

The *Free Girl* vs. Feminism Part II: “Cause I’m Free, I Can Do What I Want to Do!”

Berrin Yanikkaya

Department of Radio, Television and Cinema, Yeditepe University, Turkey

berriny@yeditepe.edu.tr

The first part of this paper called ‘The Free Girl vs. Feminism Part I: “*Don’t Get Me Wrong, I’m Not a Feminist or Something!*”’ is presented at the **Freedom and Prejudice Conference** in Istanbul in October 5th 2006. In that paper I aimed to open up a discussion space on the prejudice in contemporary Turkish society which is articulated and reinforced by the representations and messages of mass media against women’s liberation movement and freedom, and the theories and studies that are carried out under the umbrella of feminism.

The Free Girl that is mentioned in the title of both of these papers refers to a popular Turkish musician, Nil Karaibrahimgil who first started to work in media industry in the advertisement sector, and then wrote and sang the songs of a cell phone advertisement campaign; at the same time she appeared on the visual materials as a drifter on the eastern part of the country singing “I am free” –that caused her to be known as the “Free Girl” until her debut album was publicized. In this paper I will try to explore the anti-feminist discourse generated by and with one of the white-*st* and free-*st* urban female image in the Turkish popular cultural scene and the dissonance of her adventures as a drifter in the rural and relatively less-developed areas of the country as opposed to her urban identity, by following the cell phone advertisements that she took part in. These cell phone advertisements are later designed as a love story and after a while moved into the city scene where a handsome boy tries to follow the cues and reach her, and as the “story” unfolds “episodes” become more urban and concomitantly much more complex and fast.

Starting with her image in the advertisements, she constantly tries to show to the Turkish audience how different she is, how she can do everything she wants, how she is free from all traditional bounds, which are also emphasized in her

album titles, covers and lyrics, and self-made unusual costumes as well as her remarks on the related subjects in the various TV and newspaper interviews. That seemingly *free* and *resistant* attitude falls apart when it comes to deal with the traditional norms, roles and values of being female in the given social context where she confronts with different social groups in front of the public. Therefore, I would like to discuss her urban, *free* and challenging public image which is elaborately –as it is claimed to be- *free* from any political view –especially feminism- and at the same time explicitly and implicitly negotiating with the existing social and cultural values of being a female with all the possibilities and the limitations Istanbul offers to women today.

Feminism and/or Anti-Feminism in the World

The anti-feminist discourses today cannot be considered as local issues, so to say that they are not specific to the Turkish context. All over the world, feminists have been accused of being man-haters, representing only white middle-class women's interests.¹ Backlash is supported by the misrepresented images and misarticulated feminist discourses by the mainstream media. The backlash can be traced to a response to 1970s feminism, this was as well the time "feminist arguments appeared to be gaining wider credence" and again "somewhere along the line feminism has become the 'f-word', perceived to be an empty dogma which brainwashed a whole generation of women into false consciousness of their relationship to power (Whelehan 2000:16)." Mass media have a major role in the "decline" of feminism(s) by the articles that are published in the newspapers and magazines, and by the TV programs and most of the movies, which are more popular and effective in reaching larger audience than the alternative media. Loudermilk (1997) says, "(a)ccording to media pundits, we live in a "post-feminist" age; feminism is passé. The term 'post-feminism,' at least as it's defined in the popular press, implies that feminism is over, that women have won."

As Whelehan points out that "(i)n today's cultural climate feminism is at one and the same time credited with furthering women's independence and dismissed as irrelevant to a new generation of women who no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already 'arrived'(2000:3)." This new way of looking at feminism has been described as post-feminism or new feminism says Whelehan; but according to her "a definable threat runs thorough the language of culture, politics and mass media that is quite simply anti-feminist and anti-equality (2000:3)." The mass media stand in the center of this cultural and political context and by presentation and representation of the popular anti-feminist discourses, they articulate and reproduce the already existing values and prejudices in the society. The contemporary women also have to deal with the undermining and conflicting representations of their real life practices and experiences in the media.

As MacDonald points it out "(...) the biggest gap opens up between women's changing experiences and awareness, and the media constructions of themselves that they are regularly exposed to (1995:6-7)." On the one hand, they have become the active participants of the workforce in a variety of fields and liberated from the traditional bounds which used to limit their everyday life activities; on the other hand, mass media continue to produce and reproduce the binary oppositions and portray women as subordinated members of the society or simply the objects of male gaze. Mass media's presentations of feminists are stereotypical and similar to the women interviewees' answers in Paula Kamen's book: "bra-burning, hairy-legged, amazon, castrating, militant-almost-antifeminine, communist, Marxist, separatist, female skinheads, female supremacists, he-woman types, bunch-a-lesbian, you-know-dykes,

1 This could be a valid argument for the time, but then the feminisms raised their voices.

man-haters, man-bashers, wanting-men's-jobs, want-to-dominate-men, want-to-be-men, wear-short-hair-to-look-unattractive, bizarre-chicks-running-around-doing-kooky-things, I-am-woman-hear-me-roar, uptight, angry, white-middle-class radicals (*quoted* in Loudermilk 1997)".

Faludi argues that, the discourse in popular cultural products blame women's movement and feminism for creating unhappiness and despair among women.: "in Hollywood films, of which *Fatal Attraction* is only the most famous, emancipated women with condominiums of their own slink wild-eyed between bare walls, paying for their liberty with an empty bed, a barren womb. 'My biological clock is ticking so loud it keeps me awake at night,' Sally Field cries in the film *Surrender*, as, in an all too common transformation in the cinema of the '80s, an actress who once played scrappy working heroines is now showcased groveling for a groom. In prime-time television shows, from "thirtysomething" to "Family Man," single, professional, and feminist women are humiliated, turned into harpies, or hit by nervous breakdowns; the wise ones recant their independent ways by the closing sequence (2006)". Not only popular movies or TV shows also the popular fictions depict feminists or the women who "once" participated in women's movement as de-womanized, unhappy, lost the female characteristics in search of her own gender identity and or her own career.

Feminism and/or Anti-Feminism in the Turkish Context

There have been some confusion and conflict on the definitions of freedom, free life style and real life practices of these concepts in the Turkish context. The notions of freedom and liberation are mistakenly associated with having a pre-marriage sexual life solely, therefore in terms of preventing any "loose" labels, women today feel like they have to deny certain alliances or help creating public enemies by condemning and marginalizing the women who do have different and alternative ways of living. As Saktanber (1995) describes, there are two kinds of women representations in the mass media in Turkey: The free, available woman or the good wife and selfless mother. The "adjectives free or independent indicate that a woman is not under the protective mantle of a man or that she has violated the authority of the man under whose tutelage she legally exists" (1995:155). This point of view also suggests that "the sexuality of free, easy woman" is open to any gaze. At the same time, "free or bold women" were represented with an exaggerated sexuality that also makes them look like available and inviting. So the term "free" itself when it is used as an adjective to refer to woman meant to be the available and inviting woman rather than an acting and willing subject. This connotation was and still is one of the major fears of women, which made them refrain from any associations of being "free". From this aspect, feminism as the voice of women's liberation was reduced to the level of sexual freedom.

The prejudice against Feminism does not simply refer to about how it is understood; it is also about not willing to understand anything about Feminism or any *-ism* in general. This is as well not only about taking sides with feminism or anti-feminism, it is also strongly related with the apolitical lifestyles which have been imposed on the younger generations by a number of institutions such as families, education system and state regulations after the 1980 military coup in Turkey. After the experience of 1970s, when there were two major political sides in conflict and when people suffered due to the political views they hold, a systematic depoliticizing process was promulgated in 1980s. The younger generations were carefully and deliberately detached from politics and introduced and encouraged to be the faithful members of the consumer society.

Paradoxically, when all the political activities were banned in Turkey after the military coup, a new feminist movement found for itself an arena to raise its voice. After the first unstable three years following the 1980 democracy break, well educated, mostly middle-

class urban women started to seek the ways to redefine femininity and a new female identity. As Tekeli (1986:195) points out the main political trajectory before the 1980s can be linked to the domination of left-wing ideologies in anti-state circles. When Tekeli describes the first days of the movement in the 1980s, she says “we discovered just how thoroughly Turkish society was permeated by patriarchal and sexist concepts and the ‘fact’ that daily private life is the real arena of patriarchy (quoted in Grünell & Voeten 1997:225)”.

Following the emergence of this new feminist movement, women magazines were published, one of the most remarkable one was called *Kadınca*; in the beginning it was a traditional women’s magazine addressing issues such as beauty, sex, fashion, interviews with celebrities. When Duygu Asena and her staff took over the magazine its content changed and it became an important publication for the feminist movement. This publication and its attempts to open up a space for feminist views helped the word spread in the society but at the same time the “radical” statements created a general misunderstanding of what feminism really is. The idea of economic independence and some suggestions to women in terms of being able to have a life on their own have been understood mostly at the level of sexual freedom or hate against men, which I believe are the main confusions related with the conceptualization of feminism in Turkey. Concomitantly, feminism became a separatist worldview in the eye of the public and also feminists became “loose” and/or “mad” women.

Istanbul and Women

Istanbul is one of the biggest cities in the world with 13 million at present inhabitants. Starting with 1980s and continuing all through the 1990s, Turkish society in general and particularly the urban population of the country have been deeply influenced by the effects of the free market economy, new social and institutional regulations, rapid changes in temporal and spatial experiences due to the adaptation of new technologies, fragmented city structures, and establishment of commercial broadcasting stations among all other factors. These changes became more and more visible in the urban centers, especially in the city of Istanbul. One of the important characteristics of this era is the existence of the diverse groups or individuals being in the same places at the same time but managing to be there without having any contact whatsoever. There were invisible zones in certain sections of the city, along with the highly visible borders. One of the major discourses circulated in the social life was (and still is) being able to live the way one wants, which was articulated into a “freedom” based discourse. The demands of 1970s were originated from the “justice” for all, which shifted in the 1980s to the “freedom” for self originated demands, though the problem with that freedom was being free to choose anything and everything within a pre-determined consumer culture (Gürbilek (2001).

The dominant spirit of the era after the 1980s can be summarized as “no memory, no future, no ties”, therefore the young generations’ desires become running away from Istanbul, but at the same time from the country due to the insecurity, fear of future, feeling stuck between the traditional values and beliefs and the modern (or even postmodern) life styles. At the same time the matrix of economic, social and cultural climates constrain the mobility of a number of urban subjects in Istanbul. Only privileged minority possess the means to overcome that implicit stability. The fragmented structure of the city allows women to be on the certain places at certain times. The ones who live in the periphery do not experience the city as the ones in the center; they live in their own small communities. The ones who are in the center started to draw back from the certain parts of the city in order to avoid any possible troubles. Mass media’s representations of women collaborate the male dominated discourse and show what happens to a girl when she asks for her freedom in the city. So once it was a place where you could be as free as you want, now it is the place where you will be scared as you live. At

the same time, the increase in the number of women who work and earn high salaries resulted with more and more women living alone in the city, as well as driving, shopping and going out at nights without the need of an accompanying men.

Istanbul opens up a space for urban middle-class women to be free and to be feared at the same time. Between these two maxims women in İstanbul still have to deal with multileveled aspects of traditional norms and values and male-dominated discourse. Sometimes being economically free does not necessarily mean that a person is really free.

The Free Girl and the Cell Phone Advertisements

The Free Girl came to our world by a singing a song “I’m Free” on the rural parts of the country with a back bag and a “cowgirl” hat and the mobile phone in her hand, which was the symbol of her freedom. Later on we found out more information about her, such as she has been working in the advertisement sector, she was composing her own music, and she was going to release an album². The *Hazır Kart* (Ready to use Mobile Phone Card) advertisements started to broadcast in the 2000s as an unfolding story attracted attention just like drama series, making the audience wait for the next episode. The main theme of these advertisements was consistent with the contemporary urban people’s desire of running away from the city, yet not giving up the urban conformist habits provided by the new technologies: Being on the top of a hill and still being able to communicate.

Whelehan argues that there is individualistic kind of ‘radicalism’ of ‘new’³ feminists. “This radicalism pretends the power of self-definition is all about being ‘in control’ and ‘making choices’, regardless, it seems, of who controls the ‘choices’ available (2000:4).” Yet Nil does not describe herself as a feminist neither ‘new’ nor ‘old’, her lyrics pretend to create a womanish world-view. If one does not read/watch/listen her interviews in the media or if one does not listen to all of her songs, s/he could easily think that she defends women’s rights, asks for equality and economic freedom. In one song she addresses her mother and says “Mom I’ve got to run, I don’t want to cook rice”. But in another song she changes her idea and addresses her boy friend and says “So I’ve got out of bed and made a cake for you”. In her interviews she keeps telling that she is free to do whatever she wants to do and her mood changes so easily, she feels like a child all the time and everyday she ‘resets’ her memory leaving all the ‘bad things *in yesterday*’⁴. She presents her life and herself as if she lives out of space with neither contextual nor spatial or temporal references, but definitely in her own ‘world’ and in her own urban settlement by holding the ‘total’ control in her hands. But on the other hand, she gets so confused or suddenly remembers that she lives in a country where the traditional values, beliefs and gender roles are important in the commercial success of her albums; so she decides to come out of this world and negotiate with the society’s conservative discourses. As it happened in her latest album release, as soon as the questions posed to her about feminism she announced what she meant by buying her own ring the (main theme in one of her songs) was the ‘opposite of feminism’.

Again Whelehan argues that “being ‘in control’ became one of the catchwords of the nineties in the parlance of women’s magazines, but control always seemed to be about the right to consume and display oneself to best effect, not about empowerment in the worlds of work, politics or even the home. It was an expression of withdrawal from a wider political arena (2000:4).” As I mentioned the anti-isms period in the Turkish context, Nil sure is one of the best public figures, who fit the ideal persona of the global consumer society.

2 Nil Dünyası (*Nil World*) 2002, Nil FM 2004, I Bought My Own Solitaire Ring 2006.

3 I believe this statement explains the spirit of most of the urban young women today.

4 Interview with Ayşe Arman, May 6th 2006, Hürriyet Newspaper.

Conclusion

The “Free Girl”, she sure is not alone when she insists on not being feminist, not having anything to do with politics. Most of the young women and men share similar feelings and ideas with her; they hate feminism because feminism hates men, they hate politics because politics is a mess. The Free Girl has her economic independence. She has no financial expectations from men. At the same she thinks that women have to deal with a lot of problems in Turkish society. And as a successful advertiser she repeats one of her pad commercial lyrics during an interview where she explains her relation with women’s issues: “Having kid and career at the same time is almost like creating an art work. The ones who succeed in doing this are very important role models. Therefore I believe working modern women are having problems in this respect and they try to achieve this goal. They should depend on themselves instead of a man or their families. The summary of this whole idea is: Buy your own solitaire ring, buy your own diamond”. In another interview she clarifies mist about the issue: “ I speak to women and say go buy your own ring. That is why I wrote this song. I want this subject to be discussed, that’s why I brought it up. Don’t look for any feminist meaning here. I don’t mean that men should not buy diamonds to women; it is just women should buy as well. I address to women, I don’t have any complains about men”.

How it is possible to achieve such independence with political denial? How far any economic independence can manage to go without the collaborating social and cultural transformation? How long would any idea survive without its discursive and theoretical basis? Just because women are able to live on their own, that does not mean that women are subordinated anymore; on the contrary this pseudo-freedom creates a deeper and stronger subordination model. This time with superficial freedoms and rights, women get the illusion of being liberated from the patriarchal discourse and the traditional values. The backlash of feminisms serves to the male dominated discourse again.

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