BETWEEN OVERSEXUALIZATION AND MOTHERHOOD: DIVORCED MOTHERS’ NARRATIVES ON WOMANHOOD, MOTHERHOOD, AND SEXUALITY

by

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AND SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

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The term oversexualization, as I call it, refers to the stigmatization of divorced women as ‘seductresses’ who are ‘in need of sex’ and thus as ‘dangerous’ to other couples. This thesis explores how divorced mothers experience and define womanhood, motherhood, empowerment, and happiness within a context of oversexualization. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirteen middle class divorced mothers were conducted in Muğla and Istanbul through the snowball sampling method. The thesis reveals that for middle class divorced women in Turkey (1) oversexualization leads to a negotiation between the stigma and one’s self image, (2) the culturally and linguistically specific notion of güç renders the performance of gender and empowerment ambivalent, and (3) motherhood provides one of the most intimate sources of moral support despite that fact that it simultaneously exacerbates women’s gendered tasks. While the constructions of womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality are all similarly instrumentalized by dominant public discourses to reproduce the oppression of women and the marginalization of divorce, within the prevalent feminist literature, motherhood remains less reclaimed in comparison to womanhood and sexuality. Moreover, oversexualization is almost entirely overlooked. This thesis thus emphasizes the political significance of the nuances between conflicting and/or similar narratives of struggle, intimacy, emancipation, and oppression, while questioning how the existing feminist and academic literatures correspond or fail to correspond to these nuances.
To my mother

who used to sit in front of her little store

and dream about the future
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this work is to elaborate on divorce in general and divorced mothers in particular without diverting the discussion to other spheres such as family and marriage. As I have been interested in the topic of divorce for six years, one prominent pattern has attracted my attention during my conversations with divorced women, academic and activist journey, literature reviews, and preliminary research on the legal and historical background. The topic of divorce becomes ghostlike in academic, feminist, and governmental texts since it is almost always rendered secondary or trivial to other issues if not completely overlooked or avoided.

Divorce is an underrated issue within the scholarly literature, in that, it is usually analyzed through quantitative research while even the existing qualitative research mostly dwells on topics such as depression, the development of children, its effects on remarrying, and its negative effects for the society. In other words, divorce is contextualized as either a cause of various problems, or an anomalie which is caused by various problems, rather than a marginalized phenomenon in itself. Correspondingly, when we look at the public discourses and social policies, divorce is reconstructed as a disaster for the wellbeing of the society and thus something to be eliminated. While there are few works which explore the phenomenon of divorce without marginalizing it, divorce is not the main concern of these works. Lastly, the feminist literature in Turkey does not completely dismiss the dynamics and the experiences of divorce, however, the feminist discussions tend to shift their focus, yet again, to the discussions on family, marriage, and the undervalued labor of women. I will provide a detailed analysis of this existing framework of divorce and divorced motherhood, as well as the method of the research and my notes on the fieldwork in this introductory chapter.
1.1. Fieldwork

1.1.1. Research Participants

The research was conducted with 13 middle class divorced mothers. In order to provide a comfortable setting during the interviews, the anonymity of the participants was strictly observed throughout the research. While the names of the participants are kept confidential, I do not replace nicknames with the participants’ actual names since a body of narratives clustered around one name can yet again reveal that person’s identity. Therefore, I will provide a general information about the participants instead of introducing them separately. I am aware that such anonymity harbors the dangers of essentialization and generalization which I try to overcome by focusing on the differences as well as the similarities between the narratives.

The age range of the participants varied between early thirties to sixty: four participants around their thirties, six participants around their forties, two participants around their fifties, and one sixty-year-old participant. All of the participants were working divorced mothers even though two of them were housewives during their marriages. One participant is a high school graduate, one participant had a two-year major, eight participants had four-year majors, while three participants have university degrees yet whether they had two-year or four-year majors is unknown. All of the participants stated that they got divorced based on their own decisions, however, one participant decided to get divorced after ex-husband wanted to separate, and one other participant ended their continuing relationship nine years after her ex-husband divorced her. Two of the participants were re-married —one of whom divorced again. Even though their stories of togetherness vary, all of the participants had spent at least two and at most twenty three years as lone divorced mothers by the time of the interviews. Lastly, four participants had two children while the rest had one.
1.1.2. Method

The participants of this research were reached by using snowball sampling method. In total, 18 hours of semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with 13 middle-class divorced mothers. While snowball sampling method led me to available contacts in the cities of Muğla and Istanbul, a research area was not pre-determined for two reasons. Firstly, marriage and divorce have the potential of being two major factors that change women’s lives in terms of residency or occupation in Turkey. The participants experienced the divorce period usually in a city other than where they lived at the time of the interview. Overall, their stories were set in Ankara and the cities to the west of it. Secondly, the areas were primarily determined on the basis of the availability of social networks, as building intimate connections was the upmost priority of the research for the participants to be able to share their stories of divorce and marriage as comfortably as possible.

Since income as the mere measure of class would not suffice to define a research sample within such a large research area, social, economic, and cultural capitals of the participants have been taken into consideration. Bourdieu (1986) defines three forms of capital which can be converted into money ‘as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility.’ In this respect, the participants have the necessary social and/or family affiliations to access jobs, housing or help in taking care of the child, at least one income from a paid job, retirement or alimony, and hold at least a high school degree. I use the term middle class to indicate that even when the participants had their times of financial difficulties, they also had the cultural and social capitals to manage the obstacles for the sake of themselves and their children. Similarly, when they felt inadequate in terms of cultural capital, they had the necessary social and economic capitals to get by until they could secure a more stable life standards (a job, an income). Consequently, the main issues of this research such as oversexualization, sexuality, and gender, will not fall completely trivial when compared with the struggles of divorced mothers to ensure their children and their own basic needs and livelihood.
1.1.3. Self-Reflexivity

Having been raised by a divorced mother since the age of one, this research was a very intimate journey for me. However, as a first-hand witness of my own mother’s life as a divorced mother, I initially interpreted the differences between the participants’ life stories and my mother’s life story as a failure of my fieldwork. Unlike my mother, several participants received immense support from their parents, had been in solidarity with their ex-husbands, re-married, or claimed not to be marginalized. Upon my various disappointments throughout my fieldwork, I realized that I was unknowingly looking for participants who were in the exact conditions as my own mother had been in. As a consequence of my unintentional obsession on collecting a homogenous body of life stories and my not-surprising failure, this thesis is the product of my attempt to make sense of and interconnect the differences as well as the similarities between divergent narratives of divorced mothers.

1.1.3.1. A travel between being a ‘daughter’ and being an ‘expert:’ “You know better”

Since I grew up among not one but many divorced mothers, I have always been seen as a daughter or a nephew by the divorced mothers around me. I have been used to hearing life advices, intimate complaints, or funny sexual jokes which led me to think that such a position would be an advantage during my fieldwork. These intimate connections provided a vast network for a snowball sampling method, yet, surprisingly I was not a nephew or daughter anymore—not even to those with whom I was closely acquainted. All of the participants put me in the place of an expert on divorce and divorced motherhood. Even when they were very friendly to me, my position as an expert during the interviews did not stem from formality but rather I was seen as an experienced researcher and I had fulfill that expectation because they took the interviews seriously. This was a problem for me in a few of the interviews where I felt the need to fulfill their expectations from an expert —such as knowing exactly what I was doing in terms of my questions, methods, and approach. Sometimes, I did not have
to try accomplishing a performance as a skilled researcher as one participant even used the phrase “you know better.” Yet again, such utterances led me to constantly be self-conscious about the importance of the interview to the participant I was interviewing with.

One interview was peculiarly memorable to me. The participant was one of the youngest ones and therefore closer to my age. She both saw me as an expert on the issue and also conversed very friendly. At one point in such context, she became heavily touched by the idea of me —as a daughter of a divorced mother— doing a research on divorced motherhood, and asked whether her little daughter would be questioning her experiences as well when she grows up. I quickly changed the topic and did not probe her intense moment any further. In her case, and in many other participants’ such intense moments, I always chose to change the topic and usually shared my own stories and opinion after the interview. Not only the participants with little children but also the participants whose children are already successful adults often had second thoughts about their past choices or the future possibilities. While I was sharing my own stories and “de-marginalizing” divorce, divorced motherhood, and having divorced parents, in a way, my position in relation to divorced mothers actually changed in that I was not the one hearing the advices, complaints, or jokes.

1.2. Situating the Literature on Divorce

1.2.1. Legal and Historical Background

Feminists in Turkey have long been disclosing how women’s identities are continuously reconstructed as good wives and sacrificing mothers. The increasing emphasis on family and motherhood in Turkey both dates back in the early years of the Republic and also holds sway in public discourses and social policies at the present. During the establishment of the Republic of Turkey women were portrayed as good mothers who were responsible for bringing up their children in the light of the Kemalist reformist ideologies, and educating the nation (Tekeli, 1986; Gulendam, 2000; Sirman, 1989; Parla, 2001; Kadioğlu, 1994). According to Kerestecioğlu, values and perceptions on family have shifted from the social sphere of education, media, literature, and cinema into the political sphere of the legal and bureaucratic regulations with the recent AKP
regime (Kerestecioğlu, 2014). Since the first years of their governance, the AKP government attempted to protect and reinforce the institution of family in Turkey. In 2004, adultery was tried to be included as a crime in the Penal Code during the preparation of TCK (Turkish Penal Code). In 2008, the Prime Minister of the time and the current President of the Republic, advised women to have three children. Besides the clear statements of the government (“We are a conservative democratic party, we have to strengthen our family structure”), the policies prioritized family over women. In 2010, the Family Ombudsman was established under the Directorate of Religious Affairs to reinforce the institution of family by visiting houses one by one (Aile Dışında Hayat Var!, 2013). In 2008, with the Social Security and General Health Insurance Law, women were tied to their husbands and fathers (Özar & Yakut-Çakar, 2014). In 2011, the name of the Ministry Responsible for Women and Family was changed into the Ministry of Family and Social Policies by the removal of the word “woman” completely (Aile Dışında Hayat Var!, 2013). Similarly, the former law No.4320 in 1998 and the current law No. 6284 in 2012 both of which include the laws on violence against women, were both entitled as the Law on the Protection of Family as well as taking violence against women as an issue of security rather than inequality (Karinca, 2012). Despite the insistences of feminist and LGBTQ groups on including classes on gender in formal education, Ministry of Family and Social Policies rather published family education programs (Aile Dışında Hayat Var!, 2013) whereas Mother Universities were established by the collaboration of municipalities, universities, and associations beginning in 2012 ("Anne Üniversiteleri: Masumiyetten Uzak Bir Adım", 2014). Besides these classes, the ministry had agreed to the decisions of the International Family Conference which included the articles of discouraging divorce as a means of protecting the younger generation, preventing sexual intercourse outside the family, protecting children’s psychological development by banning broadcasts which undermine the family (Kerestecioğlu, 2014). As conceptualized in these articles, divorce is politically perceived as something to be eliminated while family structures which are alternative to the heterosexual nuclear family are not even recognized. Considering the prevention of sexual intercourse outside the family, I would also like to draw attention to how family is often used instead of marriage in Turkish. The marriage certificate is addressed with the term “the family certificate” in the Family Law, Article 143, even though it is commonly known as the marriage certificate. If marriage is certificated with the term family, consequently, divorce ends not only the marriage but also the family.
Therefore, the families which include divorced parents are reproduced as ‘broken families.’

In February 2012, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies funded the social welfare for 150,000 women whose husbands are dead (a financial support worth 300 lira), excluding 20,000 divorced women who were equally in need according to the results of the research conducted by the collaboration of the ministry and Bogazici University. The ministry accepted to provide financial help for only the women whose husbands are dead by claiming that “it would incite people to get divorced and that would undermine the family” (Özar & Yakut-Çakar, 2013). Before this social welfare policy, social institutions were already aware of the needs of such women, yet there was not a single policy about them. Women found their own ways to access other forms of aid; however, they could reach the institutions often months or years after the necessity occurred, with no guarantee that the aid will be regular and/or enough. While the phrases of “having the right to the aid” and “to really need the aid” are constructed as opposites by these institutions, the women who receive aid are strictly under surveillance to be sure whether they are not misusers (Nihai Rapor, 2011). Likewise, both the ministry’s social welfare and the alimony regulations in the Article 176 of the Family Law require women to have a “dignified” life and not to live “as if they are married.” The ambiguity of the definitions works in a way that it completely disregards women’s free will over their lives. In other words, women gain some rights in exchange for others (Özar, Yakut-Çakar, Yılmaz, Orhon, & Gümüş, 2012).

In 2014, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies introduced the Family and Divorce Process Counseling which was started as a pilot scheme in 2012 ("Aile ve Boşanma Süreci Danışmanlığı", 2016) and was speculated to be obligatory for the divorcing couples (Tahaoğlu, 2013). The Government plan for 2016 has pointed out that amendments have been made with regards to the law No 6284 which concerns violence against women and the National Action Plan for Social Gender Equality, including the measures for all programs on the media to be in conformity with traditional family values. The measures referred to the negative effects of the media on family and reminded the importance of Family and Divorce Process Counseling ("Criteria of ‘Conformity with Traditional Family Values’ for Media", 2016). More recently, the Parliamentary Commission for Investigating Divorce Cases and the Negative Factors Effecting the Integrity of Family and for Designating the Necessary Precautions to Reinforce the Institution of Family was established in 2015 ("Meclis Boşanmalari
Araştıracak", 2015), yet in February 2016, a women’s rights activist Hülya Gülbahtar was attempted to be dismissed from the Commission by Sait Yüce, a member of the Commission and the ruling party ("AKP’li Vekilden Kadın Avukata: Ben Sana Haddini Bildirmeye Çalışıyorum", 2016).

Turkey has had an approximate divorce rate of 1.6 for the last five years according to TÜİK and the UN statistics (Evlenme ve Boşanma İstatistikleri, 2016; Demographic Yearbook, 2014) and had the 27th lowest divorce rate among 85 countries around the world in 2013 (Demographic Yearbook, 2014). Despite the divorce rate has been 1.6 for the last five years, the increasing number of divorce has been agitatedly denounced by various newspapers. The newspaper Sözcü, for example, recently wrote about CHP’s (Republican People’s Party) critique of the current AKP government’s social policies for the last 13 years by presenting the increased divorce rate alongside the increased rates of drug addiction, child abuse, and murder ("Toplumsal bozulma 13 yılda dibi gördü", 2016).

1.2.2. Literature Review

Women and Children Last: The Social Situation of Divorced Mothers and Their Families provides a critical overview of the literature on single mothers in 1974, drawing attention to invisibility of divorced mothers in these researches. Brandwein, Brown, and Fox emphasize the importance of distinguishing between divorced motherhood and single motherhood by briefly mentioning their problems with the state, over-sexualizing and de-sexualizing discourses, obstacles of being a divorced mother. (Brandwein et al., 1974).

The oversexualization of divorced women and particular obstacles of divorced motherhood find place in the literature however they are either instrumentalized in the marginalization of divorce, or rendered as secondary issues. The edited version of an experience sharing meeting in Feminist Politika titled “Boş Anlardı Evlilik, Boşandık!” (Yıldız, 2010), exemplifies the discourses which I call oversexualization, and the stories of divorce very similar to the narratives analyzed in this thesis. The four women in the text, realize the marginalizing perceptions of the people about their divorce through “nettlesome insinuations” which are received not through “concrete examples” but rather “feeling them inwardly.” Divorced women explain the way people think about
them such as “ooh, is she looking for someone?” whenever they pay a little attention to their beauty, or the ways in which married men—for whom divorced women “become favorite”—try to “take their chance on them.” The text also mentions the ways married couples marginalize divorced women, as if they can “seduce someone anytime” which consequently stigmatizes divorced women as “dangerous.” However, I would like to draw attention to how this text shifts its focus from divorce to more on family, marriage, violence by claiming that “We suddenly realized that we were actually talking about marriage rather than divorce. Obviously, we—as feminists—still need to talk about marriage.” While the text does not discuss divorce in particular, it does not divide between divorced womanhood and divorced motherhood either. Therefore, all the specific experiences of divorce, divorced motherhood and womanhood dissolve in a critique of patriarchy in general.

In *Is a Different Family Concept Possible?*, which was published after the conference with the same title, family, marriage, divorce, and parenthood are discussed from various approaches. Sevgi Adak provides a legal, economic, political framework of family in Turkey (Adak, 2014) in her paper about The Socialist Feminist Collective’s campaign “There is Life outside Family.” Similarly the other papers in *Is a Different Family Concept Possible?* discuss the effects of demography, social policies, and the market on women’s oppression. Overall, the texts of the law and the state on the issue of violence against women are all using a language of security, protecting the family, and the wellbeing of the society. Feminist texts, on the other hand, try to defamiliarize the familiar by limiting their discussions to violence, marriage, and family. Therefore, particular problems of divorced motherhood, in a way, remain marginalized in both forms of text.

Moving on to the academic literature, I will dwell on three main research conducted within the last decade in Turkey which were conducted with the collaboration of either the Ministry of Family and Social Policies or the General Directorate of Family and Social Research: *Boşanma Nedenleri Araştırması* (2009), *Tek Ebeveynli Aileler* (2011), and *Eşi Vefat Etmış Kadınlar İçin Bir Nakit Sosyal Yardım Programı Geliştirilmesine Yönelik Araştırma Projesi* (2011). The government’s approach to these research regarding divorced womanhood and motherhood gives us an idea about how divorced mothers can be violated even based on various research that

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1 Research on Causes of Divorce, Single Parent Families, and Research Project to Develop A Financial Aid Program for Women Who Lost Husbands
include their problems and narratives. Both *Boşanma Nedenleri Araştırması* and *Tek Ebeveynli Aileler* were published with prefaces which define divorce as one of the biggest threats to society; the former is written by Aliye Kavaf—the Minister Responsible for Women and Family between 2009 and 2011—and the latter is written by Associate Professor Ayşen Gürçan. Even though both of the projects reveal the problems of divorced women and mothers, first, these problems were not the main objects of these works, and second, these problems were addressed through an attempt to reinforce family. *Eşi Vefat Etmiş Kadınlar İçin Bir Nakit Sosyal Yardım Programı Geliştirilmesine Yönelik Araştırma Projesi* on the other hand, particularly analyzes the difficulties being a divorced or widowed woman. However, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies decided to provide financial aid only for widowed women whereas the research sample also included divorced women who were in the same situation with the widowed women (Özar & Yakut-Çakar, 2014).

In addition to the literature in Turkey, there is a large international literature on single motherhood. While the literature on single mothers does not distinguish between divorced mothers and single mothers, it mainly explores welfare reforms and its effect on the mothers’ choice between whether contributing to the labor market or choosing the welfare assistance (Kimmel, 1995; Berger and Black, 1992; Edin and Lein, 1997a). Some of these works focus on the financial hardships of single motherhood and the importance of the availability of support through social network. Single motherhood is, therefore, usually taken as a matter of survival within this literature (Polakow, 1994; Edin and Lein, 1997b; Swain and Howe, 1995), whereas, the psychology literature mostly dwells on the correlation between single motherhood and depression/stress (Brown & Moran, 1997; Cairney et al., 2003). The majority of these works concentrate on single motherhood in relation to the government policies such as welfare reforms (Gordon, 1994; Harris, 1993), tax credit (Meyer and Rosenbaum, 2001a; Meyer and Rosenbaum, 2001b), health insurance, Medicaid, childcare subsidies, and allocations (Gordon, 1994; Harris, 1993; Hays, 2003). Another body of literature on single mothers revolves around the children of single mothers in terms of the behavior problems, parenting quality, children’s success or health (Garfinkel and McLahananan, 1987; Jackson et al., 2000). There are a few examples of research on condemnation, social control, community which burdens a single mother (Little, 1998) or single mothers’ opinions on re-marrying (Brodsky, 1998; Edin, 2000). The international literature particularly on divorced mothers puts much more emphasis on children compared to the
literature on single mothers. Similarly, the main issue is mostly the effects of divorce on children, or on the relationship between divorced mothers and their children (Arditti, 1999; DeGarmo et al., 1999; Whitbeck et al., 1994). Stress, depression, and parental practices are again forms a wide literature on divorced mothers (Colletta, 1983; Tein et al., 2000; Lorenz et al., 1997).

1.3. Outline

In this research, I try to analyze divorce, womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality by capturing the distinction of divorced motherhood within the framework of oversexualization of divorced women. The next chapter, “Negotiating between Oversexualization and Self-image the Politics of Passing and Selfhood,” focuses on what I call oversexualization, a particular form of everyday violence encountered by divorced women. The chapter discusses the divorced mothers’ diversive approaches to oversexualization and how these various approaches relate to each other and the politics of passing and the self. Chapter III, “Ambivalent Intersections of Womanhood, Empowerment and Happiness,” is about how the divorced mothers conceptualized womanhood, and what their conceptualizations of womanhood tell about empowerment, gender, and happiness. Chapter IV, “Threatening and Embraced: Reclaiming Motherhood, Womanhood, and Sexuality Equally,” examines the notion of motherhood within the divorced mothers’ narratives, and how the feminist politics in Turkey correspond or fail to correspond with these narratives. Overall, the research does not try to answer why divorce is marginalized. Instead, it reveals the dynamics of this marginalization and by doing so; it attempts to compensate the longstanding neglect on the issues of divorce and divorced mothers.
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