WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?
STRATEGIC INVISIBILITY DICTATED BY SOCIAL NORMS

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ABSTRACT

The research paper analyzes the spatial dynamics of traditional Turkish coffeehouses as a micro-public space in 1980s Turkey. Focusing on the gendered exclusion of women in the neighbourhood scale where coffeehouses are located, the paper examines the tactical presence of women in the micro-public spheres. Through the analysis of architectural plans, oral histories from my mother and grandmother, and photographs from my grandfather's İzmir coffeehouse (1982–83) in the family archive, the article focuses on how the kahvehane's interior layout, as well as its later expansion into street-front space, established a public sphere that is male-exclusive. The work foregrounds the consistency of women's conditional presence; women were only present if they were subservient or had familial ties to the coffeehouse's owner. The artificial boundaries created by the social norms regulated women's freedom of movement inside and outside the coffeehouse. The article seeks to document the everyday tactics of women to show how the subtle and indirect negotiations contested patriarchal social norms. Ultimately, this work aims to reconceptualize coffeehouses as contested micro-public spheres where marginalization and subtle presence intertwine.

Keywords: Kahvehane, Turkish coffeehouse, micro-public space, gendered exclusion, feminist urbanism.

1. GENDER, SPACE, AND THE KAHVEHANE

The "kahvehane" is a unique form of a coffeehouse in Turkey, deeply rooted in the country's social and cultural fabric. For centuries, these traditional coffeehouses have shaped urban life by creating a space exclusive to the male domain of the population (Safi 2018; Yasar 2009). The kahvehane emerged in the 16th-century Ottoman Empire. Men would gather during their leisure time to talk about current events, socialize, and play tabletop games, creating a public sphere that excluded and marginalized women (Yildiz 2007). Growing up, I learned from firsthand experience that as a young girl, one did not stop, look inside, or play outside a kahvehane, let alone dare to enter one. If I ever needed to walk past one, I was told by older adults in my family to bow my head and keep walking. This personal exposure raised my awareness about kahvehane. I did not understand the significance of these norms, but I still complied. I recall my male cousins, who were my age, and they frequently accompanied their fathers to the kahvehane. This was the first time I witnessed the inequality of gender as a child. As an architect, I now interpret this unwritten rule and see how coffeehouses unfold the imprinted norms that regulate gendered behavior in the Turkish public realm. While the complexities of this male-exclusive space have been studied under sociability and consumer culture in recent scholarship (Sokmen

2012; Karababa and Ger 2011), women's experience and presence in the kahvehane have received much less scholarly attention.

The period following 1923, known as the Republican era, demonstrates the role of the kahvehane as a political space where men were engaged in debates and pioneered in forming public opinion (Yaşar 2003). Discussions around kahvehane spaces, however, often framed women in terms of their absence and overlooked the complexity of how they had a nuanced presence while being invisible. Women's absence was not only confined to the coffeehouse interiors but existed beyond their walls, shaping how women moved through and engaged with the surrounding urban environment. Kahvehane spaces created artificial thresholds for women's participation, to the extent that they also shaped women's presence on a neighborhood scale. As Canaran (2018) highlights, coffeehouses were transformed from the interior enclosed rooms of the coffeehouse into street-front annexes, a process of spatial expansion that described how urban life was laid out. However, the nature of this expansion, particularly in the post-1980 period, has not been adequately examined. The feminist activism following the 1980 coup is well documented, which produced a renewed wave of feminist mobilization (White 1994; Çakır 2007). Although the 1980 coup may have influenced the trajectory of kahvehane culture, its direct impact is beyond the scope of this work. The coup coincides with the time period covered in my paper, which is why this paper considers the post-1980 period as a historical point of reference, which overlaps with the kahvehane spaces' expansion to street-facing spaces and a broader shift in women's presence in the urban context. My approach to this period stems from the family archive (photos and oral), which has material from the 1980s. As my grandfather owned a coffeehouse from 1982-1983 in Izmir, Turkey, I have gained insights into the research through oral history with the female family members, my mother and grandmother, who were the silent agents of my grandfather's kahvehane. Although the coffeehouse culture was highly male-controlled, there were incidents in which women, especially female family members, entered the coffeehouse to help with the chores, bring items, or find refuge. These contributions of women might seem insignificant; however, they were the subtle yet vital examples of defiance against rigid fences built upon socio-culturally accepted norms. Gender inequality was still visible, yet women were on the other side of the threshold with subservient roles. This nuance changed the perspective that coffeehouses acted as spaces of exclusion, and women were absent. Rather, their presence was determined by their familial status, not by individual agency, as my mother and grandmother state. However, this presence is often overlooked by scholars, who tend to use the absence of women instead of the nimble accounts of women whose familial presence permitted them to enter these male-dominant dimensions.

This research unfolds the paradox of the mentioned absence or conditional presence of women in such coffeehouses and brings forward the multi-layered experiences of women. The paper aims to analyze the architectural and urban settings that kept kahvehanes nested in exclusion and close to silent negotiation. I trace their static being, from indoor to street-front locations, while noting how gendered spatial practices governed women's use of the public space. Through oral histories, family archives, and theoretical readings of gendered space, I aim to re-conceptualize kahvehane spaces not just sites of men's sociability but as entangled and contested sites where the presence of women was in nuanced, negotiated, and overlooked forms.

2. HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The unilaterality of my grandfather's kahvehane was not surprising, as it had a long history in Turkish culture. Coffeehouses became popular during the 16th-century Ottoman Empire, where the first one was established in Istanbul in 1555, and have been a part of everyday Turkish life since. The coffeehouse was historically a source of information when illiteracy was prevalent; individuals would read the newspaper aloud to others. The coffeehouses even had battery-operated radios before people had

them in their homes, and the same can be said for television. Kahvehane was beyond information hubs, and it served as a space where stories were shared and emotional bonds were created. Turkish males frequented coffeehouses to join groups and have a sense of belonging. They took comfort in belonging to an organization more than in personal individualism and felt most comfortable among their friends and family (Gannon 2001). As the old Turkish saying goes, one cup of coffee is worth forty years of friendship.

As varied as the activities performed in the kahvehane might seem, it always served one side of the population. Men from all backgrounds, including merchants, laborers, students, and the unemployed, would gather at the kahvehane to drink Turkish coffee, play backgammon, and exchange political news (Yildiz 2007). In fact, as of the end of the 19th century, there were almost 2,500 kahvehane establishments in Istanbul, a number that made them highly accessible and further solidified their central role in male urban life (Ozeren 2018). While there was a great diversity of clientele, the permanent aspect of the kahvehane was that women were excluded from gathering in these communal spaces. Social exclusion was not only an informal practice; it extended, operated, represented, and permeated contemporary social norms and the legal structure of the period. Ottoman public life was organized around a gendered separation and had Islamic sociocultural norms originating from patriarchy as an underpinning ideology (Yildiz 2007). In public spaces, men occupied spaces in the public domain: streets, libraries, shops, while women occupied the domestic space of the house (Yildiz 2007; Gannon 2001). Coffeehouses were explicitly designed for men, not women. Contemporary researchers have referred to the kahvehane as an ancillary space for men, a safe space of refuge where men could escape from domestic duty for social engagement (Soygeniş and Kırış 2013). Men found it acceptable to talk freely, grumble, and joke about "masculine topics" without boundaries of domesticity in a public space. By tradition, within the socio-cultural space, women were

discouraged, and in some cases prohibited, from socializing with men in a public setting that they did not know. Thus, women were excluded from the kahvehane and its surroundings, if they took place in public space at all.

3. BEYOND THE THRESHOLD

Design and Spatial Layout
Kahvehane, from an architectural perspective, is a simple layout, where this simplicity is noteworthy. It is a small gathering place with a distinct smell and familiar noises of heated discussions, steady chatter, laughter, and the cups clattering (Gannon 2001). As Gannon (2001) observes, a typical kahvehane in a small town includes a small room, a kitchen, and several wooden tables and uncomfortable chairs. My grandfather's kahvehane is a traditional example of this description with amenities. It might seem like any café from the drawing (figure 1); however, the details point to unilateral design decisions as we analyze the plan. The kahvehane plan drawn by my uncle illustrates my grandfather's kahvehane, a typical arrangement resembling other kahvehane settings around Turkey. The entry has a large timber door (kapı) and four large windows (pencere) facing the street in front and one facing the less busy street, generally open in fine weather. The open front has a social aspect that dissolves any boundary between private interior space and the exterior of the place. The kahvehane invites men to look in and participate, and at the same time, the sitting position inside allows for visual contact with the outside world.

In all manners, there are no physical or symbolic barriers between the kahvehane and the corresponding male public space around it. The vast room has tables and chairs, allowing space to accommodate different activities, from watching a sports game or news to playing tabletop games where others can join around the table and watch the game. In the center of the room is a wood stove (soba) to provide warmth in winter. Importantly, there are no distinct separations or areas apart from the kitchen, which implies the kahvehane is
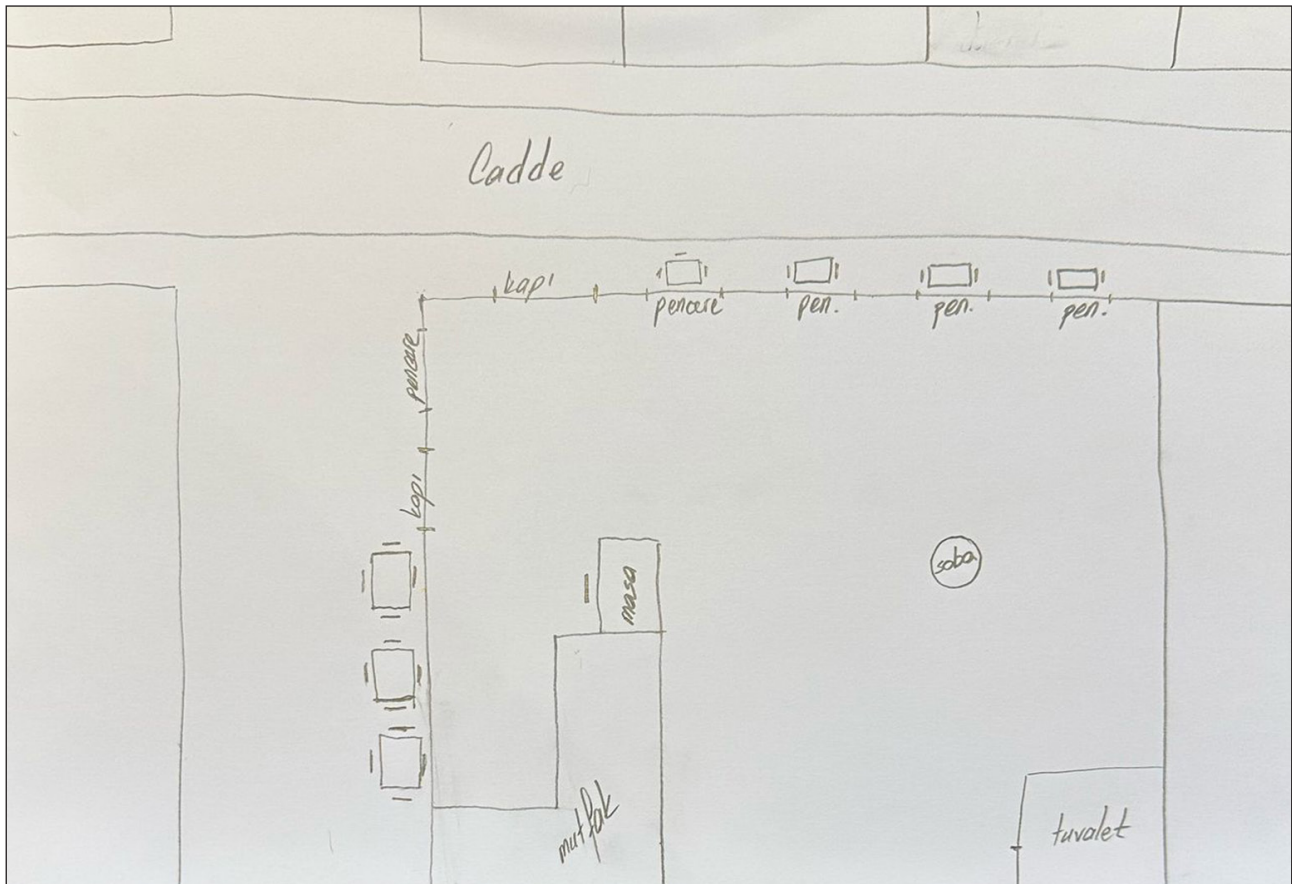
Figure 1. Turgut Şenkaya. Floor Plan of a Kahvehane in Eski Foça, İzmir, Turkey, including labels for street (cadde), door (kapı), window (pencere), table (masa), kitchen (mutfak), wood stove (soba) and toilet (tuvalet). 2025. Hand-drawn sketch on paper.

set up for an undifferentiated group of consumers. If women ever find refuge in a kahvehane as a subservient, the kitchen (mutfak) becomes the only space where they can do it. The kitchen is a small place to prepare beverages; in a kahvehane setting, one does not expect to be served or to order food (Gannon 2001). The only toilet is one in the corner, and it only serves men. Turkish public spaces almost always include bathrooms for both men and women, and in rare situations, mixed-gender bathrooms. Having only one bathroom is a design decision that acts as marginalization towards women. Even the spatial layout underlines the fact that women are not welcome in this male-exclusive space.

Early Memories in the Kahvehane

For my mother, kahvehane was a constant background of her daily existence. In our Aegean hometown, my grandfather's life was centered around this coffeehouse on the corner of the busiest street in the small town. Unlike others, she was there to sell fizzy drinks from the kitchen, where she was behind a thin kitchen wall until she was twelve years old. An unspoken understanding permitted her as a child to exist inside the kahvehane. However, her presence was not an active one; it was a quiet extension, a shadow of my grandfather's labor. She describes the sunlight streaming through the entrance, the whirling cigarette smoke, and the dust floating in the air. The men, and only men, sat in straight-backed chairs around small, low tables, sipping their thick Turkish coffee or tea, while rhythmically clicking their prayer beads in meditation. More often than not, they had their chairs tilted just outside the door facing the street. This is a common custom for many coffeehouses that usually made it so that they could both greet neighbors and look at the active daily life. However, the unwritten

understanding was set in motion when my mom turned twelve. She was no longer a child; she was a young woman; for this reason, her presence at the kahvehane was inappropriate (figure 2). Instead, she was shifted to the main door threshold, occasionally being sent to call my grandfather for dinner. She was never permitted again in the kahvehane context as she had been before. Kahvehane became a place that barricaded her presence, even though it once held her silent labor. It is not simply a personal recollection but an opportunity to observe the gendered structure in kahvehane settings and its broader implications. These traditional coffeehouses controlled the rhythm of my mother's family life, as they did thousands of others, and hit the cultural scale. It was beyond just a traditional coffeehouse; it was a border. A border that prohibited my mother from entering, where she once found refuge. It became a space where men took it upon themselves to declare in subtle unison that she was no longer a child, but a woman; a bold and sudden transition that determined the places she was allowed or not allowed into. This shift, etched forever in her memory, marked a moment in her life where the reality of gender inequality in the kahvehane and the broader culture dawned upon her.

4. EXPANSION OF MALE TERRITORY

During the early 1980s, kahvehane was a micro public sphere woven into urban life and was defined by strictly gendered norms (Canaran 2018). This paper analyzes kahvehane spaces under this microscope at an urban scale. The term micro-public in Canaran's thesis (2018) refers to small-scale places in the urban fabric. These places act like regular public spaces, such as parks and plazas, in social, cultural, and political functions.

Figure 2. Unknown photographer, Men Posing in a Traditional Kahvehane, Including My Uncle (Age 12), Eski Foça, İzmir, Turkey, 1982. Photograph.

Though more limited in size and scope, micro-public spaces allow interaction, communication, and public life. This chapter explores how women encountered and experienced these male spaces during the urban growth of kahvehanes. As feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) reminds us, public spheres in the past were masculine spheres in which women were excluded. Similarly, the Turkish coffeehouse is a masculine space in which women's presence is limited and controlled.

Marginal Presence

The historical and cultural structures of the time had rendered women nearly invisible in these male public gendered spaces (Ozkocak 2009). Historian Ozkocak (2009) notes that Ottoman coffeehouses and their incarnations were male spaces where women were absent (figure 3). Women who enter these spaces are only there briefly and usually at the periphery of the coffeehouse. For example,

in an emergency, a woman will stand outside for a few minutes to deliver the information and disappear as the conversation ends. The threshold of the door is where the invisible line is drawn, not stepping fully in as it will clash with the unwritten rule. As waving your hand or calling the name of the person inside to get their attention is unacceptable, women have to uncomfortably wait at the threshold until the person they need to speak with sees them. In this way, women's visibility is a double-edged sword: women are only visible outside the kahvehane if it is rationalized by some other type of errand or a reason that makes it acceptable to occupy a male space.

My mother talks about her walking routine to the market in 1983: "We learned to walk fast and not look around as we passed by the coffeehouse. You tried not to be visible, not to be commented on or stared at." This invisibility is a social and spatial logic, as women cross to the other side of

Figure 3. Unknown photographer, Three Men of Different Ages Enjoying the Kahvehane Setting, Eski Foça, İzmir, Turkey, 1983. Photograph.

the street or take the longer route to avoid the kahvehane area. By doing this, one can recognize that women simply did not occupy the immediate surroundings of the coffeehouse. This became an example of how the expansion of male territory reinforced the inequality of gender in the urban spatial forms.

Street as a Semi-Public Zone

Traditional coffeehouses have one key urban characteristic, which is their seating arrangement. The chairs spill from the interior to the sidewalk, controlling the use of the "public" space. This informal use of sidewalk dates back to the late 19th century (Kömeçoğlu 2009), where the arrangement was referred to as "street coffeehouses." Having kahvehane activity happen on a sidewalk while occupying a public space makes the street part of the kahvehane. The extension of the kahvehane puts the customers

in a privileged position by surveilling the people passing by. This extension was social for men, creating an outdoor area to get fresh air, watch the street's flow, and assert ownership on the sidewalk. Women's experience is different, where the street becomes an obstacle. My grandmother mentions this extension: "It was like the whole street was theirs in front of the coffeehouse." The ownership men had on the sidewalk eliminated the partition between the interior and exterior of the kahvehane, thus restricting women's movement in the streetscape. A photograph from 1983 in front of my grandfather's kahvehane shows this interaction with the street (figure 4). In this photo, my grandfather and his three friends are posing in front of the kahvehane, with the chairs facing towards the street for men to interact with the public space. The photograph is a powerful example to support the depth of the micro-public area. Through inserting chairs on the sidewalk,

Figure 4. Unknown Photographer. Three Men Standing Outside a Kahvehane Including my Grandfather (far left) with Chairs Facing Toward the Street, Eski Foça, İzmir, Turkey, 1983. Photograph.

kahvehane takes the street in its exclusive domain while limiting women's circulation.

The territorialization of micro-public space influences women's already limited freedom of movement within the neighbourhood. If women were alone, they tend to feel out of place or even threatened when encountering lounging men, especially if men stop chatting and all eyes gaze at women. The social and public space of the street became a private salon for kahvehane patrons to exist. Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative (1984) writes that the seemingly public spaces can have "invisible walls" for the female population, manufactured from the male gaze and male dominance. The change Turkish neighbourhoods experienced in the 1980s with the increasing expansion of kahvehane on the sidewalk represented this boundary. Women were at an undrawn border, on one side the supposedly public street, and on the other a micro-public space where they had to stay outside. Kahvehane, on an urban scale, functioned as a gender filter. It is a micro-public place that generates a gendered urban area, limiting women's movement by simply arranging chairs in a certain orientation.

5. TACTICS OF NUANCED PARTICIPATION

As women faced exclusion on the micro-public scale, they managed to assert their presence with subtle tactics. Women did not approach the kahvehane or the street leading to it directly, since it would be an act that questioned the societal norms that intertwine with traditional Turkish culture. Instead, women chose to engage with the kahvehane territory indirectly. My grandma and her circle of female friends employed behavioral tactics to assert agency through compliance. Women would have to deploy an indifferent demeanor that involved being calm, calculated, and not overly friendly. Women followed key behaviors to avoid standing out, such as maintaining forward eye contact, a direct stride, and modest clothing (figure 5) . These behaviours were shielded in disguise, indicating they were only crossing through the space and not contesting it. My mom describes the traditional Turkish society from women's experience, and calls their

movement as "tactical invisibility" to avoid conflict when moving into male-dominated micro-public spaces. My grandmother explains in her interview that women learned to become visible without being seen. Women would carry a baby or grocery bags as social protection. My grandma describes this tactic: "If you were seen with a child or bags in your hands, you were on legitimate business, not wandering around, was the key." These covers were merely a part of women's strategic participation in the male-exclusive domains of the public space under the cover of traditional roles such as mother and homemaker, which were respected by kahvehane regulars. Fraser (1990) underlines the exact tactic as a springboard for public activity under the idioms of domesticity and motherhood.

The strategies women used were not defensive, but also worked as covertly subversive. Women found ways not to be completely excluded from public life by finding nuance to keep themselves visible. Women would send their sons to work in the coffeehouse as apprentices, just like my grandma did with my uncle. As Gannon (2001) mentions, coffeehouses are family-run businesses, and usually the owner's son waits at the tables and serves beverages. The younger men became the messengers between the kahvehane and the women who were excluded from the interiors. Others simply relied on their connections: there is often a woman-friendly store owner near the coffeehouse, so women would go into the store and have loud, cheerful conversations, implicitly claiming their right to the sidewalk at a hearing distance from the coffeehouse. These small acts of presence are what feminist scholars call "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988) or working within the limitations of their social contexts to obtain some autonomy. In the context of the early 1980s, there was no confrontation; rather, negotiations over the micro-public spaces were taking place.

Women strategically negotiated their presence in the micro-public spaces through various tactics to have autonomy in the urban environment. Being treated as second-class citizens in kahvehane and the space kahvehane occupies on the street, pushed women to find ways of maintaining

Figure 5. Unknown photographer, Interior Seating of a Kahvehane in Eski Foça: Male Sociality and a Lone Woman, 1983. Photograph.

their dignity and existence in urban life. They demonstrate methods to make themselves visible in subtle yet effective ways. The indirect but sophisticated actions led to gradual changes in the 1980s. Women's endeavors to be present in the micro-public spaces started to get recognized and led the cafes and tea gardens to be more inclusive, where young women participated in public life with increasing freedom of movement (Sevinç 2013). Yet, in the 1980s, traditional kahvehane remained a mainly male-exclusive environment. With their discreet determination and subtle tactics, women managed to assert some level of ownership in the micro-public spaces. Even though they were not able to find a seat at the kahvehane table, they made sure to be present in urban life.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper analyzes the urban and gendered dynamics of the traditional coffeehouses under the scope of micro-public spaces in 1980s Turkey. The focus is on the impact these male-exclusive

spaces had on women's socio-urban experience. The characteristics of kahvehane's interior layout set the base for research to understand the interior dynamic before moving onto its spatial expansion from a closed interior to street-front annexes. Examining the intricacies of this micro-public space where women negotiated and contested these boundaries leads us to an understanding of complex exclusion. It is a multifaceted process of marginalization and subtle empowerment entangled with deeply patriarchal norms. Kahvehane, through oral history and the pictures of my family archive, provides the foundation for the apparent difference in the urban presence of women and men. The deliberate organization of outward-facing seats along the street created a spatial arrangement that reinforced kahvehane's status as a public site for men and transformed the street into a gendered boundary for women (Canaran 2018; Komecoglu 2009). Women's experience was marked as "tactical invisibility" within the micro-public sphere. Their presence

was conditioned by cultural restrictions that determined their proximity to coffeehouses. Oral history recounts how women carefully found acceptable ways of controlling and negotiating their places along the edges of coffeehouses, from early in their lives. The learned practices of women have established a new permanent mark in the collective memory of urban space and shaped the ongoing gendered territories within the micro-public spheres.

In the 1980s, in the kahvehane, one would overlook the blend of presence and absence. Women were often not recognized as occupying these spaces, but they still made themselves visible through small, quiet, and indirect resistance to their exclusion. Ultimately, kahvehane became an area of endless negotiations and quiet revolutions, and its worn chairs bear witness to the soft but consistent change. In every measured move around the kahvehane and in every glance to the crowded male-exclusive room, these women sew new possibilities into their neighbourhood, showing that even the most solid-looking walls can be tactfully permeated through women's persistence.

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