

Sarıgöl, Pınar. *Gender and Biopolitics: The Changing Patterns of Womanhood in Post-2002 Turkey*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 2022. 245 pages. ISBN: 9789004337398.

Reviewed by **Zeynep Tüfekcioğlu**

Universität Duisburg-Essen

zeynep.tuefekcioglu@gmx.de

Turkey's recent transformation, which has unfolded since the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) landslide victory in 2002, has been the subject of innumerable studies from various disciplines.¹ Hence, the historical roots of this transformation as well as its effects on economics, politics, culture, and society have been tackled in depth, mostly in relation to rising ideologies, including but not limited to neoliberalism, authoritarianism, Islamism, conservatism, and populism. In some recent studies, there has been a prolific interest in the gender aspect of the ongoing changes in Turkey.² Although such studies that tackle this issue still constitute a relatively small part of the scholarly work on the 'new Turkey' under the AKP regime, they provide significant insights into 'the various ways in which neoliberal modes of governing women's bodies come together with religious, conservative, and authoritarian measures in contemporary Turkey'.³

Pınar Sarıgöl's *Gender and Biopolitics: The Changing Patterns of Womanhood in Post-2002 Turkey* could be placed in the context of recent (feminist) research such as 'Neoliberal Body Politics: Feminist Resistance and the Abortion Law in Turkey' (2017), *Biopower, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Turkey* (2019) and *The Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary Turkey: Reproduction, Maternity and Sexuality* (2022).⁴ Standing in parallel

- 1 See, for instance, Başer, Bahar and Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi (eds.). 2017. *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance and the AKP*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris; Babacan, Errol; Kutun, Melehat; Pınar, Ezgi and Yılmaz, Zafer (eds.). 2021. *Regime Change in Turkey: Neoliberal Authoritarianism, Islamism and Hegemony*. London: Routledge; Bedirhanoglu, Pınar; Dölek, Çağlar; Hülagü, Funda and Kaygusuz, Özlem (eds.). 2020. *Turkey's New State in the Making: Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion*. London: Zed; Yavuz, Hakan and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (eds.). 2021. *Islam, Populism and Regime Change in Turkey*, New York: Routledge.
- 2 See, for instance, Korkut, Umut and Eslen-Ziya, Hande. (2018). *Politics and Gender Identity in Turkey: Centralised Islam for Socio-Economic Control*, New York/London: Routledge; Savci, Evren. 2021. *Queer in Translation Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam*. Durham/London: Duke University Press; Dursun, Ayşe. 2022. *Organized Muslim Women in Turkey: An Intersectional Approach to Building Women's Coalitions*. Berlin: Springer.
- 3 Alkan, Hilal; Dayi, Ayşe; Topcu, Sezin; Yarar, Betül (eds.). 2021. *The Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary Turkey: Reproduction, Maternity, Sexuality*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1.
- 4 Alkan, Hilal; Dayi, Ayşe; Topcu, Sezin and Yarar, Betül (eds.). 2021. *The Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary Turkey: Reproduction, Maternity, Sexuality*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris; Kazanbaş, Esra. 2019. *Biopower, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Tur-*

and continuity with such studies on gender politics in contemporary Turkey, *Gender and Biopolitics* critically investigates the implications of AKP's neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian turn on womanhood, female subjectivity and female sexuality.

In her book, Pınar Sarıgöl aims to 'explore the changing patterns of womanhood in politics and the consequences of this change in the *life* of the woman in post-2002 Turkey in connection with the governmental rationality of the ruling party; namely, the AKP' (p. 1; italics original). Hence, from a Foucauldian perspective, working with concepts such as governmentality, disciplinary power, biopower, and regime of truth, Sarıgöl puts forward a detailed analysis of how the neoliberal rationality of the AKP regime has influenced women in contemporary Turkey, both discursively and in reality. To this end, following the introductory chapter, in which changing conceptualisations of 'ideal' and 'problematic' womanhood in Turkey and Foucault's ideas on biopolitics and governmentality are discussed rather briefly, in the following four chapters, this study moves into an in-depth exploration of what the author categorizes as 'paradoxical and interrelated' (p. 207) life spheres of womanhood, namely sexuality, family, violence and Islamic neoliberal female subjectivity.

Gender and Biopolitics contributes to the ongoing discussions on gender, neoliberalism and Islam in contemporary Turkey first and foremost by tackling a wide range of issues, such as veiling and public surveillance (in Chapter 2), virginity, adultery, and divorce (in Chapter 3), domestic violence, rape and manhood (in Chapter 4), gender justice, female employment and poverty (in Chapter 5). Each chapter, respectively and yet inextricably, elaborates on how the regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms of the neoliberal and Islamist governmentality of the AKP redefine ideal womanhood and how these influence women in everyday life through rising violence, discrimination and 'neighborhood pressure.'

In order to exemplify the discursive language as well as the regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms of the new truth regime under the AKP, Pınar Sarıgöl relies on an impressive number of diverse sources. While Friday Khubats of Diyanet constitute the core of the data, a selection of monthly journals of Diyanet, the speeches of political actors, AKP's party plans, references to certain Islamic principles, statistics and reports, educational booklets, national action plans as well as annual reports and international agreements are also taken into consideration. In the light of such extensive qualitative data and numerous statistics that demonstrate, for instance, the increasing rates of violence against women and the public opinion on the important role of religion as a reference point for law and morality, in her study, Sarıgöl aims to provide answers to over a dozen of main questions (see the list on page 10) and even more.

To a large extent, this ambitious aim is fulfilled in this valuable monograph. However, this ambition, namely the goal 'to achieve an *overall understanding* of woman-

key. Master's Thesis, University of Alberta. URL: <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/c7e46792-1b6f-4f09-9629-64cee8eb9a0a> (last accessed 8 January 2023); Özgüler, Cevahir and Yarar, Betül (2017). 'Neoliberal Body Politics: Feminist Resistance and the Abortion Law in Turkey'. In Harcourt, Wendy (ed.). *Bodies in Resistance: Gender Politics in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Palgrave Macmillan: London. 133–161.

hood in Turkish politics and social and population policies through problems of government analytics' (p. 9; italics mine), brings about the weakness of this book: In its attempt to provide answers to too many questions through several anecdotes, statistics and qualitative data, *Gender and Biopolitics* tends to lose its center. Partially, this problem is related to the outline of this study. After the introductory chapter, it moves directly into the analytical chapters, which include discussions on various epochs of Republican history. Even though the comparisons of ideal womanhood from different epochs are pivotal and accurate, scattered over four chapters, they become rather repetitive and tiresome for the reader. Instead, a chapter with a brief but concise historical outline that sums up the changing patterns of womanhood in Turkey since 1923 would be highly useful, especially for those who are not familiar with the Turkish context, but interested in the theoretical aspect of this study. Such a chapter could also help the reader make more sense of the continuities and divergences regarding secular and Islamist conceptualisations of womanhood in Turkey. Another weakness of *Gender and Politics* could also be linked to its ambitious goals and broad framework. Since the chapters tend to cover too many issues, some are unfortunately discussed only superficially. Particularly Sarigöl's ideas on manhood and resistance need more elaboration. Likewise, a more thorough exploration of Islamist feminists (in Chapter 3) could greatly contribute to the book's overall discussion on feminist resistance against AKP's new mechanisms and technologies of control over the female body. Another weakness of this study is the fact that it is a difficult read. Disregarding a few spelling and punctuation mistakes, the problem is not about the use of the English language *per se*, but rather the missing flow of the language. The sentences tend to be too long; and they are written too often in the passive voice. The overall text therefore gives the impression that it has been translated from another language.

A clear strength of this study is its theoretical contribution to gender studies that look into the Turkish context. In this regard, the book's Foucauldian approach provides an innovative and compelling exploration of gender and sexuality in contemporary Turkey. Despite the book's significance for the Turkish context, it does not contribute much to the existing Foucauldian literature. In this respect, unlike what its author claims on page 205, this study lacks theoretical and analytical lucidity, as it simply appropriates Foucault's terminology into the Turkish context in a rather uncritical manner. The key Foucauldian concepts are defined and discussed somewhat briefly in the introduction and various chapters. However, they are not problematized or reconsidered in the light of new global and local developments in contemporary times. In that regard, this study would highly benefit from the intricate discussions and reinterpretations of Foucault's notion of governmentality in the edited volume, titled *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (2015), which is conspicuous by its absence despite the impressive extent of references.⁵ Likewise, a more in-depth discussion of and a closer engagement with Jemima Repo's *Biopolitics of Gender* (2016), which the author

5 Zamora, Daniel and Michael, Behrent C. (eds.). 2016. *Foucault and Neoliberalism*. Cambridge/ Malton: Polity.

cites many times, could reinforce the theoretical aspect of this study.⁶ In short, a more meticulous theoretical consideration could have provided a better opportunity for readers to re-evaluate Foucault's thoughts in the context of a neoliberal Muslim country in the 21st century.

These shortcomings, however, do not diminish the importance of this study. As *Gender and Biopolitics* pins down the devastating effects of conservatism and neoliberalism on women, it stands out as a remarkable example of how a young scholar merges academic writing with feminist activism. All in all, *Gender and Biopolitics* is a valuable read for anyone interested in the intricacies of gender, politics, and religion in contemporary times.

6 Repo, Jemima. 2016. *Biopolitics of Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.