In the histories of peoples and nations a few individuals are remembered and honored for heroism, public service, intellectual accomplishments, and farsighted attitudes. In the history of modern Turkey, Halide Edib, (1884-1964) is one of these few. She grew up in the Turkish Ottoman Empire when most women still veiled in public, were rarely provided more than a basic education, and were not permitted a voice in public affairs. Yet her achievements were truly remarkable. Halide Edib was:

- The first Muslim woman graduate of American College for Girls in Turkey.
- An author of twenty novels and memoirs still relevant today.
- A university lecturer in England and Turkey.
- A guest lecturer at the Muslim university in India with Gandhi attending.
- Teacher and inspector of schools for the Turkish government.
- Advisor to Mustafa Kemal, known as Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey.
- An honorary corporal in the army during the Turkish War of Independence.
- A leader in the struggle to give women legal and political rights in Turkey.
- A member of the Turkish parliament.

What factors encouraged her in such unusual pursuits for a woman? How was she able to overcome significant barriers to her sex?

Her memoirs (Memoirs of Halide Edib) provide glimpses of a life that spanned the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of modern Turkey. Her memoirs also provide clues about her ability to overcome constraints because of her sex to achieve a respected public role in the new Turkish nation and international recognition as an author and lecturer. The following excerpts from the Memoirs are about Halide’s early childhood.

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1 Halide Edib is also referred to as Edip and or Halide Edip Adivar, taking her second husband’s name.
As you read her account, jot down things you notice about her childhood that you think might have encouraged her independence and later successes.

Halide was born into a wealthy family living in Istanbul. Halide’s mother died when she was very young, and for a time her grandmother raised her with the help of servants. In describing these early years in her memoir, Halide calls herself “the little girl.” Here she describes her “indispensable” lala:

“Ali is the man-servant who takes care of [the little girl]; he is her lala, the indispensable personage in every old Turkish household, for which no English, no European, equivalent can exist, for it arose from roots wholly foreign to them, wholly Oriental. The lala was the natural outcome of the marked separation between the indoor and outdoor life of that day and world [of Ottoman Turkey]. Indoors was the delicate, intimate rule of women; out of doors was the realm of men. They could play there their proper role of protector, and one felt happy and secure in their presence. As a child, and as child only, one could share to the full the freedom of the two worlds, and one’s lala was one’s natural companion into all the open-air places of experience…. The little girl’s lala is Ali, a quiet big man with a great deal of affection…. He is kind and grave and buys her colored sweets in the street, a thing which is strictly forbidden by her father.”

A little later, Halide described how “the little girl,” (herself as a child) saw girls and boys:

“[The little girl] knows two classes of people and two ages: ‘Children’ are all little girls and continue to live in child-dom until they take the veil…. That happens when they are ten years old, and they then join the grown-ups forever after. All the grown-ups are the same and of the same age [to the girl child] whether they are twelve or fifty. Boys are emphatically not children. They dress like men, or rather as they did at that time, and they are disagreeable and noisy. If there is anything in the world to dislike, for her, it is boys…. If there is anything in her heart that can be called a decided liking, it is for men, especially for those who have white beards and eyes that one feels and remembers.”

Halide’s grandmother raised Halide as a traditional Muslim girl, teaching her domestic skills with a basic education. Her father, however, wanted a different education for his only child by his first wife:

“Now her father Edib Bey, secretary of his Majesty Abdul Hamid [the Ottoman ruler], had a strong admiration for the English and their way of bringing up children. He believed that the secret of their greatness was due to this, and so his method of bringing up his first-born was strongly influenced by English ways as he had read of them in books. He occupied himself personally with her dresses, underclothing, shoes, and stockings—even handkerchiefs…. He did not make her wear a hat. As a

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matter of fact it would never have done for him even to express a desire to do such a thing, for hats were the outward and visible sign of Christians, yet he only covered her head in winter with a kalpak [tight cap] and let her go bareheaded in the summer.

“She wore short, dark blue frocks in winter, all English-made, and white linen in the summer. Her arms and legs were bare after the manner of English children, which shocked her granny and made her anxious lest she should catch cold.

“But the little girl’s objections were not as to the weather and its changes. She looked different from other children of her age and class. She attracted attention, and she was envious of the gorgeous-colored silk gowns, frills and ribbons, even jewels, with which other little girls were decked. To this day she feels occasional longings for gaudy colors and vulgar apparel although her true tastes are quite otherwise.

“Next it was her diet. The Turkish children of her class were allowed to eat anything...the little girl had a strict diet—some meat and vegetables, a very little fruit at meal-times and only milk in the evening. How she hated milk and loved fruit of all kinds! …”

“Kyria Ellenie (Madame Ellen) was the head of the so-called kindergarten where little girls and some very small boys of the neighborhood were sent. It was kept by three Greek spinsters, Kyria Ellenie being the eldest. The children were mostly Greek and Armenian and the daughters of the Christian chiefs of [his Majesty] Abdul Hamid, such as the chief of the bakers, the chief of the chemist, the chief of the booksellers, and so on…The little girl was the only Turkish child there. She did not remember how she came to go first but she never forgot her intensest, sincerest, and perhaps longest love-affair. Its object was Kyria Ellenie… her outward ugliness was phenomenal but the little girl both with her natural and spiritual senses had perceived her inward beauty…. There was a wonderful security, a nameless delight in the old woman’s presence.”

After a serious illness, Halide returns to her grandmother’s home and, for a time, to a more traditional schooling. During Ramadan she visits her “milk-mother,” the woman who nursed her as a baby because her mother was too ill to do so. Here she describes going with her to the Suleyman mosque in Istanbul:

“The streets were full. Groups of women, in charshafs [long ankle-length gowns] of many colors, moved along, the young with thick veils but the old with their faces uncovered, all with rosaries in hand and tight lips occasionally whispering a prayer…. [In the great Suleyman mosque5]…I felt caught up into the general sway and began moving my body unconsciously to and fro in the same harmonious manner as the rest. I became a part of the whole and could not have moved otherwise than under the

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5 The Suleyman mosque is one of the world’s finest architectural wonders and religious buildings. For images see: www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Suyleman_Mosque.html
dominating pulsations of the place. No false note, no discordant gesture was possible….

“In the evening the great guns were fired, signaling the time to break the fast, and we gathered about the round low tray on which jams, olives, cheese, spiced meats, eggs, and all sorts of highly flavored pastries were arranged…. In Ramazan [Ramadan] the Moslem [Muslim] spoils his stomach as one spoils a beloved child, even the poorest allowing himself variety and plenty.”

Halide was sent to college where she met and married, immediately after graduation, a much older man, a famous mathematics professor. Although she became a mother of two sons she was not happy in the secluded world demanded by her marriage. Then, without telling her, her husband married a second wife. Halide took the unusual and bold step of demanding a separation and divorce.

Eventually she married again and, with her husband, Adnan Adivar, took part in the transformation of Turkey into a modern democratic state. In 1908 she founded the Association for the Advancement of Women that emphasized education for girls. Later she served as an honorary corporal with the Turkish army against the Greeks in the Turkish War of Independence (1918-1922). During the war she first was a nurse and then became the interpreter, press advisor, and secretary to Mustafa Kemal, who led the successful resistance against the Greek invasion of Turkey. Under the name Ataturk, Kemal became the leader who modernized Turkey. However, Halide and Adnan had a falling out with Ataturk and left Turkey. They lived in England until Ataturk’s death in 1938.

In the mid-1930s, during her exile in England, Halide Edib was invited to India to lecture at the National Muslim University in Delhi. Mahatma Gandhi heard her lecture and praised her for her stated belief that nationhood could not be built without religious toleration. Gandhi, a Hindu, declared “May Begum Saheb’s [honored scholar Edib’s] coming in our midst result in binding Hindu and Muslims in an indissoluble bond.” Although the partition of India came about creating Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, the Indian constitution provides for freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Her book about India and her time there, Inside India, is still respected for its insights into nationalism and for making the case for separation of religion from politics.

Halide Edib’s novels and memoirs had a significant audience in England, the United States, India, and other countries. They were the most widely known descriptions of the revolutionary struggles to found modern Turkey written by a woman. Two recent commentators emphasize her importance in the struggle for women’s rights. Here they summarize her continuing influence on today’s Turkish women:

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“Halide Edib Adivar's many-faceted examination of Turkish women, their roles, rights, and dilemmas, continues to still maintain its validity today. Like the heroines of her novels, Turkish women, with strong personalities and combining the traits of both western and Turkish cultures, proudly hold hands with women of all nations to celebrate the history, the present and the brighter future of women everywhere.”

Points to Consider

1. Historians have noticed that certain family patterns have been common to the upbringing of most women of extraordinary accomplishment. These family patterns were the same for extraordinary women in many different times and places, including the United States. The pattern includes all or most of the following characteristics:

- The family was economically well off, often wealthy.
- The girl was an only child or had only female siblings.
- The father was well educated; tutored his daughter or insisted she be educated.
- The girl exhibited a precocious intelligence or talent.

Which of these seem to fit the up-bringing of Halide Edib?

List reasons you can think of that would explain why extraordinary women might come from this type of background.

2. In her memoirs Halide mentions that, “Before my birth, it was very much hoped that I should be a boy, and father had vowed that he would name me, after the saint…Halid, [one of Mohammed’s most devoted followers]. When I disappointed them by turning out to be a girl, they persisted in giving me the feminine form of Halid, which is Halide….”

This is an example of what is called “boy preference”—boy babies strongly wished for and favored over girl babies at birth. There have been many causes of boy preference, for example,

- Men were seen has having higher economic value to the family.
- In many cultures men carried on the family name.
- In religions such as Hinduism, sons were the ones that carried out religious rites at their parents funerals and until recently in Judaism and Christianity, they were the priests, ministers, rabbis or teachers.
- Men were often seen as influencing events in the public worlds of politics and war.
- Boys were trained to become artists and scholars, privileges and vocations often denied to girls.

This preference for boys, common to many but cultures in the past, has diminished or even been reversed in parts of the world but is still the norm in some groups and cultural areas. For example, it appears that many Japanese families prefer daughters because frequently they now marry at an older age, remain home and are more likely to help care for aging parents.
How does this common preference for boys help to explain the profile of extraordinary women described in question #1?

Do you know of any girls who, like Halide, were named for a male saint, their father, or another male relative? Were their names “feminized”? How?

Think of an example of boy preference in your own experience and explain why you think it demonstrates a preference for boys.

3. In her memoirs Edib describes her *lala*, the servant in whose company she as a girl child was allowed to experience life outside her home. She writes that the roots of the custom are “wholly Oriental” and so not found in Europe or America and “was the natural outcome of the marked separation of the indoor and outdoor life of that day and world [of Ottoman Turkey].”

Who seems to have “owned” the inner space of the home? The outer or public space outside the home?

When girls were ten, what did they have to wear when leaving the home for outside? In her description of going with her “milk-mother” to the Suleyman mosque during Ramadan, how were the women in the crowded streets dressed? Which women did not wear the “thick veils” over their faces?

4. The word *purdah* derives from the Persian word meaning curtain. It refers to the seclusion of women by veiling and complete covering in public and restriction to the women’s quarter in the home—a harem or *zenana* (the Indian term for harem). In purdah societies, contact between the sexes, except for close family members, is generally discouraged.

Purdah is generally practiced, at least in its strictest forms, in several Islamic countries. Using the Internet, research the how purdah effects the lives of women in one of the following countries:

- Afghanistan
- Morocco
- Saudi Arabia

In a short paper:

- Describe your findings.
- List the websites you used.

Compare your findings with other students in your group or class.
Sources


