

## Our image in the eyes of the West

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“It is good that we now have a Turkish woman novelist in the United States. Finally Americans can understand we do not look like the Arabs. Americans tend to think everywhere in the Middle East is just the same. They don't know how different Turkey is. Besides, Turkey is *not* part of the Middle East! The problem we as Turks face here is that Armenians and Greeks have arrived to this country long before we did. When we came to the United States we found Americans already brainwashed. Most Americans can only think of Midnight Express when the subject of Turkey comes up. We should convince them that this is not the case. We should ... as a woman novelist *you* should *show* them that what they have heard from Armenians and Greeks is simply not true.”

I hear these remarks quite often. Women's images are a national cause for Turks. The more Westernize you look the better. Is this why after the 1999 earthquake in Turkey the families that wanted to adopt those children who had lost their parents have mostly asked for “blond girls with blue eyes?” Is this why when Tansu Ciller, the first woman prime minister had come to power in 1993, columnists left and right had kept themselves busy celebrating her Western look, her blondness, although in time she turned out to be far more “masculine” than all the *dark* male politicians around her? Woman's images have been an essential part of Turkey's modernization and Westernization venture right from the start. The length of a skirt, the color of your hair, the hat you wear, and, of course, the veil ... they are all deeply loaded with ideological values. Small things are deeply politicized and oftentimes polarized in Turkey, far more than the macro structures in which they operate. Unfortunately, it is those macro structures that experts on Turkey or the Middle East mostly focus on. Small things wherein the gist of a culture and a regime resides oftentimes escape the attention of diplomats and politicians worldwide.

The Turkish elite's obsession with the image of women oftentimes resembles the uncomfortably conformist behavior of a wife tolerating being badly battered by her

husband. A woman who rather than going to the heart of the matter, tries to cover the bruises on her face and around her eyes by applying more and more make-up to hide the problems in her marriage. While it might be true that many Westerners have to take a closer look at Turkey's remarkable achievements and unusual history in searching for an answer to the vital question of how compatible Islam is with Western democracy, many Turks, in return, have to start washing the make-up on their face and start admitting the bruises left in their history.