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Canan Tanir

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Canan Tanir

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

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Book Review: *Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity, and Affect in Postsecular Turkey*¹

Reviewed by Canan Tanir²

Even though numerous studies in the past have taken up the gendered politics of the Turkish modernization and secularization project, none have delved into the affective economy around divination and fortune-telling as their primary focus in that constellation. Zeynep Korkman's *Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity, and Affect in Postsecular Turkey* very creatively fills this gap with a unique and multi-layered analysis of the material relations that take shape around this seemingly mundane practice.

By employing a genealogical approach to secularism which appropriately unravels the complexities around how gendered conceptions of religion, secularity, and tradition surface through the processes of divination and fortune-telling in the postsecular context of Turkey, Korkman is able to convey that the definitions of public/secular and private/religious are very much interlocked and continuously shifting. With this clear refusal of the simplistic binary of religious versus secular, the book brilliantly demonstrates how the changing dynamics of a postsecular Turkey find their reflection in the "affective economy" around divination and fortune-telling. Locating these practices precisely within the neoliberal marketplace, the book also deals with the deepening insecurities of neoliberal capitalism under an Islamist authoritarian heteropatriarchy. This intricate analysis is built upon rich and extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul's fortune-telling coffee shops. It is complemented by cultural analysis and historical data to provide the reader with a complete and coherent account.

The book consists of three parts, with a total of seven chapters, examining gendered affects, sociabilities, and labors in the larger formations of heteropatriarchy and the postsecular neoliberal order in Turkey. The first part is dedicated to the genealogical tracing of the gendered construction of the secular in Turkey which serves to establish the historical relationship between divination and the religion/secularism divide. Chapter one, "Crimes of Divination" examines the historical shifts in how fortune-telling was regarded from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Turkish Republic. This foregrounds the analysis in the second chapter "The Gendered Politics of Secularism" which carries readers forward into the present context of Turkey, displaying the centrality of gender and sexuality in the formation of Turkish secularism. The chapter also demonstrates how the secular has been constituted through a repudiation of its outsiders, which then controversially causes fissures in its postsecular appropriations. The third and last chapter in the section forms the core of Korkman's overall analysis by establishing the central role of "feeling" in the re-appropriation of superstition into the postsecular public realm. Destabilizing the gendered boundaries between the religious and the secular throughout this first part, Korkman exposes how the practice of fortune-telling, although considered a "feminine foible" (12), can

¹ Zeynep K. Korkman, *Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity, and Affect in Postsecular Turkey*. Duke UP, 2023. 276 pp.

² Canan Tanir received her PhD from the Department of Sociology at Binghamton University, New York. She currently works as an Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA. Her work explores the limitations of neoliberal conceptions of individual responsibility and choice through an empirical focus on gendered politics of household care and mothering. Email: canan.tanir@utrgv.edu

become a significant tool in understanding the ways in which women and minoritized subjects in the postsecular context handle the precariousness and uncertainties they may face.

The second part of the book advances this argument by exploring how fortune-telling reconfigures the sociospatial arrangement of the postsecular public. In the fourth chapter titled “Feeling Publics of Femininity,” fortune-telling cafés are examined as part of a larger feminized domain of affect, intimacy, and feeling. Although these cafés are located within the secular public, they blur the gendered lines of the public and the intimate spheres, which were previously divided more diametrically by a positivist epistemology of the secularist ideal. Chapter five demonstrates how this novel configuration of public intimacy or “the neoliberal intimization of the public sphere” (116) could be acknowledged as an alternative space for groups who are disempowered by the heteropatriarchal neoliberal order. However, Korkman also concludes that the distance these fortune-telling cafés may provide from the political public sphere does not necessarily make these spaces compatible with feminist politics.

The two chapters in the third and final part of the book, “Feeling Labor, Precarity, and Entrepreneurialism,” focus on how the commodification of divination as a service in the neoliberal market, typically marked by precariousness, provides “feeling labors” (29) that are themselves utilized in surviving the precariousness and instability of the neoliberal context. Chapter six delves into the concept of feeling labor, situating it in the broader context of neoliberal restructuring which touts individual choice and freedom and promotes active, autonomous, self-therapeutic enterprise while at the same time unevenly constraining the possibilities of stability and security. While helping clients navigate anxieties, fortune-reading ironically sustains the precarity of those who conduct it by placing coffee cup readers at an intersection of financial opportunity and precarity. This distinguishes Korkman’s concept of “feeling labor” from the more well-known concepts of emotional labor or affective labor. Precisely through this distinction, as well as by noting divination’s resonance with the unsettling feelings of precariousness, Korkman eloquently highlights the historical and geographical specificity of the uneven distribution of ever-growing neoliberal anxieties. Lastly, the picture is completed by scrutinizing the entrepreneurial refashioning of the self as a response to labor precarity in Chapter Seven, “Entrepreneurial Fortunes.” Spiritual entrepreneurship in this postsecular era is enabled by collapsing the economic and the personal and recasting of the self as capital or as a form of investment. Korkman extends her analysis to the growing online fortune-telling businesses, laying bare how these digital enterprises are glorified by the media as moral, socially responsible, and successful models of self-realization and entrepreneurship. She argues that, in fact, these enterprises are deepening the precarity of labor even further by utilizing transnational flexible labor for reading fortunes or translating them, labor provided by those who otherwise lack opportunities for secure employment.

Throughout the whole book, distinct threads of the gendered affective economy around divination are nicely woven into the fabric of the contemporary neoliberal context and the anxieties it increasingly produces within the specific history and contingencies of a religiously conservative and authoritarian Turkey. By centering on feeling as an analytical lens through which to question feminist agency as well as feminisms’ engagement with affect, Korkman successfully delivers on her promise of displaying the shifting politics of gendered secularism through the feminized practices of divination and affect. The precarious conduct of such practices within the limitations of neoliberal capitalism complicates this analysis further by demonstrating novel possibilities for a reconfiguration of the public. However, Korkman is wary of suggesting naive and simplistic readings. To the contrary, enriched with interesting data and in close dialogue with theory, the book offers an exemplary approach to situating an unexpectedly local and seemingly mundane

focus right in the center of global significance. Ultimately, it presents a very convincing case for reading everyday relations and familiar concerns as immersed in a framework of historical conditions, as well as showcasing the infusion of broader social and economic forces into the daily practices in subtle and unrecognized ways.

The book may be particularly attractive for ethnographers and qualitative researchers because she links her fieldwork to a globally significant conversation with conceptual clarity, but in the same vein the book would also be of major interest for scholars of Gender Studies, Middle Eastern studies, religion, secularism, modernization, affect, and neoliberal forms of precarious labor. In addition, Korkman's engaging style, her lively use of ethnographic detail, and her sophisticated theoretical approach would make the book an interesting addition to any graduate and undergraduate syllabi in Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, or Middle Eastern history.