



## 'The question of the corset': fashion, health and identity in late Ottoman history

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RESEARCH PAPER



## 'The question of the corset': fashion, health and identity in late Ottoman history

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines discussions on the corset in the illustrated press, text-book for girls, and medical and advice literature in the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909). The article argues that the corset functioned as a cultural benchmark establishing the terms of Ottoman Muslim female sartorial decorum in a larger medicalized public debate on modern indoor dress. Hamidian reformers responded to a set of intertwined but rather conflicting requirements placed upon Ottoman Muslim women's bodies, then positioned as the central pillars in Muslim community building. Caught between consumer desires for fashion, and the health, of the Muslim population, and stalled by a traditional discourse to regulate female indoor dress, Hamidian reformers mobilized a medicalized discourse associating dress, health and patriotism. Debates over the corset insisted on authentic Ottoman Muslim femininity by drawing upon the binaries of fashion against health, foreign against Muslim, and beautification against beauty. Corset debates opened the path towards shifting female beauty and its preservation from an individually pursued private aesthetic into a scientized public debate which represented moral virtue and patriotic duty towards the larger goal of communal and imperial wellbeing.

### Introduction

In a letter dated October 1895, a certain Ümmü Mukbil, a resident of the Davudpaşa district of Istanbul, responded to an anonymous article entitled 'The Question of the Corset' published in the *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (Ladies' Own Gazette [hereafter *HMG*]), the 'palace-sponsored'<sup>1</sup> and longest published women's magazine under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r.1876–1909).<sup>2</sup> She stated that she wrote to congratulate the anonymous

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<sup>1</sup>M. Şükrü Haniöğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 183.

<sup>2</sup>Ümmü Mukbil, A, *HMG*, no. 17 (9 Cemaziyevvel 1313 /28 October 1895), 4. Ümmü Mukbil responded to 'Korse Meselesi', *HMG*, no. 15 (2 Cemaziyevvel 1313/21 October 1895), 1–3. For general information on *HMG* see, Zehra Öztürk, 'Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete', in *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Supplement I (İstanbul: 2016), 533–34; for detailed information and analysis on *HMG* see, Elizabeth B. Frierson, 'Unimagined Communities: State, Press and Gender in the Hamidian Era' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1996) and Ayşe Zeren Enis, *Everyday Lives of Ottoman Muslim Women: Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete (Newspaper for Ladies) (1895–1908)* (İstanbul: Libra Yayıncılık, 2013) and for a selection of transliterated articles into modern Turkish see, *Yeni Harflerle Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete (1895–1908) Seçki*, eds. Mustafa Çiçekler and M. Fatih Andı (İstanbul: Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı, 2009).

author on the usefulness of his “evidence-based” argumentation on the dangers of corsetry in convincing Ümmü Mukbil’s seven young female friends to give up wearing corsets.<sup>3</sup> She also wished to relate her friends’ experience so as to warn other ‘young women who pointlessly ruin their bodies by using that ‘compression machine’.<sup>4</sup> Although she was happy to see that corsetry had not yet become a widespread practice among Ottoman Muslim women, she nevertheless lamented that the desire to follow this practice had ‘spread like an epidemic’ and that it would not be long before corsetry spread all over the Ottoman Empire. Agreeing with the anonymous author that wearing a corset constituted a requirement of fashionable dress among Ottoman Muslim women, albeit a dangerous one, she nevertheless added that there had to be an alternative to the corset that would cause no harm to those ‘valuable bodies’ in procuring the currently popular shape, the hour-glass figure. After reading the article carefully, she and her friends had questioned the very necessity of wearing a corset in order to wear a close-fitting modern European dress. She told her friends, to their amazement, that she had such a European dress, though wearing a waistcoat rather than a corset underneath.

Subsequently, her friends swore to take off their corsets right there and then. Next, they all returned to their homes with a sample waistcoat that Ümmü Mukbil had cut out of calico for them so that they could make their own waistcoats at home. She ended her letter with the following words:

Although the waistcoat I wear does not contain any non-textile parts, such as whalebone or steel stays that would constrain and destroy the body, it is nevertheless able to procure the desired outcome. [. . .] In case some of our readers would like to see the waistcoat, I could provide a picture to be published in the gazette.<sup>5</sup>

A closer scrutiny at Ümmü Mukbil’s correspondence reveals a symbolic narrative aimed at establishing sartorial decorum. It is unclear whether Ümmü Mukbil is a male writer using a pseudonym or an actual female correspondent, but the letter presents Ümmü Mukbil as both a narrator and teacher; and as for her seven friends, they are depicted as elite women who can read, write and afford a waistcoat.

Ümmü Mukbil uses a medicalized discourse such as: Wearers of corsets ‘ruin their bodies’, corsets ‘constrain and destroy the body’, and the fashion for corsets spreads ‘like an epidemic’. This approach emphasizes the close relationship between modern dress and its impact on women’s bodies, suggesting a looser, gentler discipline on the body than the harsh, hard whale-bone corset. While, on the one hand, she acknowledges fashionable dress as a modern requirement, on the other she casts corsetry as a contagion that needs to be resisted, with a special focus on the impact undergarments exert on women’s bodies in assimilating to fashionable dress. For Ümmü Mukbil, the corset, described as a ‘compression machine’, constitutes the main threat to women’s bodies due to its excessively constraining properties. She presents the waistcoat as a safer alternative, because it is made of soft fabric with much gentler constraining properties. Her critique is a choice representing correct behaviour against the initial recklessness of the other seven young women. She advocates creating modern dress by ‘domesticating

<sup>3</sup>Ümmü Mukbil refers to the anonymous author as ‘*makalenin muharriri bey efendi*’ (gentleman writer of the article).

<sup>4</sup>Ümmü Mukbil, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ümmü Mukbil, 4.

the foreign'.<sup>6</sup> As such, women could either choose to jeopardize or to preserve their lives and health through certain practices with regard to everyday dress. It was in one's own hands to maintain correct (read healthy) fashionable dress thanks to the knowledge the Hamidian serials was purveying to its readers.

This article examines discussions on corsetry in the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) in the illustrated press, text-book for girls, and medical and advice literature in Ottoman-Turkish, mostly published in Istanbul. Before proceeding further a note of caution is necessary concerning the sources in general and *HMG* in particular. Firstly, the article does not claim to include every piece written in Ottoman Turkish on the corset in the Hamidian press. The selected sources, which establish ambivalence in terms of late Ottoman engagement with Western fashion and a univocal narrative, cannot, in fact, be interpreted separately from the heavily controlled official Hamidian ideology aimed at constructing authentic Ottoman modernity. Secondly, interpreting a woman's magazine published in a patriarchal society with low literacy rates and heavy censorship presents various difficulties. One inherent problem is assessing *HMG* in terms of social impact and representation in the Ottoman Empire, both inside and outside of Istanbul. As the name suggests, *HMG* catered to elite Ottoman Muslim women; non-Muslim women were called Madames. As such, women born into elite status and private education, such as the sisters Fatma Aliye Hanım and Emine Semiye Hanım, the two daughters of the renowned Ottoman statesman, jurist and historian Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, among other elite women, regularly contributed to the magazine along with male members of the Hamidian medical, political, and intellectual elite. Men who were not physicians such as Ahmed Midhat and Mehmed Hilmi wrote in a women's magazine because in a patriarchal setting, it was men who set the terms of the debate/discourse pertaining to women. There were also numerous contributions from female professionals and teachers who were writing for and reading the magazines thanks to increasing literacy rates in the Hamidian public education system.<sup>7</sup> While these voices certainly cannot be taken at face value to represent the social reality of the period, they can nevertheless be interpreted on a symbolic level as mobilizing a prescriptive discourse aimed at constructing Ottoman Muslim femininity.<sup>8</sup>

The article argues that the corset functioned as a socio-cultural benchmark to delineate the boundaries of Ottoman Muslim women's engagement with Western fashion in a larger medicalized public debate on late Ottoman modern dress. Corset debates maintained what Haris Exertzoglou termed 'cultural negotiation',<sup>9</sup> managing conflicting ideas and values aimed at Muslim community building in an era of rapid changes.

Hamidian reformers, caught between consumer desires for Western fashions and a concern for the health—in all senses—of the Muslim population, wished to position Muslim women and their bodies as fundamental pillars of the construction of the Muslim

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Brown Frierson, 'Mirrors Out, Mirrors In: Domestication and Rejection of the Foreign in Late-Ottoman Women's Magazines (1875–1908)', in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. Fairchild Ruggles (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 177–204.

<sup>7</sup>See, Elizabeth B. Frierson, 'Unimagined Communities: Women and Education in the Late-Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909', *Critical Matrix*, 9, no. 2 (1995): 55–90; Benjamin Fortna, *Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Betül Açıkgöz, 'The Advent of Scientific Housewifery in the Ottoman Empire', *Paedagogica Historica* 54, no. 6 (2018): 783–99.

<sup>8</sup>For detailed assessment of *HMG* as a historical source see, Enis, *Everyday Lives of Ottoman Muslim Women*.

<sup>9</sup>Haris Exertzoglou, 'The Cultural Uses of Consumption: negotiating class, gender and nation in the Ottoman Urban Centers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no.1 (2003): 77–101.

community.<sup>10</sup> In this task they were stalled by the lack of a traditional discourse that regulated female indoor dress. In its stead they mobilized a medico-hygienic discourse associating dress, health and patriotism, and urged women towards patriotic thinking in matters of dress, fashion and beauty. Debates over the corset, while displaying differences of approach, established notions of sartorial decorum by setting fashion against health, foreign against Muslim, and beautification against beauty that derived from health.

The present article is divided into four sections. The first provides a context for the emergence of the debates over the corset in the Hamidian Era. This is followed by two short sections dealing successively with the advent of a medicalized view of fashion and dress, and the linking of health to patriotism. The article then turns to the corset debates themselves in the final section focusing on the hygienic dress discourse which established female sartorial decorum embodying health, modesty and taste by juxtaposing correct corseting for sartorial purposes against harmful corsetry used as a beautification practice.

### **Dress, fashion and civilization in the Hamidian era**

In the nineteenth century corsetry constituted a controversial practice in many areas around the world, ranging from Victorian Britain, America and Canada, to Iran, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. Discussions on the corset reflected anxieties about fashion in general and the threats it presented to women in particular. Whereas feminists in the West objected to the corset as a patriarchal and oppressive practice that constrained women's bodies and freedom,<sup>11</sup> historians of fashion and art historians saw the corset as a means for women to assert their sexuality and establish a normative femininity.<sup>12</sup> Dress reformers with aesthetic sensibilities saw fashionable dress as ugly and wanted more beautiful clothes for women.<sup>13</sup> Corsetry was also debated within the larger framework of what the historian Alexander Maxwell termed 'sartorial patriotism', arguing that 'patriots worried about the nation's morality, vitality and wealth'.<sup>14</sup> These worries were couched in terms of moral, economic and medical critiques, in a patriarchal language that cast fashionable dress as a feminine vice.<sup>15</sup>

Various Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the late Ottoman Empire, debated corsetry within the growing impact of Western cultural practices in general and consumer desires for European fashions in particular. While moral criticism aimed at maintaining communal and religious sensibilities in the face of foreign influences, economic criticism reflected anxieties about the cost of consumer desires to the local economy. Finally,

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<sup>10</sup>Hamidian reformers represents an umbrella term denoting a political, intellectual, and medical elite with strong ties to the state apparatus, sharing a common goal of promoting Ottoman progress and prosperity through modern scientific knowledge and patriotic thinking.

<sup>11</sup>Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: the Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman', *Signs* 2 no. 3 (Spring 1977): 554–69.

<sup>12</sup>David Kunzle, 'Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman"', *Signs* 2 no. 3 (Spring 1977): 570–79; David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982); Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>Steele, *Corset*; Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*; Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850–1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup>Alexander Maxwell, *Patriots Against Fashion, Clothing and Nationalism in Europe's Age of Revolutions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18.

<sup>15</sup>Maxwell, *Patriots Against Fashion*.

criticism based on health or medical concerns mirrored a degree of autonomy among medical professionals internationally and addressed concerns about population and reproduction.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, while scholarship on Ottoman-Turkish women's dress, particularly on outdoor dress and the subject of veiling, has addressed the moral and economic dangers of fashion, it has ignored late Ottoman concerns about modern female indoor dress discussed in terms of medicine and hygiene. This was largely because, although the Ottoman state regulated Ottoman women's outdoor dress, Muslim female indoor dress remained unregulated by religious custom or law.<sup>17</sup>

Hamidian discussions of the corset also portray a much more complex picture of the relationship between modernity and Ottoman women's dress. One of the concepts I will explore in this article is to test Maxwell's notion of 'sartorial patriotism' in the context of Hamidian corset discussions. In the Hamidian era, a greater concern for Muslim identity, with geopolitical origins, identified the importance of women (and their dress) to that identity, generating anxiety about women's health, appearance and beauty, set against the question of fashion in clothing within an increasingly global economy. This particularly applied to certain middle-class groups (see below) who were involved directly or indirectly in that less localized economy.

After the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, Sultan Abdülhamid II shifted Ottoman state policy from Ottomanism to Islamism, placing special emphasis on the Muslim subjects of the Empire. It was within this broader framework that the Ottoman central administration came to see Muslim women and their bodies as central to the building of the Ottoman

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<sup>16</sup>For a representative sample see, Exertzoglou, 'The Cultural Uses of Consumption'; Mona L. Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863–1922* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004); Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevi, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria: Intellectuals and Ideology in the Late Ottoman Period* (I.B.Tauris, 2014).

<sup>17</sup>On Ottoman-Turkish female dress and its transformation see, Jennifer M. Scarce, 'Turkish Fashion in Transition', *Costume* no. 14 (1980): 144–67. I thank Jennifer Scarce for sending me this article; Nora Şeni, 'Ville ottomane et représentation du corps féminin', *Les Temps Modernes* no. 456–457 (July–August 1984): 66–95; Jennifer Scarce, *Women's Costume of the Near and Middle East* (London, Sydney: Unwin Hyman, 1987); Nancy Micklewright, 'Women's Dress in 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul: Mirror of a Changing Society' (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1986); Hülya Tezcan, 'Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Son Yüzyılında Kadın Kıyafetlerinde Batılılaşma', *Sanat Dünyamız* 37 (1988): 45–51; Cihan Aktaş, *Tanzimat'tan Günümüze Kılık Kıyafet ve İktidar*, vol.1 (Istanbul: Nehir Yayınları, 1989); Nancy Micklewright, 'London, Paris, Istanbul, and Cairo: Fashion and International Trade in the Nineteenth Century', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 7 (Spring 1992): 125–36; Selçuk Esenbel, 'The Anguish of Civilized Behavior: The Use of Western Cultural Forms in the Everyday Lives of the Meiji Japanese and the Ottoman Turks in the Nineteenth Century', *Japan Review* no. 5 (1994): 145–85; Nora Şeni, 'Fashion and Women's Clothing in the Satirical Press of Istanbul at the End of the 19th Century', in *Women in Modern Turkish Society: A Reader*, ed. Şirin Tekeli (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995), 25–45; Elizabeth B. Frierson, 'Cheap and Easy: The Creation of Consumer Culture in Late Ottoman Society', in *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922: An Introduction*, ed. Donald Quataert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 243–60; Nancy Micklewright, 'Public and Private for Ottoman Women of the Nineteenth Century', in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* ed. D. Fairchild Ruggles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 155–76; Charlotte Jirousek, 'The Transition to Mass Fashion System Dress in the Later Ottoman Empire', in *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922: An Introduction*, ed. Donald Quataert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 201–41; Fatma Karabıyık Barbarosoğlu, *Modernleşme Sürecinde Moda ve Zihniyet* (Istanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2002); Nicole van Os, 'Milli Kıyafet: Ottoman Muslim Women and the Nationality of Their Dress', in *The Turks*, vol. 4, eds. Hasan Celal Güzel, C. Cem Oğuz, and Osman Karatay, (Yeni Türkiye Publications: 2002); Elizabeth B. Frierson, 'Gender, Consumption, and Patriotism: The Emergence of an Ottoman Public Sphere', in *Public Islam and the Common Good*, eds. Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 99–125; Anastasia Falierou, 'From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic: Ottoman Turkish Women's Clothing between Tradition and Modernity', in *From Traditional Attire to Modern Dress: Modes of Identification, Modes of Recognition in the Balkans (XVIth-XXth Centuries)* ed. Constanta Vintila-Ghitulescu (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); Anastasia Falierou, 'European Fashion, Consumption Patterns, and Intercommunal Relations in the 19th-Century Ottoman Istanbul', in *Women, Consumption, and the Circulation of Ideas in South-Eastern Europe, 17th-19th Centuries*, ed. Constanta Vintila-Ghitulescu (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 150-168.

Muslim community in terms of reproduction, maintaining cultural identity, policing communal borders and preserving social order. This significant transformation coincided with the influx of Western fashions that introduced novel ideals of beauty and practices concerning the body introduced as a part of civilized living into late Ottoman society. Hamidian civilized female behaviour necessitated that elite Muslim women wear, on indoor social occasions, the European-style form-fitting dresses with a narrow waist that arguably required corsetry. This was in contrast to the traditional loose and multi-layered Ottoman female indoor attire. Although civilization was perceived as a universal entity the Ottomans wanted to participate in, one needed to exercise caution in terms of civilized living. This was because while fashionable dress was acknowledged as both a requirement and a sign of civilized living, it nevertheless became a controversial public matter, because fashion seemed to dismantle the underpinnings of the Ottoman and Islamic understanding of the female body and dress which maintained modesty and morality. Here, the corset, along with its associated outer garments, expanded the concept of dress to encapsulate also beautification and therefore challenged Hamidian reformers.

Hamidian reformers found themselves in a difficult position: they were in need of a regulatory discourse, but were nevertheless frustrated by the lack of a traditional mechanism to monitor Muslim female indoor dress. As a solution they mobilized modern, Western scientific knowledge as an 'ordering instrument'<sup>18</sup> in general and the science of hygiene in particular. As Nadir Özbek demonstrates in his insightful study on the construction of the Hamidian welfare system, Ottoman physicians, trained in modern Western medicine, played an important role in shaping a discourse on social welfare and public health by drawing upon the modern science of hygiene.<sup>19</sup> Hygiene constituted an umbrella term encompassing both medical knowledge about the human body and preventative health measures, including a considerable number of everyday practices ranging from alimentation, rest, dress, exercise and sleep aimed at maintaining and preserving good health.<sup>20</sup>

The novel discourse positioned civilizational features upon a binary of useful/harmful to the health of the individual, communal and the imperial body. This conceptualization allowed reformers to deal with dress specifically through a medico-hygienic discourse (hygienic dress henceforth), addressed to the members of the household in general and its womenfolk in particular. Centred on the model of the 'healthy' human body, the hygienic discourse associated dress with health. While health itself was constructed as a valuable human resource to be directed towards individual and communal good, dress could be discussed within the binary of threat/benefit to the health of women's bodies. In their attempts to reshape women's behaviour, the reformers also unified health with beauty, arguing that true/authentic beauty arose from health. This in turn shifted female beauty from a private and aesthetic notion into a medicalized public concept and enabled the construction of beauty as a moral and patriotic value. Thus beauty was to be pursued not for individual benefit but for the larger goals of Ottoman power, progress and prosperity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Sheila Jasanoff, 'Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society', in *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and Social Order*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff (London and New York: Routledge: 2004), 39.

<sup>19</sup>Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet: Siyaset, İktidar ve Meşruiyet 1876-1914* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002).

<sup>20</sup>Nebi Bozkurt, 'Hifzissihha', *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 17 (İstanbul,1998), 316-19; Gülden Sarıyıldız, 'Osmanlılar'da Hifzissihha', *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 17 (İstanbul, 1998), 319-21.

<sup>21</sup>Berrak Burçak, 'Hygienic Beauty: Discussing Ottoman-Muslim female beauty, health and hygiene in the Hamidian Era', *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 343-60.

This was a complicated task because civilized behaviour did not mean outright submission to European practices, but involved a hybrid composition. The physician Tahir Beyzade Mehmed Hoşyar, in his piece 'Fashion' in the newspaper *Malumat* (Knowledge) outlined the contours of cultural engagement: 'Let us accept fashion, but within the confines of Islam. Why should we be obliged to imitate Europe to the core? Why must we appear as a Madame or a Monsieur!?'<sup>22</sup> Hamidian reformers urged women towards a selective appropriation of cultural practices: women should adopt those useful European features, deemed constructive towards Ottoman regeneration and reject those that are destructive and deemed harmful even by Westerners themselves.

An anonymous article entitled 'Roentgen Rays and Corsets' in the weekly *Mütalea* (Opinion) which complained about an observed rise among Muslims adopting European manners affirmed: "We know that imitation is necessary for our progress. However, in our opinion, what needs to be imitated should be proven to secure benefit and virtue. When it comes to the corset, its dangers have been established even by the Europeans themselves for a while now."<sup>23</sup>

While Ottoman physicians shaped the medico-hygienic discourse on dress, the Ottoman political and intellectual elite, men and women, developed on the sartorial decorum, again, within a hygienic context. As a general principle corset debates criticized the misuse of the corset as a beautifying instrument for a wasp-waisted look, not corsetry practiced for sartorial purposes upholding modesty, moderation and taste. Discussions on the corset separated correct corset/corseting from a hard, stiff and tight-laced corset with steel or whalebone stays drawing on the binary of fashion vs. health. Although these discussions coalesced in their patriotic underpinnings of dress as a whole, their treatment of corsetry varied. For example, the renowned man of letters, Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844–1912) and his protégée, the celebrated writer Fatma Aliye [Topuz] (1862–1936), the elder daughter of the famous statesman, historian and jurist Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, although favouring Western style dress (*alafranga*) in *Preserving Female Beauty* (1886/87) and *Women of Islam* (1891/92),<sup>24</sup> focused on the inherent tension between fashion and health without a final verdict on corsetry. Others chose to be more direct. Prominent Ottoman physicians such as Besim Ömer Paşa [Akalin] (1862–1940) the founder of Ottoman-Turkish obstetrics and gynaecology in his works *Family Health Atlas* (1886/87) and *Health Almanac* [1896/97], Mehmed Fahri Paşa (1860–1932), instructor on hygiene and medical treatment in a number of different Ottoman medical schools, in his *Clothes Hygiene* [1906/07], Edhem in *Hygienic Readings for Girls* [1908/09], and Ahmed Said in *Preserving Health* [1894/95], rejected, as a general principle, a hard, stiff and tight-laced corset with steel or whalebone stays, arguing that corsetry, due to its constraining properties, constituted a dangerous practice, threatening not only the individual but also communal and imperial wellbeing.<sup>25</sup> However, they did leave room for shaping the body within a hygienic context. As such, opinions differed on the ideal hygienic undergarment. There were those who advocated moderate corsetry and those who wanted to

<sup>22</sup>Tahir Beyzade Mehmed Hoşyar, 'Moda', *Malumat*, no. 69 (12 February 1897), 417.

<sup>23</sup>'Fen: Röntgen Şuası ve Korseler,' *Mütalea*, no. 23 (30 Recep 1314/4 January 1897), 4.

<sup>24</sup>Ahmed Midhat, *Kadınlarda Hifz-ı Cemal* (İstanbul: 1304); Fatma Aliye, *Nisvan-ı İslam* (İstanbul: 1309).

<sup>25</sup>Doktor Yüzbaşı Besim Ömer, *Sihhatnâme-yı Aile yahud Baba-Ana-Çocuk* (Dersaadet: Mahmud Bey Matbaası, 1304); Doktor Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol. 1 (İstanbul: Alem Matbaası, 1315); Dr. Mehmed Fahri, *Hifz-ı Sıhhat-ı Melbusat* (Dersaadet: Mahmud Bey Matbaası, 1325); Dr. Edhem, *Kızlara Kıraat-ı Sıhhiye* (Selanik: Selanik Zaman Matbaası, 1326); Ahmed Said, *Beka-yı Sıhhat* (İstanbul: A.Asaduryan Şirket-i Mürettibiye Matbaası, 1312).



replace the corset with an alternative item. The former group, who can be called the moderates, included, in addition to Besim Ömer, the Ottoman writer Sezaizade Ahmed Hikmet [Müftüoğlu] (1870–1927) in *Toilette and Beauty of the Limbs* [1891/92], the poet-physician Şekib Akif (1888–1931) in *Hygienic Conversations between Woman and the Physician* [1908/09] and the anonymous author of the aforementioned piece, ‘The Question of the Corset’.<sup>26</sup> They saw no harm in wearing a soft, flexible and moderately laced, not too constricting corset. The latter group, however, who can be referred as alternativists, argued for a safer waistcoat, a sports corset or a girdle that would replace the corset altogether. This group included the writings of both elite and non-elite female figures such as Fatma Aliye Hanım’s younger sister, Emine Semiye [Önasya]’s (1868–1944) piece ‘Fashion and the Corset’ in *HMG*, Ümmü Mukbil’s letter, and a certain Meliha who contributed to *HMG*’s serial, ‘Useful Conversation’.<sup>27</sup> While discussions on the corset drew on foreign sources, they did so in a critical manner to deter women from blindly adopting fashion. They advised women to refrain from a cultural practice that was deemed harmful even by the Western medical tradition itself. Scientific evidence was used to demonstrate the ills of the tight-laced whalebone corset on the female body where examples of foreign women were selectively chosen to represent both good and bad cases of fashionable dressing.

### ‘Fashion has engirdled us like an epidemic’

Western fashion, since its first adoption among the palace women in the Tanzimat Era (1839–1876), had become an imposing force in the Hamidian period. Various factors facilitated the visibility and accessibility of fashion during this time such as the proliferation of department stores, fashion plates and magazines, non-Muslim and Muslim tailors/fashion makers, and foreign and non-Muslim women residing in İstanbul.<sup>28</sup> Western fashions circulated freely among elite Ottoman Muslim women as well, shaping not only their dress styles but also their bodies. As Nora Şeni rightfully comments, the corset was the main protagonist in this transformation:

Indoor clothing, a combination of *şalvar* (wide, puffy pants) and *gömlek* (a type of a large blouse), gave way to the *entari* (a dress cut somewhat like a nightshirt) and the *hırka* (a woollen jacket). Under Abdülhamit, the *entari* lent itself to the variations of European fashion and the Malakoff style; the tunic and skirts with bustles made their appearance. At the same time the Eastern character of these dresses was preserved by their adornment with embroidery. However far it may have been from the lines and curves of European dresses, the *entari* was the Trojan horse of a practice that revolutionized Turkish women’s wear. It enabled the use of the ‘corset’. This was a novelty that radically altered the figure of urban Muslim woman. After its introduction, and no matter what clothing was worn, nothing – i.e., the woman’s allure – would ever be the same again.<sup>29</sup>

This reflected what was happening to European fashion itself in the last decades of the nineteenth century:

<sup>26</sup>Sezaizade Ahmed Hikmet, *Tuvalet ve Letafet-i Aza* (Kostantiniye: Matbaa-ı Ebüzziya, 1309); Şekib Akif, *Sıhhi Musahabeler* (İstanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası, 1326).

<sup>27</sup>Emine Semiye, ‘Moda ve Korse,’ *HMG*, no. 59 (10 Zilkade 1313/23 April 1896), 1–2; Meliha, ‘Faideli Sohbet,’ *HMG*, no. 57 (25 Şevval 1313/9 April 1896), illustrated supplement.

<sup>28</sup>See Falierou, ‘From the Ottoman Empire’; Micklewright, ‘London, Paris, İstanbul’.

<sup>29</sup>Şeni, ‘Fashion and Women’s Clothing’, 29.

By that time, the undergarment was the literal foundation of European women's fashion. A silhouette was impossible to acquire if a corset was not properly cut. The question of the corset was recurrent in the nineteenth century. More than just an undergarment, it became the instrument for shaping the female form.<sup>30</sup>

Dress fulfilled a civilizing function in the Hamidian era, its nature demonstrating the civilized status of the wearers; yet modern dress, determined by fashion, was also closely entwined with female beautification:

It is an undeniable fact that adornment constitutes women's right by nature, but how should this adornment be? This is an issue. Even the women of the most primitive tribes, who wander around half-naked, adorn themselves by painting their bodies. [...] Among civilized peoples, however, this ornamentation and adornment exists in the shape, form and colour of their dress. These shapes and colours keep continually changing and are renewed; this change is called fashion.<sup>31</sup>

Ahmed Midhat Efendi observed the close relationship between fashion and beautification in *Preserving Female Beauty* through the slim-waist, the then model of beauty and its intimate relationship with the practice of corsetry:

Adornment does not limit itself to the face. There are other body parts beside the face that are significant in matters of the toilette. One of these parts is the mid-body. When we talk about the mid-body we do not mean the waist only. That part of the body stretching from the abdomen to the breasts lies within the limits of what constitutes the mid-body. The greatest beauty of this part lies in the slimness of its middle part and in the gradual thickening of its lower part and the corset is used in order to achieve this shape.<sup>32</sup>

As Gülen Çevik correctly states, 'The corset was a fashion idea that was borrowed from the West. By using the corset along with its confining dress, Ottoman women were appropriating Western femininity through fashion'.<sup>33</sup> Fashionable dress harboured ambivalence: fashion was acknowledged as part and parcel of civilized behaviour, but it also constituted a dangerous enterprise catering to foreign ideals of beauty and femininity. For Hamidian reformers fashion maintained what Angeliki Spiropoulou termed 'body discourse'<sup>34</sup> because fashion 'augments and hides, compresses and reshapes, teasing and directing the eye to areas of erotic interest'.<sup>35</sup> What is more, fashionable dressing, which necessitated corsetry, allowed for tight-lacing which was 'not only a practice but also a concept, which potentially conveyed a range of cultural meanings'.<sup>36</sup>

Debates on fashion complained of the extent of fashion's power to misguide women within a medicalized framework. While elite figures such as Emine Semiye Hanım, in her piece 'Fashion and the Corset' in *HMG* bemoaned that 'fashion has engirdled us like an epidemic',<sup>37</sup> Seniha Vicdan Hanım, Hurşid Paşazade Ziya Bey's daughter, in her article

<sup>30</sup>Falierou, 'From the Ottoman Empire', 181.

<sup>31</sup>'Moda Hakkında Bir İki Söz', *HMG*, no. 4, (23 Rebiyülevvel 1313/13 September 1895), illustrated supplement.

<sup>32</sup>Ahmed Midhat, *Kadınlarda Hıfz-ı Cemel*, 24–5.

<sup>33</sup>Gülen Çevik, 'A Tale of Two Visions: Representing the Orientalized West, Representing the Orient', *Home Cultures* 15, no. 1 (2018): 34–35.

<sup>34</sup>Angeliki Spiropoulou, "'Modifying" the Female Body: women's bodies and contemporary fitness culture', *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 9 (2001): 214.

<sup>35</sup>Alexander Edmonds, *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>36</sup>Steele, *Corset*, 25.

<sup>37</sup>Emine Semiye, 'Moda ve Korse', 2.

'Fashion-Waste' in *HMG* described fashion as 'a biological organism that affects those biologically determined by their gender to be vulnerable to contagion':<sup>38</sup>

Fashion! Is there any doubt that this microbe manifests its greatest influence on women even though men are not exempt from fashion? ... Is it possible to be a woman and not be constrained under the pressure of fashion? [...] The necessity to clothe oneself and spend a lot of money on fashion is a disease that befalls upon all individuals of humanity and its microbe, called fashion in present times, is much more dangerous than all those newly discovered germs.<sup>39</sup>

Echoing these sentiments about fashion, the female travelling journalist writing in *HMG's* column 'Inside Istanbul' lamented fashion's influence on Ottoman Muslim women:

For some women the word fashion signifies such importance that once it is uttered, they immediately approach it with great enthusiasm: 'What is this fashion for? How is the new fashion?' and when something is said to be in fashion, it is accepted straightaway irrespective of whether it is a good thing or a bad thing.<sup>40</sup>

Women needed to exercise self-restraint and adapt fashion to Ottoman Muslim sensibilities. What is more, a certain E. Sabriye, who self-identified as a teacher underlining her status part of the modern institutions of knowledge, complained about powerlessness in the face of fashion's destructive effects on the individual, family and community in her article 'The Curse of Fashion' in the weekly *Mütalea* (Opinion):

Alas! Fashion. It is a great misfortune that has taken over our clothing, our purses, and our bodies. It has made our women addicted to the narrow waist. It has caused family quarrels. It has destroyed our good manners. It has infringed upon our communal morality. It has disturbed our comfort and living.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, in spite of the various dangers of fashion, fashionable dress was a modern requirement that Ottoman Muslim elite women needed to follow. Here is how *HMG* launched its illustrated fashion supplement to its readers:

We saw it appropriate to provide the latest fashionable dresses and handicraft samples by offering, at times, such a supplement. We do not believe in encouraging our readers to follow fashion. However, since European style dresses are regarded as mandatory at weddings and on social occasions with us Muslims as well, we will, from time to time, convey those dress models that we deem becoming in terms of their simplicity and shape for Ottoman ladies, from the most beautiful samples in European fashion gazettes. Even if the images of fashion are not to be recommended, we believe that our readers will appreciate the handiwork samples that we offer so as to motivate and teach our ladies how to make their own dresses. In any case, our goal is to cater to the desires of our readers and we are open to shape our program to their desires. We await kind suggestions.<sup>42</sup>

*HMG* adopted a number of differing roles in presenting fashionable dress. While it purveyed practical information to women to make their own dresses at home it also shaped the outlines of sartorial decorum befitting an Ottoman Muslim audience. These

<sup>38</sup>Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 113.

<sup>39</sup>Hürşid Paşazade Ziya Bey'in Kerimesi Seniha Vicdan, 'Moda-İsraf', *HMG*, no. 26 (11 Cemaziyelahir 1313/28 November 1895), 2–3.

<sup>40</sup>Seyyar Muharremizden: İstanbul İçinde', *HMG*, no. 317–115 (10 Rebiyülevvel 1319/27 June 1901), 6–7.

<sup>41</sup>Muallime E. Sabriye, 'Moda Belası', *Mütalea*, no.73 (5 Şaban 1315/30 December 1897), 7.

<sup>42</sup>'Moda—Nakış—Biçim', *HMG*, no.1 (10 Rebiyülevvel 1313 /31 August 1895), illustrated supplement.

features point to the entrepreneurial nature of *HMG*. In an era where mass fashions were not the norm, dressmaking constituted a means for acquiring fashionable dress. In the Hamidian era the business of modern dressmaking was in the hands of non-Muslim male tailors in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. As an alternative women's magazines provided a means for fashionable dressing. According to Yavuz Selim Karakışla it was *HMG* that focused the most on dressmaking among late Ottoman women's magazines. *HMG*'s entrepreneurial success consisted not only in terms of selling advertisement but also by running its own clothing business through patronizing a tailor shop catering to women both inside and outside Istanbul.<sup>43</sup> Whereas paper samples offered women of lower income a chance to make their own clothes with their Singer sewing machines and/or having them made at their neighbourhood tailor at affordable prices, the tailor shop that employed a female tailor, with its affordable prices and models fit for Ottoman Muslim women offered an alternative to the non-Muslim male expensive tailors in Beyoğlu. *HMG* also featured advertisements of Singer sewing machines.<sup>44</sup>

Maintaining sartorial decorum was a tricky enterprise, fraught with ambiguity and to be approached with caution, sense and sensibility.

### 'The treasure of health'

Establishing fashion as an epidemic implied that the problem had a medical remedy. Ottoman physicians mobilized a medical-hygienic discourse that associated dress with health and patriotism. They redefined health as a valued human resource for the individual, the community and the empire in pursuit of the loftier goal of Ottoman power, prosperity and progress and placed fashionable dress within a binary of health preservation/health risk.

To health were attributed intrinsic and instrumental values. Health was, first and foremost, important for the individual and their happiness. An anonymous article published in *HMG*, 'Corporeal Hygiene, Moral Hygiene', asked, 'Is there any need to discuss that health is the most valued treasure in the world? [...] It is the single most fortunate thing, the only blessing ever capable of providing happiness. One should always strive and struggle to protect this treasure'.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, a healthy, active and productive population was equated with the well-being of the Ottoman state. They stressed that everyone needed to preserve and promote good health by properly looking after their bodies, which required combining modern hygienic principles with patriotic awareness and moral uprightness. Maintaining good health in the Hamidian era was constructed as both a religious obligation and a patriotic duty incumbent upon all members of society. As God commanded human beings to look after their bodies for religious as well as communal ends, neglecting to preserve good health therefore constituted not only a sin but also civic disobedience:

When health constitutes God's sacred benefaction, His divine blessing to man, it would constitute ingratitude toward one's Creator not to appreciate its value and not to protect it. But the Creator of the Universe has equally assigned a duty of worship to His creatures.

<sup>43</sup>Yavuz Selim Karakışla, *Osmanlı Hanımları ve Kadın Terzileri (1869–1923)* (İstanbul: Akıl Fikir Yayınları, 2014).

<sup>44</sup>See, Frierson, 'Cheap and Easy'; Uri M. Kupferschmidt, 'The Social Uses of the Sewing Machine in the Middle East', *Die Welt des Islams New Series* 44, no. 2 (2004): 195–213.

<sup>45</sup>'Hıfz-ı Sihat-i Beden—Hıfz-ı Sihat-i Ahlak', *HMG*, no. 16 (5 Cemaziyelvelvel 1313/24 October 1895), 1.

While it is necessary for human beings to devote their bodies to their people, community, family, nation, patria, and not to behave after their own heart and, God forbid, commit suicide, since those who dare at such an infamy, would not only experience an ugly death vis-à-vis mankind but would also be deemed sinful and rebellious in the eyes of God. This is how denigrating an act suicide is. Well then, is not failing to preserve good health akin to committing suicide? Is this equally not a sin?<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Besim Ömer stressed the importance of health for humankind in his compiled work *Hygiene* (1900/01). Linking the individual body to the social body, he situated the healthy body not only as the driving force but also the building block of a happy and prosperous human community:

As each and every human body constitutes a great capital for humanity, the immunity of an individual from disease means great service and benefit to the endurance of the communal body (*vücut-ı umûm*) whereby the opposite is a calamity and damage to the light of humanity. The happiness of a human community depends upon the health of the individuals that constitute it, because the sum is greater than its parts.<sup>47</sup>

He also described health and illness in the same work as follows:

Every living organism possesses the capacity to resist and fight external forces and exterior material influences. Health consists of the state of equilibrium between the interior forces which procure the preservation of life and individual development and those exterior forces. A change, caused either by an interior or by an exterior influence, which disrupts this balance, leads to an unnatural state, to a condition of illness, or more properly, to sickness.<sup>48</sup>

The above words establish health as a bodily standard. While health, the balance between the outside and the inside of the body, constitutes the natural state of the human body, illness, emanates from the disruption of this balance. The medical elite maintained that the modern science of hygiene constituted the proper way to preserve and maintain good health.

With public debates focusing on the impact of dress on the female body in general and undergarments in particular dress now constituted a means of beautification; issues of dress became entwined with both health and beauty. A certain Nazife Hanım explained the hygienic function of dress: 'Dress constitutes the body's specific dwelling; the stronger the house, conducive to the proper functioning of the bodily organs, the better the body will be able to resist hazardous external influences.'<sup>49</sup>

In fact, defining hygienic dress meant writing at length about the cut, shape and material of the item in question. It was underlined that dress should be loose-fitting, practical, and comfortable, in tandem with geographical and seasonal requirements, and one's physical build and age. It should be produced from fabric that did not irritate the skin or block perspiration, nor constrain the body in a way that hampered proper bodily function. Clothing should also be made from fabrics that could be easily washed. It was Dr. Edhem, however, who laid out the fundamental purpose of dress in a clear fashion in his text-book *Hygienic Readings for Girls*:

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>47</sup>Doktor Besim Ömer, *Hifz-ı Sıhhat* (İstanbul: Karabet Matbaası, 1318), I.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>49</sup>Nazife, 'Birinci Makale: Kıyafet-i Nisvaniyye-i Osmaniyye', *HMG*, no. 32 (2 Receb 1313/19 December 1895), 2-4.

Dress is used for preserving the body. It is not to be used for the purposes of beautification. The greatest beauty of the body lies in its strength and health. Nevertheless it is possible to adorn oneself out following the principles of hygiene. It is absolutely necessary for clothing not to exert pressure onto the body. As long as one pays attention to this condition one can dress in whatever way one desires.<sup>50</sup>

The above words would situate the corset, as something that did 'exert pressure onto the body', as an item of apparel that could cross the line between hygienic and unhygienic dress. Fashionable dress was allowed as long as it followed the laws of health and did not impose a strict discipline on the body. It was therefore imperative to define the corset and establish a correct practice of corsetry in order to maintain hygienic dress. In the final analysis, while the corset could function as an aid and support for the body, enhancing both health and beauty, it could also constitute a 'machinery of femininity',<sup>51</sup> with nothing to offer women but pain, discomfort, and misfortune, sending them directly to their graves.

### Identifying the corset, advising correct corsetry

'The Question of the Corset' summed up major anxieties: 'Is there no use in a corset? Does its harm reside in itself or in how it is practiced? These issues are worth investigating'.<sup>52</sup> To answer these questions, Ahmed Midhat Efendi suggested that: 'The essential matter for women to pay attention to in corsetry lies with which corset to wear, and in what way'.<sup>53</sup> Clearly what mattered was to wear the right type of corset for the right occasion and purpose. But what did this mean exactly?

Establishing correct corsetry necessitated identifying the corset, underlining its dangers versus benefits to female health and beauty, as well as establishing hygienic undergarments available to women. Sartorial decorum was set against the 'reckless behaviour' of a variety of women. Examples ranged from foreign or non-Muslim women living in Istanbul, that is to say 'Madames', to Chinese women with bound feet, from young and irrational Ottoman Muslim women who could not resist the temptations of fashion to foolish, overweight old ladies who wanted in vain to hide their bellies with a corset. Ümmü Mukbil's moralistic piece, discussed above, exemplified one such case. In the final analysis, corset discussions argued that dress hygiene was a civic virtue and that improper corseting constituted an act of civic transgression which threatened not only the material aspects of the Ottoman Muslim community such as demographical issues, but also its customs, values and traditions, i.e. matters of identity, of all of which women were the custodians.

On these grounds, it was imperative to establish what one meant by corset and correct corseting.

Once again, was the corset an item of dress, a useful support for the body or a dangerous beautification practice? If by a corset one meant a stiff, tight and constraining device imposed on the body with the aim of procuring the wasp-waist look, for example, this could definitely not be regarded as an item of apparel (read bodily protection), but

<sup>50</sup>Dr. Edhem, *Kızlara Kıraat-ı Sihhiye*, 14-15.

<sup>51</sup>Spiropoulou, "'Modifying' the Female Body", 213.

<sup>52</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 2.

<sup>53</sup>Ahmed Midhat, *Kadınlarda Hıfz-ı Cemal*, 26.

was rather nothing but self-inflicted suffering masquerading as a beautification practice, threatening women's bodies with deformation, illness and death. In his *Almanac of Health* Dr. Besim Ömer defined the corset as such: 'The torture device, which contains steel or whalebone stays that women wear under the pretext of supporting the waist, the stomach and the breasts, is called a "corset"'.<sup>54</sup> Referring to the corset's constraining properties, 'The Question of the Corset' explained why the corset could not be regarded as an item of clothing:

There is no other proper term to describe the corset than a machine and a device; it is unacceptable to call it a piece of clothing because of its form and use. The purpose of women's dress consists not only in protecting the body from external influences, that is to say, in arranging one's natural requirement of dressing oneself, but also to assist in adorning the body and to increase one's beauty and grace.<sup>55</sup>

The corset should not serve purposes of beautification. While Ahmed Said, in his *Preserving Health* affirmed: 'The corset is a mangle of beauty invented by civilization—if comparison permits—which presses and extracts health out of the body',<sup>56</sup> Dr. Mehmed Fahri, warned readers against misidentifying the corset in his work *Dress Hygiene*:

Women regard the corset as a garment to shape their figures to comply with the practice of ephemeral fashion. However, the purpose behind the corset should altogether be different; the corset should only be used as to keep clothing in place; to act as a point of support, and not cause any harm, by protecting the organs in the thorax and the stomach, maintaining their proper functioning.<sup>57</sup>

Hamidian reformers over exaggerated the dangers of the corset for dramatic effect. Gülistan İsmet, the first Muslim woman to graduate from Constantinople Women's College, in her piece 'Do not Wear the Corset!' in *HMG* stated alarmingly that 'It would be suitable to call the corset the biggest enemy to the beauty, health, and happiness that a woman living today can encounter in her lifetime'.<sup>58</sup> In the same vein, another, this time anonymous, article in the newspaper *Morning* (*Sabah*), talked about the ills of corsetry as being that 'merciless executioner of women'.<sup>59</sup>

Myriad dangers lay in extremely tight corsets. An anonymous article, 'What do women who wear the corset suffer from?' published in the journal *Sihhat* (Health), listed ten internal organs affected by the corset and their respective ailments: the lungs, heart, stomach, liver, spleen, pancreas, intestines, kidneys, bladder, and womb.<sup>60</sup> These ranged from lung diseases such as tuberculosis, to minor and major heart problems such as palpitations, endocarditis, pericarditis, even cardiac arrest, from indigestion to a variety of stomach disorders.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol. 1, 220.

<sup>55</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 1.

<sup>56</sup>Ahmed Said, *Beka-yı Sihhat*, 13.

<sup>57</sup>Mehmed Fahri, *Hifz-ı Sihhat-i Melbusat*, 63.

<sup>58</sup>K. İsmet, 'Makale-i Mahsusa: Korse Kullanmayınız!', *HMG*, no. 357 (8 Muharrem 1320/17 April 1902), 1.

<sup>59</sup>'Korse', *Sabah*, no. 2435 (28 Zilkade 1313 /11 May 1896), 3.

<sup>60</sup>'Mebahis-i Sihhiye: Korse İstimal Eden Hatunlar Ne Olurlar?', *Sihhat*, no. 12 (1–8 Cemaziyelvel 1306/10 January 1889), 1.

<sup>61</sup>'Mebahis-i Sihhiye: Korse İstimal Eden Hatunlar Ne Olurlar?', *Sihhat*, no.13 (8–15 Cemaziyelvel 1306 /17 January 1889), 1.

Moreover, a tight and constraining corset, characterized by Dr. Besim Ömer as 'a tool of oppression and suffering'<sup>62</sup> and a 'mangle of anguish'<sup>63</sup> put undue pressure on the internal organs, not only ruining bodily health but also deforming the body's natural beauty. He lamented that women did not refrain from wearing a tight-corset, although it caused a variety of complaints, ailments and disorders, just because they simply want to ruin their health and beauty by turning their bodies into that of a wasp.<sup>64</sup> A tight corset caused respiratory tract problems: it exerted pressure on the diaphragm, preventing the upper part of the lungs from functioning properly, inhibiting respiration.<sup>65</sup> 'Those pitiable, self-torturing women, who are barely able to breathe', he bemoaned, 'also often suffer from hot flushes'.<sup>66</sup> A constraining corset also caused heart palpitations and indigestion by hampering the proper functioning of the heart and such digestive organs as the stomach and the liver. Moreover, a tight corset also disposed women to asthma and even tuberculosis, and if one already suffered from these illnesses the corset aggravated their condition. Alarmingly, a tight-laced corset proved to be much more dangerous for young girls because by putting pressure on the body it crushed internal organs preventing proper bodily growth.<sup>67</sup>

The corset also broke with social etiquette. The corset should not be sought as a remedy for heavy ladies because it caused much discomfort and embarrassment. Dr. Ömer mocked those overweight women who 'foolishly' tried to hide their bellies with a corset: 'The sight of a woman who compresses her age-old belly with a corset is worth pity. She is suffocating in this instrument of torture; breathing heavily, with her face displaying various hues ranging from red to yellow'.<sup>68</sup> The corset led women to suffer much more from intestinal noise than men, so much so that, 'women on social occasions feel both the need to eat sparsely and to remain on their feet right after eating so as to prevent their faces from turning red and not to suffer from indigestion'. He recommended that the best way to recovery for fainting women was to unlace their tight corsets.<sup>69</sup>

He specifically underlined the fact that he rejected a hard, stiff and constraining corset, which he compared to a coat of armour. He maintained, however, that a small, thin corset, produced in accordance with various body shapes and following the contours of the body, could, let alone not be dangerous, but perhaps even be beneficial for women. It was important to keep large breasts under control, he affirmed, but pushing them up to the chin was far from providing any beauty to the body and also dangerous to health. A stiff and tight-laced corset could only prove to be valuable for medical purposes, he maintained, such as in the case of spinal curvature for example, but it was only to be prescribed by a physician and produced with utmost care according to proper measurements.<sup>70</sup>

'The Question of the Corset' also warned readers against wearing a tight-laced corset. Such corsets sapped strength out of the body, the article maintained, rendering the body vulnerable to illness, finally turning the body into a 'ruin':

<sup>62</sup>Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol. 1, 220.

<sup>63</sup>Besim Ömer, *Sıhhatnüma-yı Aile*, 136.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 134–35.

<sup>65</sup>Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol.1, 220–23.

<sup>66</sup>Besim Ömer, *Sıhhatnüma-yı Aile*, 135.

<sup>67</sup>Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol. 1, 221–22.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>Besim Ömer, *Sıhhatnüma-yı Aile*, 134.

<sup>70</sup>Besim Ömer, *Nevsal-i Afiyet*, vol.1, 222–23.



Exerting excess pressure onto the body implicates countless dangerous risks and illnesses. When the corset puts too much pressure on the chest, for example, the lungs become strained in their respiratory function eventually becoming tired; tired organs become vulnerable to illness and disease. Therefore, young girls and women who wear a corset invite tuberculosis, a devastating illness.<sup>71</sup>

The article elaborated on the dangers: it impaired the proper functioning of such various vital organs as the heart and the stomach, impeding their circulatory and digestive functions. A tight corset also displaced the liver, constrained the bowels and exerted pressure onto the womb. The ovaries suffered from this pressure and various vital functions pertaining to women became disrupted. Therefore, the article argued, physicians regarded the corset as a 'pilferer of wellbeing' that destroyed not only 'the precious treasure of health' but also the 'natural beauty of the body'. There could be no beauty in a body stripped of its health and vigour. Therefore, whereas a stiff corset, that 'compression machine' constituted a 'misfortune' tight-lacing was nothing but a 'terrible affliction' that befell women. However, the ills of the corset all arose from tight-lacing, the article maintained. A wide, short and non-constraining corset could be beneficial in protecting the internal organs from external influences such as cold weather, for example and it would also support the breasts. In addition, a moderately laced corset could help to straighten those women who walked with a stoop.<sup>72</sup>

To warn readers from literally becoming fashion victims *HMG* covered news, not only of non-Muslim ladies fainting from wearing too-tight corsets but also of Muslim women who expired due to tight-lacing:

The other day a Madame, with an excessively tight corset, fainted in a carriage heading towards the Beyoğlu district. Thank God that her brother accompanied her. A physician was immediately summoned from a pharmacy close to the car. After examining the Madame, the physician stated that the Madame was almost out of breath due to the tight corset and that this was the reason why she had fainted. The corset was immediately removed. [...] According to the physician if the corset had not been removed in time there would have been left nothing but the mortal remains of the Madame in the car. [...] Let our women draw a lesson from this and protect their bodies from this dangerous thing.<sup>73</sup>

If that were not warning enough,

The other day a young lady attended a wedding, but then her corset was so tight that she could barely breathe. She had dinner at the wedding and was further short of breath; she spent the evening in agony. When she finally returned home she immediately took off the corset but it was in vain because the poor lady fell ill after that day and died within ten days. Can a sacred life be sacrificed for a couple of hours of finery? Consequently, we would especially like to warn our ladies not to ruin their young and fresh bodies.<sup>74</sup>

As a precaution *HMG* featured corset advertisements based on hygienic criteria. Here is an example of a certain Sinakon [?] corset:

The Sinakon corset, famous for its beauty and simplicity, provides the body with a nice shape without exerting pressure onto the lungs and other internal organs. This new invention draws

<sup>71</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 2.

<sup>72</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 2-3.

<sup>73</sup>'Dahili Havadis', *HMG*, no. 5 (27 Rebiyülevvel 1313 /16 September 1895), 6.

<sup>74</sup>'Dahili Havadis', *HMG*, no. 4 (23 Rebiyülevvel 1313/13 September 1895), 6.

out one's height, slims down the stomach and provides the woman with a perfect figure. As this corset is both practical and stylish, it has been accepted by Europe's leading women, and women who are of frail composition have also chosen this Sinakon corset extremely conformable to hygienic principles.<sup>75</sup>

This somewhat magical corset rolled health, beauty, style, comfort, and elegance into a unified expression of sartorial decorum. On the one hand, European women who exercised correct fashion sense were commended while, on the other hand, foreign women who did not give into corsetry were also celebrated. An article in the magazine *Servet-i Fünun* (Wealth of the Sciences) on women's dress wrote that female dress was an important topic debated at the women's section of the 1893 World's Columbine Exposition in Chicago, interpreting the lack of a mention of corsets as a sign of American women's rejection of the practice.<sup>76</sup>

The elite sisters Fatma Aliye Hanım and Emine Semiye Hanım also commented on fashionable dress. While both women acknowledged the necessity of wearing a corset for Western style (*alafranga*) dress, they nevertheless displayed difference in their treatment of corsetry. Fatma Aliye Hanım did not take a definite position on the corset in her work entitled *Women of Islam* and referred her readers to her mentor Ahmed Midhat Efendi's work *Preserving Female Beauty*. He had presented matters to his readers through the paradigm, summarized by Fatma Aliye as 'life of worth' (*ömr-i aziz*) versus 'life of pleasure' (*ömr-i leziz*), that is to say, the kind of life promoted by physicians versus the lifestyle promoted by fashion makers. Fatma Aliye maintained that one should wear a corset if one desired the former and refrain from wearing it if one desired the latter.<sup>77</sup>

Emine Semiye Hanım, however, adopted a more direct approach to the topic of the tight-laced corset, suggesting an alternative item. In her article entitled 'Fashion and the Corset' published in *HMG*, she argued that the corset, that 'oppression device', robbed women of their joy, comfort and happiness.<sup>78</sup> She stated that Ottoman Muslim women's bodies, accustomed inside their homes to wearing loose-fitting clothing, such as a baggy blouse or a *robe-de-chambre*, suffered under the undue pressure of the corset when the women attended social gatherings, where most wore fashionable Western-style dresses. This turned that 'joyous occasion'—especially the dining table—into a 'torture-chamber'. While she maintained that a moderately laced corset did not cause much harm, she nevertheless cautioned that the corset was unsuitable for those ladies who suffered from ailments of the chest and the stomach. Although she specified that a waistcoat fulfilled the principles of hygiene, she bemoaned that the waistcoat did not unfortunately agree with those fashionable tight-fitting dresses. She advised women to wear a 'corset de sport' the ideal undergarment for Western style dresses without any properties constraining to the stomach. Here is how she described the sports corset:

The waist and the sides of the 'corset de sport' are made of elastic and it does not cause any inconvenience during breathing and eating. It contains very few stays and instead of that infamous frontal metal piece that causes stomach ailments it features a buttonhole made of its own fabric and mother-of-pearl buttons. It contains few if any stays.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup>*HMG*, no. 25 (20 Cemaziyelevvel 1322 /2 August 1904), 399.

<sup>76</sup>Kadri, 'Kadınların Libası', *Servet-i Fünun*, no. 131 (2 Eylül 1309/14 September 1893), 8.

<sup>77</sup>Fatma Aliye, *Nisvan-ı İslam*, 200.

<sup>78</sup>Emine Semiye, 'Moda ve Korse', 1–2.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

She underlined that the sports corset should not be produced by corsetieres, but rather that tailors should sew it in such a way as to be soft and harmless. She advised those readers who desired a beautiful body without asphyxiation and indigestion to apply to the lady in charge of the *HMG's* tailor's shop in order to procure this corset.<sup>80</sup>

Following up on sartorial requests to *HMG's* tailor shop, a certain Meliha Hanım who contributed to the series 'Useful Conversation' in *HMG*, likewise argued for a more indigenous and healthy alternative to the corset: 'Yes, for an Ottoman everything should be Ottoman, including the shape of her dress. Nowadays our dress shapes all come from European fashions. [...] I can accept fashion for what it is, but it is those corsets that strongly bother me. The ills of the corset lie in tight-lacing; if used moderately, the corset might provide benefits, but would our ladies constrain themselves?' She maintained that the most important item that could be invented amongst Ottoman Muslim women was an elegant waistcoat, which fulfilled the laws of health yet could be substituted for the corset. She suggested that the lady who would come forward with such an invention ought to be rewarded. While Meliha stated that she expected *HMG* to fulfil such a mission, she also lamented that although a certain Ümmü Mukbil had promised such a waistcoat, the gazette had still not received the promised picture. Meliha did not know why Ümmü Mukbil withheld the information even though a fair number of women had showed interest in having a picture. She intended to contact the lady in charge of *HMG's* tailor shop to discuss the waistcoat and thought it would constitute a veritable success indeed if Ottoman Muslim women were able to acquire the possibility of an elegant new-style waistcoat. She ended on a rather positive note: 'God willing, we will be successful in rescuing our bodies from the threat of the corset'.<sup>81</sup>

The writer Sezaizade Ahmed Hikmet in his *The Toilette and the Beauty of the Limbs*, a translation-adaptation of Madame Baronne Staffe's *Cabinet de Toilette*, reprimanded those who practiced corsetry for beautification: 'Those women devoid of honour, reason and intelligence, who wear corsets, all-day, every day, to constrict their waists an additional centimetre, ruin both their bodily health and symmetry'.<sup>82</sup> A tight-laced corset caused shortness of breath and blood to rush to the face. It also constrained the rib-cage and even threatened reproduction in some cases. He maintained, however, that women could use such hygienic corsets made from light and soft fabrics such as linen, cotton, satin and even reindeer skin with a clear conscience. A flexible and short corset of generous width should be chosen, as a tight corset distorted the natural shape of the body. A corset should only be used at times of need, in a cautious manner to keep the body upright for example, as one could observe a slight hunchback among women who did not wear a corset. While a corset proved necessary for heavy women to acquire a proportionate and well-shaped body, extremely thin women could also benefit from a soft corset to maintain a pleasant shape, assimilating to the fashionable body image.<sup>83</sup>

The poet-physician Şekib Akif in his *Hygienic Conservations between Women and the Physician* complained that, when it came to the issue of dress, women followed fashion instead of doctors. He stated that corsets, those 'harsh mangles' constituted the fiercest

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<sup>80</sup>Emine Semiye, 'Moda ve Korse', 2.

<sup>81</sup>Meliha, 'Faideli Sohbet', illustrated supplement.

<sup>82</sup>Ahmed Hikmet, *Tuvalet*, 166.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

enemy to female health and life. He warned readers that a corset, worn to produce a slim figure, was the main cause behind tuberculosis and would turn the body into a skeleton in time. Although he regretted it was impossible to make girls and women addicted to fashion give up wearing corsets he nevertheless believed in the physicians' duty to advice women not to wear a constraining corset and certainly not to wear any kind of corset before the age of 20.<sup>84</sup>

Corsetry was also seen as an inadequate means of beautification because a tight-laced corset distorted the natural shape of the body. Ancient statues were called as witnesses that corsetry was unnecessary for an attractive waist. Gülistan İsmet inquired: 'Did "Venus", that goddess of beauty, wear a corset? Is there any sign of corsetry in famous Venus statues?'<sup>85</sup> Needless to say, ancient women had a naturally beautiful (read healthy) figure. Mehmed Hilmi maintained that the Venus de Medici, the Hellenistic marble sculpture depicting the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, had a well-proportioned waist, narrow but not too narrow, and that if that body had been constrained by a corset, it would lose its symmetry.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Ahmed Hikmet stated that if one observed ancient statues one would see that those bodies went from the cradle to the grave in their natural proportions.<sup>87</sup> 'The Question of the Corset' had also echoed this notion, arguing that physicians regarded the natural bodily beauty of the ancient women of Ancient Greece and Rome as having been shaped without a constraining corset in total accordance with health.<sup>88</sup>

Women were also warned not to mistake deformation for beauty. The example of Chinese foot binding was frequently invoked. The anonymous piece 'The Corset and Women' in *HMG* established a parallel between the practice of Chinese foot binding and corsetry: 'What is the difference in terms of oppressiveness between constraining the foot to make it smaller and constraining the waist to make it slimmer?' From the perspective of health, the author maintained, corsetry proved much more dangerous than foot-binding because, while a bound foot caused limping, a corset endangered life.<sup>89</sup> The message behind all this was that Ottoman Muslim men did not approve of the hourglass shape, the imposed foreign standard of beauty, and insisted that the natural female shape became Ottoman Muslim women. Mehmed Hilmi provided a striking example of a Madame, a non-Muslim lady:

This one incident haunts me: one day a friend of mine and I were going to the Beyoğlu district. We approached the bridge. Coincidentally, a Madame, almost black-and-blue in her corset and in unnatural state with her wasp-like waist, awakening a feeling of compassion in one, who was also going to Beyoğlu, passed us by. My friend gawked at the Madame for a while. He was utterly astonished. Then he said to me: 'take pity upon this woman who walks as stiff as a ramrod. If there is one thing in the world that I cannot understand, it is the beauty in a thin waist that looks as if it is about to break in half.' We believe that there are a fair number of people who would agree with my friend. Moderation and prudence is necessary for everything. Being beautiful is natural. Looking beautiful also depends upon artfulness and ability. However, excess in adornment, and the lack of insight may even destroy beauty. Every

<sup>84</sup>Şekib Akif, *Sihhi Musahabeler*, 56–7.

<sup>85</sup>K. İsmet, 'Korse Kullanmayınız', 2.

<sup>86</sup>Mehmed Hilmi, 'Hanımlara Vesaya-yı Sihhiye: 3', *HMG*, no. 169 (25 Safer 1316 /15 July 1898), 3.

<sup>87</sup>Ahmed Hikmet, *Tuvalet*, 165.

<sup>88</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 2.

<sup>89</sup>'Korse ve Kadınlar', *HMG*, no. 376 (27 Cemaziyellevvel 1320 /1 September 1902), 3.

woman should adorn and ornament herself. That is her right. However, moderation is the key. Insight is also necessary, otherwise failure is certain.<sup>90</sup>

What is more, 'The Question of the Corset' criticized the relationship between beauty and corsetry. The article blamed poets, writers and those writing about female beauty in general for inciting women to abuse the corset, arguing that such people, instead of placing beauty in the context of complete health and considering a strong and vigorous woman beautiful, elaborated in their poems and novels on the thinness of waists and the graces of a slim posture. The article concluded with the following advice: 'Were ideas about beauty to change then perhaps excessive corseting would turn to moderation; however, in any case, it is foolish for women to jeopardize their health in order to look beautiful'.<sup>91</sup> The physical and intellectual energies of Ottoman Muslim women should be harnessed towards loftier goals instead of trivial pursuits such as an excess in fashionable dressing. Zeyneb Sünbül, the granddaughter of Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, scolded them: 'Instead of constraining our bodies with the corset and falling into a state of weakness, we should instead strengthen our minds with education'.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

Hamidian discussions about the corset provide an unprecedented case study demonstrating the late Ottoman central administration's attempts to place modernity on the Ottoman Muslim body, both physically and socially, both literally and symbolically. The discussions reflect an ambivalent attitude. While on the one hand, the debates associate civilization, modernity and fashion, they also link western dress with foreignness and sickness, both of the individual and the empire. This ambivalence arises from the need of the Hamidian state to respond to a set of intertwined, but rather conflicting requirements.

On the one hand, in the legally unregulated space represented by women's indoor gatherings, a number of factors encouraged the adoption of western-style dress and fashionable western notions of beauty, notably the use of the tight-laced corset to allow the wearing of close-fitting western dresses and to display a wasp-waist. These factors included modern marketing in a newly more globalized economy that had already had an impact on non-Muslim women, as well as social pressures coming from the palace women, who were also ahead of the game. Both of these fed the desire of Ottoman Muslim elite women to follow the fashion. On the other hand, Sultan Abdülhamid's policy of Islamism, which aimed to create a modern Muslim polity, placed special emphasis on women and women's bodies as markers of Ottoman Muslim identity. This requirement urged women towards patriotic thinking regarding dress and beauty.

The two sets of requirements, which at first glance seemed to harbour contradictory demands, had in fact a common denominator. Both were concerned with the human body. The modern science of hygiene was seen as central to dealing with such problems and the Hamidian medical, political and intellectual elite, drawing on that modern

<sup>90</sup>Mehmed Hilmi, 'Hanımlara Vesaya-yı Sıhhiye: 3', 3.

<sup>91</sup>'Korse Meselesi', 3.

<sup>92</sup>Zeyneb Sünbül bint-i Sedad bin Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, 'Fazıl-ı Meşhur Merhum Ahmed Cevdet Paşazade Saadetli Sedad Beyefendi Hazretlerinin Kerime-i İffet-Vesimeleri İsmetli Zeyneb Hanımefendi Hazretlerinin Makale-i Aliyyeleridir', *HMG* no. 7 (4 Rebiyülahir 1313/24 September 1895), 4.

science, mobilized a medicalized discourse arguing that healthy individuals, a healthy community and a healthy empire went together.

Hygienic dress, which constituted a vital aspect of this medicalized discourse, debated corsetry on the grounds of health especially, though also including arguments that looked to comfort and traditional aesthetics. Hygiene constructed health both as the state of balance between the outer and the inner body, and a process emanating from the proper, natural inner workings of the body. Hygiene also argued for health and beauty to be inextricably linked, and as beauty emanated from health it should not be sought by an external bodily practice, such as the tight-laced corset, that might damage health. Hygienic dress allowed soft corsets or waistcoats that were not too constricting to act as a healthy support for the body, this seen as both natural and domestic, but condemned the use of the more constricting variety of corset as artificial, even mechanical beautification, seen as western and foreign. The first protected both individual and community, the second endangered both. In the final analysis, corset debates functioned as a discursive tool negotiating the terms of Ottoman Muslim female sartorial decorum in the Hamidian era. As such, Maxwell's paradigm does not fully explain the Ottoman case. Hamidian reformers were not against fashion *per se*, but argued against women misappropriating fashion to embrace Western femininity. They advocated a hybrid model in terms of fashionable dress which involved combining useful European features with local practices, and rejecting harmful practices towards constructing Ottoman Muslim femininity.

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