

Pınar Selek, *Sürüne Sürüne Erkek Olmak (Becoming a Man Through Crawling)*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınevi, 2008

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This being that is made to believe that he is a giant yet faces his real dimensions constantly and is deranged in the face of life's complications, holds on to his mould with an aggressive fear. He becomes more "manly" with each blow in the face he receives and gives. In the ebb and flow of the promise of sovereignty and the discovery of non-sovereignty, he becomes a schizophrenic being that is very fragile, yet he tries to hide this fragility with certain walls, masks, and manifestations of power or pomp. (215)

Sürüne Sürüne Erkek Olmak (Becoming a Man Through Crawling) is formulated around an oral history project entitled "Erkeklik ve Askerlik Deneyimleri" (Experiences of Masculinity and Soldierly) which was conducted by Pınar Selek and her colleagues. 58 men who had already fulfilled the obligations of compulsory military service in Turkey gave their accounts as part of the interview process. Education level, socio-economic background, profession, age, and place of military service stand out as the significant variables that impacted the selection process of a heterogeneous group of men. Selek chose two male colleagues to conduct the interviews since the men might have felt intimidated telling their stories to a woman who had not shared the same experiences and who might be considered an "outsider" to the issue because the Turkish military is a gendered space. The perpetuity of the military relies very much on the strict exclusion of women and everything "womanly" from its constitution. However, it would be intriguing to see what discourses the men slip into, what they hide and exaggerate about their experiences in the military, how they construct their stories, and how their notions of gender norms influence their accounts while speaking to female interviewers.

Selek strives to understand the effects of military service as only one of the many primary developmental milestones in a man's life, which also include circumcision, marriage, becoming a father, and the construction of masculine identities. Through these anecdotal accounts, Selek invites us to see the fragile, patchy nature of the myth of manhood, which is constantly in a tug-of-war between power, violence, and hegemony on the one hand, and weakness and precariousness on the other. The male subject tries to establish himself "as a man" somewhere in this tug-of-war, through negotiation with these conflicting forces. One witnesses the soldier speak through the

powerful language of a sovereign, yet, there are times when each subjective account reveals a rupture, a state of tiredness and fragility on behalf of the male subject; that is, the moment he realizes that he *can* be broken. In those moments he criticizes mythical masculinity, yet strives to be a part of it, hence the schizophrenic nature of trying to “become a man” (*adam olmak*). However, this fragility on behalf of the male subject indicates another significant fragility according to Selek: it reveals that the mythical masculinity that is so willingly guarded by violence, patriarchy, and strict gender norms can be wounded as well. Masculinity is in perpetual need of a pompous *mise-en-scene* to reproduce its virtual glory. Selek reveals how men behave as actors on stage and negotiate their roles in modern society.

Selek’s analysis follows a chronological organization. She begins with men’s primary reactions to military service: How did they feel about it at the beginning? Most of the participants reveal a state of obligation rather than will or desire. Since they saw military service as a barrier for their future, they just wanted “to get it over with” as quickly as possible. Not having done military service means that a man has to be on the run all the time; he cannot establish himself through permanent employment, marriage, and fatherhood unless he “proves” himself capable on the military stage. Some men see the military as a matter of pride, safeguarding against accusations and humiliation by male relatives or acquaintances. As one man attests, “In our town, if someone has not done their military service, they are not considered a man. So we went, served in the military, and came back as men” (34). The ideas men had with regard to military service were very much shaped by what they heard from other males; they told both frightening and humorous anecdotes and gave advice on how to act in the military environment. The men were usually filled with ambivalent feelings, which ranged between uncertainty, fear, anxiety, curiosity, and excitement. The second step, following their conscription, is to undergo health examinations in which army officials decide whether or not the applicants are “suitable” candidates for the army. These examinations also include the control of the men’s sexual organs, and according to Selek, thus imply a *masculinity examination* that does not end with military service, but continues throughout the man’s adult life. Men are constantly under scrutiny and subject to examination in different aspects of life – military service being one of them. In this manner, they are reminded of the fragility of their subjective masculinities, which have to be “strengthened” by constant exposure to barriers.

Selek then takes a brief look at the rituals conducted for men about to leave for their military service and how these men felt on their first nights there. The awkward feeling of non-belonging to this different place, uniform, and life creates a sort of alienation; a distancing from the old self: “When I put on this uniform, I am like a robot; I obey their orders from now on” (63).

During their military service, men are molded into a particular form of citizen that is empowered with masculine ideals of fighting for one's honor, protecting the chastity of one's wife and country, obeying state authority and dominating the "weak". Molding does not happen through smooth means; rather, physical and psychological violence are established as "legitimate" instruments of education. It is interesting to see that men who are often critical of the use of physical violence also try to justify its disciplinary and educational role; hence the internalization of violence as a legitimate means to communicate one's self.

The title of the book *Sürüne Sürüne Erkek Olmak* is an excellent choice because it has two meanings: The literal meaning implies the act of crawling on the ground, something that all soldiers do to hide themselves from the enemy. The deeper meaning of the title comes from the fact that becoming a man is not an easy, smooth ordeal. It requires enduring much physical pain, crawling, being beaten, and getting slapped; and humiliation, through sexually loaded curses, having to obey irrational orders, and not being able to respond to consciously violent attacks on one's ego. The defense mechanisms produced by men against the constant attacks on their beings differ: some choose to legitimize violence and give meaning to it, waiting for the day they will become higher ranked soldiers; others try to find their way in this hierarchical network in a pragmatic manner. It seems like a common practice among soldiers to gossip about their superiors in the rank and file system to satisfy their desire to take revenge. Stories of direct and open resistance to violence are interesting since, according to Selek, they work to reproduce hierarchical relationships rather than damaging them; while the resisting individual is absorbed by the myth of masculinity, the others feel trapped in their restrained manhood. "As an exceptional situation, it [resistance] does not damage the hierarchy; on the contrary it works as a remedy for the system, limiting individuals' arbitrary actions and re-establishing the disciplinary system" (129).

Selek finishes her analysis with a look at how men regarded their military service experience in retrospect. All the stories seemed to converge on the point that military service is necessary for a male teenager to become an adult that is a proper "disciplined" man. Although there is an undeniable internalization of the military values, the feelings of uneasiness, obligation, disturbance and anxiety about military service which are revealed through the cracks of the narratives show that men coming from different backgrounds have different experiences of military service, and the ultimate aim of molding everyone into a fixated, ideal, male, citizen model does not work perfectly. I believe the power of the book comes from the revelation that men, as the dough that is to be molded through military service, do not emerge as identical products.

Although this work uses the methods of oral history in narrative collection, it cannot be readily considered a work of history but is rather an interdisciplinary work, based on the personal histories of people. And yet it has contemporary implications for a topic that still needs much discussion. Selek's sociology background does not necessarily cause her to fit the narratives at hand into a particular theory or framework she has in mind. She insists on the importance of self-reflection and accepts that she reads these narratives through the lenses of a feminist. Throughout the book, it is mostly the voices of men that we hear, since more than half of the book consists of quotations. This makes the book an easy read that is free of complicated, theoretical language.

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