

**“Women against Women”.  
Syrian Women Refugees and  
Intersectional Marginalization**

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**Abstract:** In this book review, Onur Yamaner’s study on Syrian female refugees’ experiences of intersectional marginalization, published in 2021 in Germany, will be examined from a critical perspective that attests to both the strengths and weaknesses of the research. The review will first provide a summary of Yamaner’s work, including its theoretical foundations and methodology. Then, it will discuss some shortcomings involved in the study that mainly stem from its ignorance of what the critical feminist paradigm has to say on the subject. It is hoped that this review will provide insights to researchers who would like to approach the issue of feminization of migration from an intersectional perspective in the future.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, female refugees, migration

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## **“Women against Women”. Syrian Women Refugees and Intersectional Marginalization**

Review of Onur Yamaner (2021): Syrian Female Refugees. Intersectional Marginalization.

Although it has been recently pushed to the bottom of the agenda of international public opinion due to the COVID-19 epidemic that has swept the whole world, one of the most important ethical, legal, social, and political problems facing humanity in the 21st century is the refugee issue. This increasingly widespread experience of forced displacement and statelessness, among the causes of which we can count not only the political upheavals and civil wars spreading in the Third World but also the irreversible destruction inflicted on nature by the global capitalist economy, has led many social researchers within both civil society and academia to understand and solve it. Onur Yamaner's research on Syrian female refugees living in Ankara, Turkey's capital, is one of these valuable initiatives. Looking at the gendered nature of hate speech against immigrants from an approach that tries to make Syrian women refugees' voices audible is a brave scholarly effort that deserves critical appreciation "these days [when] being a Syrian woman is not pleasant" (Yamaner 2021, 17) at all. Besides, the fact that the research was carried out during the state of emergency declared in Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt, at a time when social scientists who liked to conduct research on Syrian immigrants faced many formal and informal restrictions and obstructions, makes Yamaner's study an even more courageous undertaking.

In his fieldwork, Yamaner bends the stick to the other side, so to speak, mirroring the ways local women participate in the reproduction of anti-immigrant discourse. He pursues this project by looking at women's experiences of oppression from an intersectional perspective. Stating that intersectionality is built upon multiple social divisions and cleavages, involving class, gender, and race, he discusses the three main approaches to the study of intersectionality as identified by McCall (2005). While the first approach focuses on the difficulties living within intersectional groups entails, the second approach tries to deconstruct analytical categories such as race and gender. The third one, on the other hand, which Yamaner also uses in his study, aims to document unequal relations between social groups and demonstrates how fluid these relations could be

(Yamaner 2021, 34-36). By doing this, Yamaner shows us how challenging a task it is for feminism to achieve a common definition of womanhood that would form the basis of a collective political subjectivity in the face of various racial, religious, cultural, ethnic, and other differences and inequalities among women.

Onur Yamaner builds his research on five main hypotheses. First, he claims that while Syrian female refugees are oppressed by both public and private patriarchy, Turkish local women are also involved in this process through daily life practices such as gossip and rumors. Although what exactly this public-private distinction in the conceptualization of patriarchy corresponds to is not sufficiently illuminated in the study, Yamaner's research emphasizes women's engagement in the perpetuation of masculine domination in turn for certain practical benefits. As such, it implies that Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "patriarchal bargaining" continues to be an important tool for understanding the complex ways women relate to patriarchy.

In his second hypothesis, Yamaner shifts the focus from women's daily life practices to another field of study, the media, and examines the reproduction of discriminatory discourses against Syrian women both in the mainstream press and on social media. As Yamaner points out, in Turkey's current socio-political context, the political opposition exhibits open or implicit hostility towards Syrians when criticizing the governing party's policies regarding the Syrian Civil War and Syrian refugees. On the other hand, as Yamaner himself admits, the AKP, which has actively taken sides in the Syrian Civil War, has not legally recognized Syrian immigrants' refugee status yet, despite purporting to follow a policy of hospitality towards them with references to a religious discourse of fraternity. Related to this, in his third hypothesis, Yamaner says that hate speech against Syrians takes different manifestations in the public sphere depending on the positioning of its agent vis-à-vis the government. Moreover, Yamaner traces the roots of hate speech against Syrians into modern Turkish history and argues that the mission of the new Turkish republic, founded via a revolution that toppled the Ottoman monarchy, to sever its ties with the Ottoman and Islamic past opened up some space for hostility against the Arabs in the then-emergent political regime.

Yamaner writes that prejudices against Arab people, still prevalent in Turkish society, also permeate discriminatory attitudes towards Arab women, including Syrians, who are deemed as the carriers and reproducers of Arab culture, according to the fourth hypothesis of the study.

Then, in his last hypothesis, Yamaner looks at the complicated nature of the relations between Syrian female refugees and Turkish local women and says that the former are sometimes seen as a problem or a threat by the latter. But

they are also regarded as victims in the eyes of local Turkish women at other times.

In the study, a multi-method design was adopted as it scrutinized how the discriminatory discourse against Syrian female refugees manifests itself in divergent areas of social life. In addition to field observations in Altındağ, Ankara, where large numbers of Syrian immigrants live, and in-depth interviews with 36 women from this district, 24 local and 12 Syrian, Facebook posts and news articles about Syrians were examined by using the toolkit of critical discourse analysis.

Yamaner theoretically builds his research upon Foucault's understanding of discourse and tries to shed light on the intertwined nature of discourse and power. Accordingly, in his analysis, he largely benefits from the critical approach of Teun van Dijk to discourse analysis. After laying out the theoretical foundations of his work, he draws attention to the contemporary state of racism and argues that in this new racism, the biological understanding of race has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on culture-based distinctions. Thus, the understanding of race and ethnicity is intertwined, and culture is increasingly being addressed on a biological basis. Yamaner (2021, 32) intends to use this discussion to challenge the general belief in Turkish society that "since there are no black people in Turkey, there cannot be racism."

He then discusses the notions of intersectionality and intersectional marginalization and says that racial domination intermingles with sexual domination in the case of Syrian female refugees, which adds to their exclusion and invisibility.

In the second chapter, Yamaner provides an overview of recent socio-political and economic developments regarding Syrian refugees, particularly Syrian female refugees, living both in and outside camps in Turkey.

In the third chapter, titled "Women against Women," he focuses on the conflicted nature of relations between local Turkish women and Syrian women and problematizes the former's involvement in the reproduction of patriarchy, as intermingled with racism, especially through their daily life practices. He discusses how make-up and giving birth, that is, roles and behaviors that are traditionally attributed to women, can lead to racial discrimination and marginalization among women themselves. "One of the main reasons for prejudice against female refugees, at least for some local women, is the fear of losing their husbands," writes the author (Yamaner 2021, 59). Relatedly, he discusses that local Turkish women accuse female refugees of wearing excessive make-up to sexually attract their male partners and disrupt their families. This, in turn, creates a certain social pressure on female refugees to adopt a more unpretentious look

in the public sphere and try to render themselves invisible. As Yamaner (2021, 58) demonstrates, local women employ the sexist rhetoric about makeup as a tool to seduce men in their talk about female refugees, while they themselves suffer from this discourse. As regards childbirth, seemingly higher reproduction rates among Syrian refugees are accepted by local Turkish women as evidence of Syrian women's inability to control their sexual urges, as understood from their use of descriptive adjectives like "hysterical," "sex addict," "reproducing like a dog" and so on (Yamaner 2021, 73). Yamaner also writes about how the burqa can be a means of protection for Syrian women as it renders them invisible. But, at the same time, as Yamaner observes, the burqa makes a Syrian woman much more visible in public, potentially turning her into a target of oppression and subordination.

In the fourth chapter, Yamaner looks at the media discourse in Turkey about Syrian female refugees. Through an analysis of Facebook comments and likes, on the one hand, and of news articles about Syrians in the online mainstream press, on the other, he shows that Syrian women are simultaneously seen as a "threat to health" and "family unity" and represented as victims of "rape, violence, and death." In this media talk about Syrian women, they are also stigmatized as the agents of the presumedly "backward" Arab culture, a perception that furthers their marginalization.

Yamaner's research is very valuable and insightful in that it does not neglect the involvement of ordinary people, that is, local Turkish women, in the reproduction of biases against Syrian women. It goes beyond just looking at hate speech in the media and reveals the capillary nature of the functioning of power in daily life. However, the research suffers from a number of shortcomings. First, while looking for the agents of hate speech against Syrian female refugees, the author seems to have bent the stick a little too much towards local Turkish women. As feminists have long argued, patriarchy is a power structure that sustains itself by making women hostile to other women, a point that Yamaner's research also attests to. Yet, the author tends to neglect the common interests of Turkish men and Syrian male refugees men in this patriarchal mechanism while trying to expose the intertwined texture of patriarchy and anti-immigrant discourse, as it becomes evident in such sentences of his: "... the discourses of local women (...) about refugee women constitute the main source of the discourses about Syrian refugee women who are exposed to discrimination by both their own society and their counterparts in the host society" (Yamaner 2021, 26-27). In fact, this is one of the traps many studies that claim to shed light on the intersectional nature of gender inequality fall into as they incorporate power inequalities between women into the equation of patriarchy. While they shift the

focus away from women's common experiences within patriarchy, they show a temptation to place most, if not all, of the responsibility of patriarchy on women. Unfortunately, Yamaner (2021, 140) seems to have done so when, for example, arguing that the discriminatory rhetoric of Turkish women against Syrian female refugees in daily life "triggers the hypocritical approach" towards Syrians and Syrian women on social media.

Also, in such studies, men's responsibilities in perpetuating gender inequalities are justified by conceptualizing male violence as a rather therapeutic object. Actually, Yamaner draws attention to an important point when he states that Syrian male refugees' feelings of victimization in the face of hegemonic Turkish masculinity might be making them more aggressive towards Syrian women. He writes, "Due to posttraumatic stress disorder, discrimination, working under poor conditions, and the anxieties of male refugees to maintain patriarchal social order, these discourses can lead to violence against refugee women" (Yamaner 2021, 96). However, when researchers point to the damage to the male psyche caused by forced migration as the main culprit behind the oppression and injustice experienced by female refugees, there emerges the risk of ignoring that Syrian male refugees also participate in and benefit from the reproduction of patriarchy in the Turkish context. Still, Yamaner's fieldwork reveals male refugees' complicity in patriarchy with the support of repressive State apparatuses, as this quotation from one of his Syrian female interviewees imply: "One day my husband came home with a police officer. He said this policeman wanted to talk to me. I was so afraid... He showed me his police ID. He then started... advising about family relations and a wife's responsibilities. He also said, 'I heard you do not behave well towards your husband. If you keep behaving like this, I will put you in jail'" (Yamaner 2021, 82).

According to the Foucauldian understanding, discourse does not only suppress but also produce subjectivities. However, some studies ignore this dialectical nature of the relationship between discourse and power and focus on nothing but the repressive aspects of discourse. Indeed, Yamaner talks about the empowering aspects of migration for Syrian women, instead of simply showing how it reinforces patriarchal structures and relations. While migration has reinforced and added new dimensions to their oppression, it has also given them some chance to liberate themselves and to disconnect from the ties of traditional patriarchal institutions. This is especially true in the case of the language barrier, which sometimes acts as a buffer for Syrian female refugees against possible sexual assaults (Yamaner 2021, 139). Yet, throughout the study, Syrian refugee women are usually defined as passive and helpless beings in the face

of dominant discourses. For example, while examining the labor that Syrian women spend on taking care of their bodies, Yamaner might be said to overlook how self-empowering these practices might be for these women. Instead, he regards Syrian women as having no other choice but to beautify their bodies for men, as this sentence from the book implies: "Because of the fear of not being able to get married, and not being liked, refugee women feel pressure to look after their appearance and to go to beauticians" (Yamaner 2021, 43). Indeed, while discussing the interwoven impact of Islamic practices and the "husband's will" on the female body and sexuality, he openly claims the following: "There seem to be no options available to [Syrian] women outside of what is offered as their gender role" (Yamaner 2021, 71). To be honest, the author approaches the way local Turkish women relate to the patriarchy from a dialectical perspective, showing that they are not absolute victims of the patriarchy but can at times be its very agents. But he does not handle Syrian female refugees' experiences within patriarchy from an equally dialectical perspective.

Yamaner argues that the Turkish women's movement neglects women refugees' problems in the face of the urgency of various other issues, as this sentence claims: "Woman's groups' struggles against patriarchal practices, the increase in the numbers of murdered women, and sexual violence against women gave rise to the subordination of the problems of 1,621,363 female refugees, regarding them as the bearer of lesser importance" (Yamaner 2021, 55). Although there is certain justification in the author's criticism, when combined with a rather limited survey of the women's movement in Turkey, this argument, which is occasionally expressed throughout the book, makes the study seem as if it were holding the women's movement responsible for the plight of Syrian female refugees.

In a nutshell, the main theoretical weaknesses of Yamaner's study can be summarized as follows: overlooking local and refugee women's common experiences within patriarchy while shedding light on the power inequalities between them, accepting Syrian refugee women largely as passive victims without paying sufficient attention to their self-empowering practices, and failing to take note of the richness and diversity in the Turkish women's movement. These weaknesses mostly stem from the fact that he has not adequately scanned the feminist literature related to his research area. This leads to a relative neglect of the critical feminist paradigm's insights and arguments in the evaluation of the data collected. On the other hand, Yamaner's is a laudable scholarly attempt that was conducted during difficult times, aiming to make the voices of Syrian refugee women almost inaudible in the public sphere heard. Besides, by revealing the intersectional nature of gender discrimination, Yamaner's study com-

pels us to rethink how and in what contexts we relate to racism and sexism in our daily lives.

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