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Gender Aspect of a Struggle: The Women Representations in Alevi Theatre

In liberal and progressive public discourse as well as certain strands of scholarship, the Alevi religious minority is often associated with gender equality. Religious rituals like semah have been presented as the ultimate proof. Recent critical scholarship and the debates within Alevi communities, however, have challenged the myth of Alevi gender equality, and demonstrated the limits of the gendered and sexualized politics of belonging.

Following the Alevi migration to urban Turkey and Western Europe in the 1960s, theatre emerged as a highly political performance form that members of Alevi communities used for recognition, visibility, community-building and the transfer of post-memory. Dramatic texts by and about members of the Alevi communities have provided opportunities to review and revise patriarchal accounts of history to question the contemporary status of women within Alevi communities; to explore the intersectional oppression Alevi women experience in Turkey and its diasporas. Nevertheless, Alevi theatre and especially its contemporary significance for feminist and queer politics have received little scholarly attention, despite the rich and vibrant theatre cultures of Alevi communities. The state-sponsored productions about Alevi history and religion staged at Alevi festivals and the debates about them show the significance of gender for the broader concerns about Alevi identity and the political economy of theatre as well.

In this presentation, by using examples from dramatic literature and theatre, I will try to show the complex negotiations of the gendered politics of belonging among members of the Alevi communities and how Alevi women are affected by the tension between the Alevi myth of gender equality and the gender roles expected of them in their daily life.