher Sinclair-Webb emphasizes that infantilizing the conscript constructs the hegemonic masculinity and this strengthens the alleged naturalness upon the duty of military service (defending the nation) for all men.¹⁰ On the other hand, this infantilization further illustrates the naturalization of the Turkish military nation myth and conscription as cultural characteristic of Turkishness both of which are expressed in "Every Turk is born a soldier!" [*Her Türk Asker Doğar*]. In this example, infantilizing the conscript is constructed by henna through the idiomatic expression of *Kıvalı Kuzu*. According to Turkish Language Association [*Türk Dil Kurumu*]'s online dictionary, *Kıvalı Kuzu* stands for young conscript and this shows how militarism is invisibly diffused in common idiomatic expressions.¹¹ The example of henna indicates this militarist penetration into the culture and its invisibility shows the normalization of militarism, nationalism and patriarchy in Turkey.

As Enloe's aforementioned definition indicates militarism diffuses in a variety of spheres in daily life and goes hand in hand with patriarchy and nationalism.¹² If it is so varied as I tried to show in this piece, then struggle against it shall be varied as well, integrating feminism and anti-militarism at a multiplicity of spheres. Such feminist-antimilitarist stance shall question not only compulsory conscription, as an indicator of militarism but also shall criticize normalization of militarization through women's consent. It is only through the analysis of women's consent in militarization processes and disobedience against such consenting mechanisms that hegemonic masculinity that is militarized can be altered.

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¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3.

² Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 1-2.

³ For military violence on women see Cynthia Cockburn, *Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Menon, R. and Bhasin, K. 1999. "Honourably Dead: Permissible Violence Against Women" *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

⁴ See Ayşegül Altınay, *The Myth of the Military Nation: Militarism, Gender and Education in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Enloe, *Maneuvers*.

⁵ IHA-Bitlis. "Kına yakarak askere uğurluyor" (They are sending off the conscripts with henna), *Turkmedya.com.*, N.d., http://www.turkmedya.com/V1/Pg/NewsCityDetail/NewID/140575/CatID/21/CityCode/13/CityName/Bitlis/CountryID//Header/kina_yakarak_askere_ugurluyor.html

⁶ According to Military Service Act in Turkey [*Askerlik Kanunu*] (Adopted in June 6th, 1927, Act No: 1111), all men are obliged by conscription. The Act is accessible at: <http://www.mevzuat.adalet.gov.tr/html/437.html> (Accessed June 9th, 2010).

⁷ *Turkmedya.com.*, "Kına yakarak askere uğurluyor" (They are sending off the conscripts with henna)

⁸ See Mustafa Kemal Mirzeler, "The Formation of Male Identity and the Roots of Violence against Women: The Case of Kurdish Songs, Stories and Storytellers," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2000): 261-269 and Rachel Sharabi, "The Bride's Henna Ritual: Symbols, Meanings and Changes," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 11, no. 1 (2006): 11-42.

⁹ Altınay, Ayşegül. "Kadın Vicdani Retçiler Neyi Reddediyor? (What does women conscientious objectors reject?)," *Çarklardaki Kum Vicdani Red: Düşünsel Kaynaklar ve Deneyimler*, ed. Ö. H. Çınar and C. Üsterci (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), 113.

¹⁰ Emma Sinclair-Webb, "Our Bülent is now a Commando' Military Service and Manhood in Turkey," *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, ed. G. Mai and E. Sinclair-Webb (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

¹¹ "Kınalı Kuzu", *Türk Dil Kurumu Online Dictionary*, <http://www.tdk.gov.tr/TR/Genel/SozBul.aspx?F6E10F8892433CFFAAAF6AA849816B2EF05A79F75456518CA&Kelime=kinali%20kuzu>

¹² Enloe, *Maneuvers*.

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