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Book Review: Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses¹

Necla Acik²

Handan Çağlayan's book, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses*, offers a unique and rich ethnography of the Kurdish women's movement. Çağlayan covers a crucial period in the formation of Kurdish women as agents of social change from 1980s to mid-2000 in North Kurdistan/Turkey. Her analysis provides a comprehensive gendered reading of the Kurdish women's movement as a collective social movement, centred around rights-based social justice approaches within an anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial framework. Çağlayan's engagement with the movement is not purely academic. Her empirical work covers over three decades of political and union activism with intermittent periods of study and research. This resonates with what the Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, specifically that researching indigenous and marginalised communities is a lifetime commitment and requires working within the communities.

Çağlayan's political engagement within the movement led to her imprisonment from 1994-1998 during which she completed her MA, and in 2004 while writing her PhD she was put on trial in Turkey for addressing women in Kurdish during her activism work. It is in this context that she collected her empirical data which consists of but is not limited to 40 qualitative interviews with Kurdish women activists affiliated with the Kurdish movement, and an open-ended survey with a sample size of 122 with activist within the pro-Kurdish party HADEP (the questionnaire and interview guide are provided in the appendix of the book). In addition to that, her long-term involvement in the field has enabled her to collect and analyse a range of primary source documents produced by the movement such as speeches of party leaders, written documents, periodicals, political party manifestos, bylaws and programmes, and various other organisational documents which are not always collected and archived systematically. Thus, her long-term dedication to scholarly work and activism is reflected in the richness of the empirical data collected as well as the critical insight she is providing into the movement. It is therefore well placed to say that this book stands out from any other research on Kurdish women conducted so far which is often much more limited in scope and depth.

Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses consists of six chapters. In the introduction Çağlayan lays down the theoretical framework of her study. Starting off with her criticism of the gender, nation, and ethnicity literature (Enloe 1990, Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989, Yuval Davis 1997) she draws to its pitfalls for locking women into passivity and thereby blocking the perspective required to analyse women's subjectivity in ethnic and national struggles. The main analytical framework she uses instead are theories of new social movements which allows her to build her analysis of the interactive construction of women's individual identity within a Kurdish collective identity and through its interrelation to class identity as well. She combines this with a feminist epistemology to demonstrate how women claim decisive agency by focusing on everyday life experiences and the role of social networks and class identities in facilitating collective action. In this section, Çağlayan argues that while

¹ Çağlayan, H. (2020). *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

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ideologies create a meaning frame for action (Zald 1996), it is the experiences of collective victimhood and injustices in and through everyday course of life that substantiate collective action for women. She shows how collective victimhood is experienced by Kurdish women through forced displacement, violence, poverty, precarious job conditions, and human rights violations and how this drives their collective action despite being heavily penalised in Turkey for claiming their political subjectivity as Kurds and as Kurdish women.

Chapter two outlines the methodology which Çağlayan describes as an interplay of auto-ethnography, oral history, and critical intertextual readings. Detailing the various methodologies she applied, she also reflects in this chapter on her own journey of activism and positionality as well as the limits of incorporating the experiences of women who are not affiliated with the Kurdish movement thus acknowledging the diversity of experiences as well as the limitation of her study. Auto-ethnography may bear the dangers of focusing too much on an author's own story and biography, and Çağlayan carefully brings this self-reflection into her work. However, it should be noted that despite her self-critical remarks, apart from this chapter, Çağlayan's own experience is rather reflected in her authoritative analysis of the movement and by skilfully waving the collected 'empirical material' with her theoretical framework to develop a more in-depth analysis of women's agency within the Kurdish movement. This chapter oddly has also three short subsections on gendered spaces, regulating women's domestic labour-marriage and regulating women's bodies-honour which are meant to contextualise the experiences of Kurdish women activists. However, these sections would have been better placed earlier on in the book in the introduction.

The third and fourth chapter analyze the structural and historical development that facilitated the emergence and development of the Kurdish women's movement. Here the focus is on the role of the pro-Kurdish parties and the political movement in general and how women through their grassroots activism contributed slowly but steadily to their visibility within the movement, securing representation in decision making mechanism within Kurdish civil society organisations and as councillors, mayors, and MPs. These two chapters overlap with the content of the award-winning earlier work of Çağlayan (2007) *Mothers, Comrades and Goddesses* published in Turkish, it has become a key source of reference for many scholars in Kurdish gender studies.

The fifth chapter constitutes one of the fundamental chapters of the book and is a novel addition to her analysis. Framing it within the new social movement literature, Çağlayan demonstrates the importance of everyday life and human interaction via informal networks such as family, kinship, and neighbourhood for collective action. In this chapter, her analysis goes beyond external and structural factors that transformed Kurdish women's agencies as she has done in the previous two chapters, and which tend to focus on the distinction between the public and private realm. Instead, Çağlayan focuses on the continuity between these two spheres and how women experience and read Kurdishness, womanhood and political participation in their everyday life. In this chapter she gives space to activists to give meaning to their own experience and embeds this as an important source of knowledge that informs her own analysis. And herein lies the strength of the book. It puts the women's experiences at the centre of scholarly analysis and provides an insight into almost four decades of gendered Kurdish political mobilisation.

Çağlayan draws from the social movement literature to frame her analysis of the Kurdish women's movement. Yet, this framework remains rigid and doesn't seem to unpack the complexity that Çağlayan is able to capture through her insight into and analysis of the

movement. Çağlayan's hesitancy to point out the limitations of the social movement literature to her compound analysis of the Kurdish women's political subjectivity has worked to her disadvantage. It creates the impression that her theoretical framework remains insufficient and underdeveloped. This shows the challenges of applying popular theories and concepts of the Global North to movements in the Global South. The book could have been strengthened by reflecting on these challenges and by linking the discussion to the decoloniality literature (e.g. Mignolo and Walsh 2018, Lugones 2010), to point out the limitation of the social movement literature and even the gender and national literature for her particular analysis. Despite these shortcomings, the book provides a broad and in-depth analysis of gender, class, and political subjectivity and contributes to knowledge-production from the South.

Çağlayan is a well-known and highly respected scholar within Kurdish gender studies and her work deserves a wider reading as it makes an important contribution to the understanding of collective action of women from the South who struggle for gender-equality, socio-economic transformation, ethnic and cultural recognition, and political representation.

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