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The Role of Seniority-Based Succession (Ekberiyet) in Increasing Women's Influence in The Ottoman Empire

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Abstract
This study examines the transition of the Ottoman succession system from direct father-to-son inheritance to the seniority-based Ekberiyet system in the 17th century, where the oldest male in the dynasty ascended the throne. This institutional shift created a structural vacuum that fundamentally transformed gender-based power relations within the palace, structurally elevating figures like the Valide Sultan and Haseki Sultan to politically functional roles by weakening the patrilineal link and often resulting in the succession of underage or inexperienced sultans. Using a qualitative historical method, library research, and frameworks derived from gender theory and Islamic political epistemology, this research analyses the political agency of Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan, demonstrating that they proactively exploited this institutional instability to become central agents in government policy-making, military strategy, and official appointments. By linking the Ekberiyet reform directly to the rise of female regency (*naib al-sultan*), this article fills a gap in literature that often describes women's influence without addressing the institutional mechanism that enabled it, ultimately arguing that women's political involvement was a legitimate and essential mechanism for maintaining state stability, aligned with Islamic principles of trust (*amanah*) and public benefit (*maslahat*).

1. Introduction

In contemporary Western discourse, Islam is often perceived as a social system that marginalizes women from access to power and public space. This narrative frequently overlooks the complexity of Islamic history and the active roles that women played in dynastic governance. Yet, in Islamic teachings, women occupy a noble position, with clearly defined rights in social, economic, and even political spheres, provided these are exercised within the framework of ethical conduct, the common good, and trust [1, p. 164]. History records that Muslim women have played significant roles in society, including within the Ottoman Empire. This article examines how women in the Ottoman Empire exercised political influence within Islamic moral and legal frameworks. By investigating the positions and strategies of women in one of the most influential Islamic dynasties, this study demonstrates that their political agency was not a deviation from Islamic norms, but rather a legitimate and functional aspect of the socio-political configuration. Research into the roles of palace women provides important insights into how they were able to navigate institutional structures to expand their power and influence [2, p. 115].

The Ottoman Empire, one of the most influential Islamic dynasties, was built upon a strong hierarchical and male-dominated power structure [3, p. 7]. However, this traditional structure faced profound internal and external challenges during the 17th century [3, p. 40]. Research demonstrates that while the structure was patriarchal, the complex social and political dynamics contained significant room for women, particularly within the royal court, to influence policy. This space for influence became structurally critical due to the systemic instability of the era, which included rapid fluctuations in central governance (for example, witnessing 18 Grand Viziers and 12 Şeyhülislam1 in just 12 years), financial crises, and

[1] Şeyhülislam was the highest religious authority in the Ottoman Empire, responsible for interpreting Islamic law (sharīʿa) and advising the sultan on religious matters. He supervised the Islamic courts and issued fatwas, playing a crucial role in maintaining the balance between political and religious aspects of the Ottoman state.

ongoing military conflicts like the war over Crete [4, p. 551]. Crucially, the looming transition toward the ekberiyet (seniority-based succession) system contributed to the frequent succession of inexperienced or underage sultans [5, p. 608]. These crises, coupled with the political uncertainties, created socio-political gaps that court women were able to exploit to expand their power, turning informal influence into necessary state governance.

Within this volatile 17th-century setting, where the central government experienced high fluctuations in leadership, women in the Ottoman royal court were uniquely positioned to act. Ottoman women, particularly those in the royal harem, had access not only to domestic life but also to informal centres of power that could shape political policy through patronage networks and kinship. This leverage was supported by social rights women could hold through institutions like marriage, dowry, alimony, or inheritance, enabling them to acquire property and engage in significant economic activities, including trade and textile production [6, p. 122]. Therefore, the political agency of court women, especially figures like the Valide Sultan (Sultan's mother) and Haseki Sultan (Sultan's wife), was not arbitrary but rooted in established social and economic influence [3, p. 40]. This allowed them to play a crucial role in the social and political dynamics of the Ottoman Empire, transforming informal connections into essential political functions.

The period leading up to the 17th century was plagued by a brutal paradox embedded within Ottoman sovereignty: while the throne continuously passed down from father to son for fourteen generations, this system institutionalized the practice of fratricide, famously decreed by Sultan Mehmet II Fatih. The systematic execution of over 60 princes over 150 years, justified for the sake of world order (nizām-i ‘ālem), generated constant fear and profound instability within the royal court. To resolve this instability, the Ottoman dynasty pursued a radical institutional reform: the transition to the ekberiyet system. This mechanism guaranteed the throne to the eldest male member of the dynasty, whether a brother, cousin, nephew, or son of the previous sultan. Critically, this shift weakened the direct relationship between father and son, as the Sultan could no longer consider his children as direct heirs if an older male relative survived. Furthermore, the system often resulted in the succession of princes who were either underage or lacked governing experience. This created a profound leadership vacuum that structurally elevated the Valide Sultan and Haseki Sultan, positioning them as essential guardians and administrators necessary to maintain dynastic stability.

Furthermore, palace women leveraged familial connections and patronage to expand their influence. The harem was not only a site of political intrigue, but also a platform for the formation of networks involving the royal family and bureaucratic elites. Leslie P. Peirce (1993) in The Imperial Harem notes that women like Nurbanu Sultan played a key role in ensuring the dynasty's continuity through political support for their chosen Sultans. These patronage relationships not only strengthened their positions but also gave them legitimacy within the patriarchal power structure [7, p. 143].

Studies on the role of women in the Ottoman Empire have grown rapidly in recent decades, along with the increasing attention of historians to gender issues in Islamic history. Leslie P. Peirce, in her work The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire (1993), pioneered the positioning of court women, particularly Valide Sultans and Haseki Sultans, as political actors who played a crucial role in the dynamics of Ottoman power. She showed that court women used kinship and patronage to influence political decisions, including the appointment of high-ranking officials and strategic policy-making. Similarly, Gülru Necipoğlu, in Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power (1991), highlighted that the harem was not only a private space, but also an informal center of power that played a symbolic role in the dynasty's power structure. Other studies such as Betül İpşirli Argıt (Life after the Harem, 2020), Natalia Królikowska (2007), and Madeline Zilfi (2010) expand the analysis by showing women's involvement in economic activities, urban social life, and architectural patronage as forms of political expression outside the formal structures of power.

However, the majority of these studies focus on describing women's roles and influence without directly linking them to the significant institutional changes in the Ottoman succession system, particularly the

succession system within the Ottoman dynasty. In fact, the shift from a paternal-son inheritance system to an ekberiyet system in the latter half of the 16th century to the 17th century was a crucial turning point in the configuration of dynastic power. Ekrem Buğra Ekinci's (2018) study of fratricide laws and Halil İnalcık's analysis of the succession system allude to this change as part of a political stabilization strategy, but have not elaborated on its implications for the gendered distribution of power within the royal court. Therefore, this article attempts to fill this gap by presenting an analysis linking the reform of the succession system to the increased political agency of court women. This approach not only complements studies of Ottoman social history but also offers an alternative reading of women's power in Islamic history through the lens of Islamic epistemology, where justice, benefit, and trustworthiness serve as frameworks for interpreting power, including when exercised by female figures.

2. Literature Review

To interpret the complex dynamics of women's agency within the Ottoman court in the 17th century, this article utilizes two distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks.

The first framework is Joan Scott's (1986) gender theory, which is employed to understand gender not merely as a description of social identity but as an analytical category of power relations. This approach is crucial because the historical analysis must move beyond describing women's political involvement to explaining how that involvement became structurally legitimate within a dominantly patriarchal system. Scott's perspective allows for a rereading of patriarchal domination as a structure negotiable by female actors, particularly when analyzing the influence of figures like Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan. This theoretical lens helps position the harem not just as a domestic space, but as a formal center of informal power leveraged through kinship and patronage, as established by prior historians such as Leslie P. Peirce (1993) and Gülru Necipoğlu (1991).

The second framework is the epistemology of Islamic politics theorized by al-Māwardī, which emphasizes that political legitimacy stems from the principles of trust (*amanah*) and public benefit (*maslahat*), rather than resting solely on biological lineage. This concept is vital for interpreting the role of women who assumed the position of regent of sultan (*naib al-sultan*) during times of dynastic instability. By applying this framework, the article argues that the active political role of women was legitimate because it served the highest goal of the state: maintaining political stability and the welfare of the people. Historical studies by scholars such as Halil İnalcık (1969) and Ekrem Buğra Ekinci (2018) have discussed the ekberiyet system primarily as a stabilization strategy to end fratricide. However, this study deepens that historical analysis by integrating the Islamic political concept of maslahat to formally legitimize the political agency of women who stepped into the resulting institutional vacuum.

By combining these two perspectives, this article reads the transition to ekberiyet system not merely as an internal dynastic reform, but as a structural gap that expanded the space for women's political agency within the context of islamic rule. This combined theoretical approach explicitly supports the research's main concept: demonstrating that women's political roles were not anomalies but a legitimate and functional socio-political configuration.

3. Research Method / Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research. This approach was chosen because the topic being studied is historical and social, namely the transition of the succession system in the Ottoman Empire from a father-to-son inheritance model to an ekberiyet system, and its impact on the position and political role of women in the palace in the 17th century.

The library research method allows researchers to deeply examine various relevant history books, and journal articles from the Ottoman period. Source collection is focused on materials that detail: (a) the implementation and consequences of the ekberiyet system; and (b) the political activities, patronage, and architectural expressions of the Valide Sultan and Haseki Sultan (e.g., Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan). The analysis is fundamentally interpretive, emphasizing a deep understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts. This step involves contextualizing the Ekberiyet transition

not just as an administrative change, but as a structural gap that necessitated the emergence of new, non-traditional actors (women) in the dynamics of palace power.

As an analytical strategy, this research uses case studies of two key female figures from the royal court, Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan. This approach aims to provide a concrete picture of how changes in the succession system created structural opportunities for women to participate in the leadership process and state policymaking.

Thus, this study not only aims to map the institutional influence of the ekberiyet system on palace women, but also to highlight that in the context of Islamic values, women have the space and legitimacy to play an active role in government structures, as long as it is carried out within the framework of justice, benefit, and trust.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. "Ekberiyet" Transition and Power Dynamics

From the late 13th to the early 17th century, the Ottoman throne passed down continuously from father to son for fourteen generations. The Sultan cared for their survival, protected them from each other, and was responsible for training his sons for leadership careers [7, p. 229]. However, the succession of the throne from father to son also presented problems. Emecen stated that the Sultan had to constantly be wary of the potential for overthrow or assassination by his son, as the throne would inevitably pass to him upon his death; whether killed in battle, dying of illness, or being overthrown by his successor [8, p. 108]. Furthermore, this tradition also allowed a prince to kill his own brother, as decreed by Sultan Mehmet II Fatih [9, p. 91] in *Kanunname-i Âl-i Osman*, while saying "For the welfare of the state, one of my sons who has been blessed by Allah with the sultanate may kill his brothers in a legal way[2]."

According to historical records, more than 60 princes were executed in a period of approximately 150 years after the enactment of Sultan Mehmet II's fraticide law [10, p. 1037]. Most were executed on the grounds of nizām-i 'ālem, while others were executed for *baghy* (rebellion) or *sai bil' fases* (attempts to create chaos). These figures demonstrate that fratricide was an institutionalized, brutal practice that systematically created a climate of fear and instability within the royal court [11, p. 40] [8, p. 178].

The growing anxiety between the sultan and his son, and the prince and his brother, limited their freedom of movement due to fear of these threats. Therefore, ekberiyet was the optimal and perhaps the only solution to this paradox of Ottoman sovereignty. The transition from father to son to ekberiyet was the automatic succession of the eldest male member of the dynasty, whether a brother, cousin, nephew, or son of the previous sultan [7, p. 99] [9, p. 92].

Ekberiyet meant that much of the political goal of reproduction for the previous generation was no longer relevant. In theory, a sultan would no longer have to worry about the threat of overthrow by one of his sons or civil war between them, or about taking action to ensure the succession of his favorite son, as succession was not guaranteed to fall to his son if the sultan had an older brother. Consequently, sultans might enjoy greater freedom in their personal lives, as long as they produced heirs to continue the dynasty and did not violate the sultanate's ethical protocols.

The transition to ekberiyet turned out to benefit the positions of valide sultan and haseki sultan [12, p. 19]. Pierce stated that with this system, the relationship between father and son was weakened because he could not have children before ascending the throne or the sultan might die before his children reached adulthood. Furthermore, he could not consider his children as direct heirs because any brothers or cousins he might have would rule before them. On the other hand, the valide sultan and haseki sultan

[2] *"[V]e her kimesneye evlâdımdan saltanat müyesser ola, karındaşların nizâm-ı 'âlem için katletmek münâsibdir, ekser 'ulemâ dahi tecvîz etmiştir, anınla 'âmil olalar."* See Özcan, *ed.*, *Kanunname-i Âl-i Osman.* For a legal discussion on fratricide in Ottoman history, see Mehmet Akman, *Osmanlı Devletinde Kardeş Katli* (Istanbul: Eren, 1997).

remained relevant in their roles in the Sultanate, where the valide sultan was the protector of her husband, the sultan, and the haseki sultan was the protector of her son, the prince [7, p. 230].

This phenomenon serves as an important starting point for examining how the transformation of the succession system not only altered the dynastic configuration but also opened up structural opportunities for women's agency in the realm of palace politics. Kösem Sultan's political role within the transitional ekberiyet system must be understood not merely as an expression of individual influence, but as a manifestation of the dialectic of power within an institutional framework undergoing significant transformation. The system created political uncertainty that necessitated the emergence of new actors in the dynamics of palace power.

From the perspective of dynastic political theory, this shift redistributed political and social capital within patronage networks. Kösem Sultan, as valide sultan, strategically exploited this structural gap to expand her political agency. She acted as a power mediator, combining traditional kin-based legitimacy with the demands for political stability fueled by the complexities of the new succession system.

Through patronage networks, Kösem successfully articulated the role of women as central political actors, not only upholding dynastic stability but also reforming the leadership paradigm within the patriarchal Ottoman political system [13, p. 1459]. This approach aligns with Joan Scott's gender theory, which positions gender as a category of power analysis, where gender roles are not merely identities but also mechanisms that shape and reproduce power structures.

Furthermore, in the context of the epistemology of political Islam, as proposed by al-Māwardī, political legitimacy does not rest solely on biological lineage, but rather on the principles of trust and benefit. Kösem Sultan, by becoming naib al-sultan, interpreted political authority as a trust that must be carried out for the benefit of the state, a position that opened up space for women to contribute substantively to strategic decision-making.

Thus, Kösem Sultan's position marks a critical phase in which the transformation of the succession system catalyzed a gender paradigm shift in Ottoman political power, demonstrating that women were not merely passive actors in history, but agents of structural change that influenced the direction and continuity of the dynasty.

Therefore, from the second half of the 16th century, women of the sultanate, such as the valide sultans and haseki sultans, began to participate significantly in the central government of the sultanate. They influenced decisions made in many areas, from appointments and dismissals to military and foreign policy matters, thus becoming a very important faction in the government during the 17th century [14, p. 237].

The increased participation of valide sultans and haseki sultans in the Ottoman Empire's governance cannot be separated from the context of institutional changes brought about by the ekberiyet system. With succession now favoring the eldest member of the dynastic family, rather than the direct son of the sultan, the position of princes became more unstable, and their reigns were often marked by underage or inexperienced sultans. This situation created a significant opportunity for valide sultans and haseki sultans to fill the leadership vacuum.

Women in this position, particularly valide sultans, assumed the role of guardians, managing government affairs and influencing political policy and the appointment of state officials. Leveraging their maternal legitimacy and family ties, they were able to build strong patronage networks within the palace and bureaucracy. Therefore, their role was not merely passive supporters, but rather active and strategic political actors.

These changes demonstrate how a dynastic political system that appears patriarchal on the surface actually provides structural opportunities for women to claim and expand their political power. The ekberiyet system, with its complex succession mechanisms, forced adaptations within the palace power

structure, where women leveraged their social and symbolic positions to maintain dynastic stability while increasing their political influence.

While Ekberiyet contributed to women's political authority, it is important to recognize that female influence in court affairs predates the system. From the reign of Sultan Mehmet II to the significant role of Hürrem Sultan in Süleyman Kanuni's rule, women had long shaped state policies [6, p. 122]. Ekberiyet, however, institutionalized this influence, allowing women to attain roles comparable to that of naib al-sultan, particularly evident during the young Mehmet IV's accession.

4.2. Kösem Sultan

Kösem Sultan, also known as Mahpeyker, was one of the most powerful women in Ottoman history. Her birth name was Anastasia, and she was born in 1589 in Tinos, Greece [15, p. 182]. Kosem Sultan joined the harem when she was only 15 years old. Kösem Sultan was the haseki of Sultan Ahmet I and valide sultan during the reigns of two of his sons, Murad IV, and Ibrahim I, and then her grandson, Mehmet IV [16, p. 234]. She had a long career as the protector of princes and the only valide sultan to rule six sultans [17, p. 45].

Kösem, as a highly influential haseki sultan, played a crucial role in the transition of dynastic succession [12, p. 19]. When Sultan Ahmet I faced the decision to execute his brother Mustafa—a bloody tradition in the Ottoman family—Kösem persuaded him to abandon the plan [18, p. 90] [19, p. 191]. He realized that if Mustafa were killed, Kösem's own children would never ascend the throne: upon Ahmet's death, his eldest son and Kösem's stepson, Osman II, would succeed his father, and would very likely follow in his ancestors' footsteps by executing all of his brothers, including Murad, Kasim, and Ibrahim.

Notes of the Venetian ambassador, Simon Contarini (1612) [15, p. 184], shows that Kösem argued on the basis of fate and justice: since Ahmed I himself was not the eldest son and only ascended the throne after his father, Sultan Mehmet III, had killed 19 brothers, he had no right to repeat that pattern of violence [7, p. 232]. Under Kösem's strong influence, for the first time in Ottoman history, the throne was passed not from father to son, but from brother to brother—a transformative moment that marked the beginning of the ekberiyet system [14, p. 245].

Sultan Ahmet I's decision to deviate from established tradition and pardon his brother Mustafa was not only a turning point in the succession system, but also indicated an epistemological shift in the meaning of dynastic stability. Kösem Sultan's intervention in this decision cannot be understood solely as a personal maneuver for the safety of her children, but rather as a conscious act of exploiting institutional gaps to reconstruct the architecture of dynastic power.

This move dismantled the logic of fratricide long legitimized by the narrative of "for the benefit of the state." Instead, Kösem Sultan introduced a new logic based on moral accountability and consideration of long-term interests: that stability stems not only from eliminating political rivals, but also from creating succession mechanisms that do not rely on structural violence. This demonstrates that women, in positions like Kösem's, are not simply part of the patriarchal power structure but also reflective actors renegotiating the values of dynastic politics [20, p. 32].

Although certain scholars argue that Kösem Sultan was not involved in the establishment of Ekberiyet and that the system was only institutionalized during Mehmed IV's reign, we maintain that her actions were instrumental. By persuading Sultan Ahmed I to spare her brother, Kösem Sultan introduced a practice that became the critical precedent for the formalization of Ekberiyet decades later [5, p. 608].

This demonstrates that the ekberiyet system was the product of political lobbying by court women who strategically understood the dynamics of succession. In this case, Kösem Sultan not only prevented Mustafa's death but also opened new avenues for women's involvement in the institutional reproduction of power.

In addition to her influence as haseki sultan, Kösem also played a central role as valide sultan. When her son, Murad IV, was crowned sultan in 1623 at the age of twelve, Kösem exercised de facto power

as naib al-sultan until 1632 [15, p. 190]. During this regency, Kösem directly shaped the political direction of the dynasty, asserting female authority within the official Ottoman power structure [9, p. 34].

Kösem Sultan, as naib al-sultan, was not simply the exercise of power on behalf of her immature son, but rather the concrete embodiment of a fusion of maternal legitimacy and political rationality. During this period, her authority was both functional and formal, as she not only maintained the symbolic stability of the dynasty but also navigated the direction of state policy in the context of internal and external crises.

Her role as naib al-sultan demonstrates that women's position in the ekberiyet system was shifting: no longer as domestic guardians, but as administrators of the state during a period of transition and tension. In this regard, Kösem Sultan's power was based on three pillars of legitimacy: (1) her biological relationship as the sultan's mother, (2) her institutional knowledge of palace mechanisms, and (3) her political ability to mediate elite conflicts.

This situation reinforces the argument that the ekberiyet system, by delaying the birth of a new generation of princes as heirs, created a power vacuum that was structurally filled by female figures like Kösem. This was an institutional gap that, rather than passively exploiting, court women proactively exploited through the politicization of motherhood.

Moreover, this guardianship practice demonstrates that the Ottoman patriarchal structure still possessed flexible mechanisms that allowed women to ascend to the political stage within the framework of the public interest and the mandate of power. Kösem was not merely a shadowy power holder, but a representative of authority institutionally recognized by the grand vizier and other members of the power hierarchy.

During Murad IV's regency, Kösem Sultan participated in important decisions in state affairs, including the war against the Safavids—especially the fall of Baghdad—the revolt of Abaza Mehmed Pasha, and the conflict in Crimea [4, p. 547]. Her involvement is evident from the petitions (arz) and reports (telhis) submitted to her by the grand vizier, in which she issued handwritten orders on behalf of her son. The grand vizier even referred to her with the honorific title “Devletlü Hanım,” indicating recognition of her political authority as nearly equal to that of a formal sovereign.

Kösem Sultan's dominant role in 17th-century Ottoman politics cannot be understood separately from the dynamics created by the ekberiyet system. As a valide sultan ruling as naib al-sultan during the reign of her underage son, Kösem capitalized on the opportunities afforded by the uncertainty and complexity of this new succession system. When succession was no longer automatic, the role of the guardian became crucial in maintaining the continuity of power and dynastic stability.

Kösem Sultan, with her political acumen and patronage network, successfully established her position as a key driver of state policy and appointer of key officials, while also protecting the dynasty during a transitional period prone to conflict. Her influence marked a significant shift in the role of court women, that assumed central positions in political decision-making that directly influenced the empire's direction.

As a result, Kösem Sultan's political career reflects how the ekberiyet system enabled and even encouraged the expansion of women's political agency, particularly that of valide sultans, as part of the government's adaptation and stabilization mechanisms in the face of the complex challenges of dynastic succession.

Kösem's role as valide sultan, acting as mentor to her son, was a norm in the 17th-century Ottoman Empire. It was considered both her duty and her right. In addition to providing advice, the valide sultan also provided vigilant protection to her son, especially during her absence from Istanbul. Since the valide sultan's tenure depended on her son, the valide sultan was the sultan's most trusted and vigilant ally. The threat of rebellion against the throne, particularly during the transition from paternal to son succession

to ekberiyet, made safeguarding the sultan as crucial as it was during his time as a prince. One reason post-Suleyman I sultans were reluctant to leave the capital was that the princes who might succeed them were readily available at court, not in distant provinces, as was the case in the era before the practice of ekberiyet.

In 1634, Kösem Sultan moved quickly to protect Murad IV from a potential rebellion during his absence from the palace in Bursa. Murad's execution of the judge of İznik for a minor offense caused discontent among the religious hierarchy in Istanbul, leading to rumors that the mufti Ahizade Hüseyin Efendi was stirring up anti-sultan sentiment and aiming to overthrow him. When the accusations against the mufti were brought to the attention of the valide sultan, she immediately sent a message to Murad to return to the capital [15, p. 197]. The unfortunate Hüseyin Efendi was strangled before proof of his innocence could reach the angry sultan. This was the first execution of a mufti in the history of the Ottoman state [7, p. 241].

Kösem's other son, Ibrahim, was imprisoned and was to be executed by order of Sultan Murad IV in 1635. However, Kösem persuaded her son Sultan Murad IV not to kill him and again, Kösem Sultan saved her son. After the death of Murad IV, the mentally unstable Ibrahim became the sole heir to the Ottoman Empire and in this way Kösem Sultan saved the Ottoman Empire. In 1640, Ibrahim succeeded his brother, but because Ibrahim was mentally unstable to rule [15, p. 186]. This allowed the authority of the empire to be returned to Kösem [21, p. 178].

Ibrahim I was the most extravagant and lethargic sultan in the history of the Ottoman Empire. His reign was led by Kösem Sultan and Vizier Mustafa Pasha [18, p. 91]. However, he did not like being ordered around by his mother and in 1644, Mustafa Pasha was murdered on the orders of Sultan Ibrahim I and expelled his mother from the palace [22, p. 213]. Unfortunately, the Ottoman Empire fell into chaos after that. There were 18 Grand Viziers, 12 Şeyhülislam, 23 Defterdar3, and 18 Agha4 in just 12 years. With such large fluctuations, public policy tends to change [4, p. 546]. Some policies may be correctable, but those related to war are very difficult to reverse [22, p. 214]. On August 8, 1648, Ibrahim was finally deposed and imprisoned in Topkapı Palace. The new vizier, Sofu Mehmet Pasha, had requested a fatwa from the Şeyhülislam to execute Sultan Ibrahim I. The fatwa was granted, and Ibrahim was killed on August 18, 1648.

Kösem Sultan's 7-year-old grandson, Mehmet IV, became the new Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and Kösem Sultan regained the status of naib al-sultan from 1648 to 1651 [16, p. 155]. According to Ottoman tradition, after a new sultan ascended the throne, the mother of the old sultan would retire to the Old Palace and abdicate her position. However, Mehmet's twenty-year-old mother, Turhan Sultan, had no experience or knowledge of governing the country [15, p. 214]. Therefore, Kösem did not retire to the Old Palace and she became Mehmet IV's naib al-sultan with the new title of büyük valide sultan (grandmother of the sultan) [23, p. 35]. The demands of the political and religious leaders who had deposed Sultan Ibrahim for Kösem Sultan to continue her career as naib al-sultan for Sultan Mehmet IV undoubtedly also played a role in this development. Kösem took over the government of the country in a short time and, with her influence, dismissed Grand Vizier Sofu Mehmed Pasha in 1649 and appointed Janissary Commander Kara Murad Pasha as grand vizier on May 21 of the same year [5, p. 612]. Thus, from 1649, she ruled the country in collaboration with the Janissary Corps until 1651 [14, p. 247]. During this time, Kösem ruled as Sultan and was deeply involved in government affairs to the point of appointing and dismissing Grand Viziers [24, p. 8].

Kösem Sultan's dominance during Mehmet IV's regency marked the peak of women's involvement in formal power structures. No longer reliant on her status as the valide sultan, she now gained authority through the consensus of the political and military elite, who saw her as a transitional figure capable of

[3] The defterdar was the chief financial officer of the Ottoman Empire, responsible for overseeing the empire's treasury, taxation, budgeting, and record-keeping of state revenues and expenditures.
[4] In the Ottoman context, the title ağa (or agha) denoted a high-ranking officer or chief, used across military, administrative, and palace settings to signify authority and command.

bridging the crisis following Sultan Ibrahim's death. Her role emphasized that women's political agency within the court was not necessarily hereditary or symbolic, but could rely on reputation, bureaucratic experience, and patronage networks.

Interestingly, Kösem's status as a büyük valide sultan created a new form of kinship-based political legitimacy, one that had no formal precedent. By not retiring to the Old Palace, Kösem transcended traditional protocol and de facto repositioned gender boundaries within the dynastic structure. Within the context of the ekberiyet system, the position of büyük valide sultan served as a safeguard of dynastic stability, one that no longer relied on direct father-son succession but rather on the continuity of legitimacy.

Moreover, the fact that Kösem was able to dismiss and appoint Grand Viziers reflects a shift in the locus of power from a weak sultan to a strong and influential female figure. Her involvement in appointing officials, responding to military crises, and managing political patronage demonstrates that the ekberiyet system created a formal space for women's political expression that was impossible under the previous patrilineal succession system. Within the framework of classical Islamic political thought, this can be read as a practice of maslahat—where power is exercised by the party best able to maintain the stability of the ummah and the state, regardless of gender.

Kösem Sultan's efforts provoked a backlash among the members of the harem and the enderun (the inner court of the Sultan). Kösem planned to depose Mehmed IV and replace him with another grandson, Suleiman II [25, p. 214]. This news was reported to Turhan Sultan, and she discussed the matter with the aghas of the Palace. With the approval of the fourteen aghas, it was decided to execute Kösem Sultan. With this decision, Kösem Sultan was executed by Lala Süleyman Agha on September 3, 1651 [19, p. 204] [15, p. 219]. After the execution of Kösem Sultan, those who supported her were also executed, thus ending the Janissary dominance in the Ottoman central government [23, p. 46]. With the death of her rival, Turhan Sultan became head of the harem as Valide Sultan [14, p. 248].

The transfer of power from Kösem Sultan to Turhan Sultan was not simply an intergenerational succession within the harem, but a turning point in the configuration of female power within the palace. While Kösem represented a model of agency based on patronage and political experience, Turhan emphasized legitimacy built through elite consensus and delegative power. She did not assert her authority absolutely, but rather strengthened it through strategic alliances—such as the transfer of administrative power to Köprülü Mehmet Pasha.

Within the context of the ekberiyet system, Turhan Sultan's position was highly strategic. She was not the valide of a dominant sultan, but rather of a minor and passive sultan. Thus, the political and symbolic responsibility of the state rested largely on her shoulders. However, unlike Kösem, who centralized control within herself, Turhan adopted an institutional approach: she established a de facto dualism of power between herself and the grand vizier as a form of check and balance amidst the dynasty's decline.

Turhan's influence was evident not only in political maneuvers but also in architectural and cultural expressions. The completion of the Yeni Cami, the construction of the mausoleum complex, and large-scale philanthropic activities symbolized women's presence in a previously male-dominated public space. Through these religious and urban mediums, Turhan transformed women's power from the domestic sphere into a narrative of dynastic rule.

Within the framework of agency theory, Turhan's actions can be read as a form of internalization of patriarchal structures compromised through adaptive strategies. She did not challenge the system head-on, but instead used symbolic resources and gender legitimacy to establish a strong bargaining position, even after Kösem Sultan's death. In this narrative, the ekberiyet system became not only a marker of successional change but also a medium for women to negotiate their active role in government more permanently and systematically.

The death of Kösem Sultan was a crucial turning point, demonstrating how power tensions within the royal court could affect women's political positions. The conflict between Kösem and Turhan Sultan,

and Kösem's execution by Turhan's supporters, marked a shift in power within the harem and the Ottoman government. These events also reflected the vulnerability of powerful women to political pressure and factions within the court.

Thus, despite the strategic opportunities afforded by the ekberiyet system, the political power of the Valide Sultans remained inherently vulnerable to internal palace factions and political backlash, reflecting the persistent patriarchal limits of the Ottoman system. The most severe illustration of these limits is the execution of Kösem Sultan. Kösem's attempts to ensure dynastic stability and retain her regency led her to plan the deposition of her grandson, Sultan Mehmet IV, in favour of another grandson, Süleyman II. This maneuver provoked a backlash among the members of the Harem and the enderun. Turhan Sultan, Kösem's rival, discussed this matter with the aghas (high-ranking officers) of the Palace, and it was decided with the approval of fourteen aghas to execute Kösem Sultan. Her death, carried out by Lala Süleyman Agha, was followed by the execution of her supporters, which ended the Janissary dominance in the central government. These events reflected the vulnerability of powerful women to political pressure and factions within the court.

The subsequent transfer of power to Turhan Sultan, while continuing the tradition of female political leadership, was not seamless. It marked a shift in the configuration of female power, demonstrating that political agency was subject to the volatility of elite consensus and strategic alliances with male power brokers, such as her decision to entrust absolute administrative power to Köprülü Mehmet Pasha.

4.3. Turhan Sultan

Turhan Sultan was the Haseki Sultan of Sultan Ibrahim I (reigned 1640–1648) and Valide Sultan of Sultan Mehmed IV (reigned 1648–1687). Turhan Sultan was born in Ukraine in 1627. Her real name was Nadia. When she was 12 years old, the Khan of Crimea presented her to the Ottoman Harem as a gift [23, p. 35] [25, p. 225]. Her original religion was Christianity. On January 2, 1642, she gave birth to Mehmed IV, the future Sultan. On August 2, 1648, her son Mehmed IV became Sultan at the age of less than 7. Turhan Sultan played a crucial role in her young son's guardianship. As mentioned, there was a rivalry between Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan. After Kösem Sultan's death, Turhan Sultan assumed full power of the Sultanate and became valide sultan. She was the second woman after Kösem Sultan to become a naib al-sultan.

However, she faced two major problems: the war over Crete and the financial crisis. To resolve these issues, she handed over absolute power to Köprülü Mehmet Pasha [17, p. 47] [4, p. 551]. In the late 1650s, Turhan Sultan undertook the reconstruction of two fortresses guarding the Canakkale Strait [15, p. 237] [3, p. 144]. The strait was penetrated by the Venetian navy at the end of the reign of Sultan Ibrahim I and became a continuous naval battleground until the conquest of Crete in 1669 [7, p. 211]. In addition, he also built two mosques there which were equipped with books that were transferred by imperial order in 1662 from the palace treasury totaling 47 books [7, p. 211] [15, p. 249].

Turhan Sultan also completed the construction of Yeni Cami which was initiated by Safiye Sultan, Valide Sultan of Sultan Mehmet III and Haseki Sultan of Sultan Murad III in 1597 [23, p. 86] [5, p. 626]. In 1660, Turhan Sultan commissioned its completion at the urging of her grand vizier, Köprülü Mehmet Pasha. In addition to the mosque, the complex also included a primary school, a school for teaching literacy, two public fountains, and a market. The Yeni Cami was the first mosque built by a woman in the imperial mosques [5, p. 635], which were the highest symbols of the religious hierarchy within the Ottoman Empire; other mosques in this category were the Hagia Sophia, Fatih Cami, Beyazit Cami, Yavuz Selim Cami, Süleymaniye Cami, and Sultanahmet Cami; and the Şehzade Cami, built for Sultan Süleyman I's son, Mehmet [15, p. 250]. This is testimony to the prestige that the office of valide sultan acquired in the mid-17th century [4, p. 590].

Perhaps the most remarkable architectural feature of the Yeni Cami from a dynastic political perspective is its massive and imposing funerary complex. In the development of Ottoman burial protocol, this matriarchal mausoleum took over the function of the imperial family's residence upon death from the

patriarchal mausoleums of Sultan Süleyman I and his successors. The burial place of Turhan Sultan occupies the most prominent position at the top of the mausoleum. At its foot is the tomb of her son, Sultan Mehmed IV [15, p. 265], and beneath Mehmet IV's burial place are the tombs of several other people, including four sultans; Mehmet IV's sons Mustafa II and Ahmed III, and his grandsons Mahmud I and Osman III (who were, of course, Turhan's grandsons and great-grandsons). Saliha Valide Sultan of Sultan Mahmud I, and Zeynep Haseki Sultan of Sultan Ahmed III, are also buried in Turhan's tomb [7, p. 207]. The importance of this cemetery complex is evidenced by the recorded 157 people employed to maintain this complex5.

Turhan Sultan was also renowned for her generosity [3, p. 161 & 173]. Even foreigners could sense the valide sultan's generosity. In his journal, Galland recorded an account of Turhan Sultan's generosity to one of her countrymen. One day in Edirne, a procession of fifteen or twenty carriages carrying Turhan Sultan, two of the sultan's sons and two brothers, and most of the harem, was passing across a bridge over the Tunca River. An employee from the French ambassador's bakery happened to be standing at the end of the bridge. When he saw the door of the first carriage open, he tried to prostrate himself to avoid suspicion that he was trying to see the valide sultan. At that moment, Turhan saw him and her companions and called out, "Do not be afraid, my children." She then asked them to throw coins; the baker received 160 coins [7, p. 198].

Turhan Sultan was the last prominent woman in the Sultanate of Women. She died on August 4, 1683, at the age of 56. With her death, the Sultanate of Women came to an end [17, p. 47]. Nevertheless, some scholars maintain that the 'Sultanate of Women' persisted, albeit in a reduced form, with women's influence in state affairs limited primarily to palace affairs [3, p. 7]. As Valide Sultan to the less enthusiastic Sultan Mehmet IV, whose passion for hunting increasingly eclipsed his interest in government, Turhan Sultan was the primary driving force behind the sultan's royal duties. According to historian Silahdar Mehmet Agha, when Turhan died in 1683, "everyone was sad and mourned and wailed, saying, 'Alas, the strongest pillar of the state has been lost [23, p. 217].'" Indeed, the sultan's lack of attention to the crumbling European frontiers of the empire led to his overthrow four years later [7, p. 239]. Turhan Sultan's great concern for the country and her son was reflected in Sultan Mehmet IV's regular visits to his mother's palace every day [7, p. 237].

4.4. Analysis and Implication

The story of Kösem and Turhan Sultan, when viewed within the framework of the transition to the ekberiyet system, demonstrates that institutional changes in succession mechanisms not only impacted dynastic stability but also opened up new spaces for the transformation of gender-based power structures. The system shifted the focus of legitimacy from a straightforward father-son relationship to a complex logic of agnatic seniority. In this liminal space, the positions of valide sultan and haseki sultan—especially when the sons were immature or non-dominant—became increasingly central, not merely symbolic, but politically functional.

Women were no longer simply guardians of harem morality, but active participants in diplomacy, patronage, military affairs, and domestic policy. Both Kösem and Turhan Sultan articulated their agency within the framework of changing dynastic structures: Kösem through mastery of patronage networks and direct intervention, Turhan through institutional consolidation and more structured architectural-political projects.

Thus, the ekberiyet system not only prevented conflict between princes but also expanded the space for political negotiation within the palace—especially for women who were able to exploit moments of transition as an opportunity to negotiate their legitimacy and role. From the perspective of Islamic

[5] 157 individuals in total, consisting of 30 guards, 90 Qur'an reciters, 20 readers of prayers on the oneness and praise of God, 4 individuals who recited selected Qur'anic verses and prayed for the soul of Turhan Sultan, one *ḥāfiẓ* (a person who recites the Qur'an from memory), one person responsible for burning incense, and 10 principal supervisors.

political epistemology, this demonstrates that power is not absolutely determined by biological traits or gender, but rather by the ability to fulfill the mandate of safeguarding the welfare of the people and the stability of the state. Therefore, women's agency in the 17th-century Ottoman Empire was not merely a historical anomaly, but part of the dynasty's constitutional evolution.

Turhan Sultan was not only a direct successor to the valide sultan leadership tradition introduced by Kösem Sultan, but also a symbol of the evolution of women's roles in Ottoman politics in the latter half of the 17th century. Through public policies and monumental projects such as the completion of the Yeni Cami, Turhan demonstrated how powerful women could wield influence to shape the broader social and political landscape.

Her generosity and effective leadership in addressing the Sultanate's internal problems, such as war and financial crises, reflected the adaptation of women to increasingly institutionalized political roles. Furthermore, Turhan Sultan emphasized how women's agency could be combined with religious and symbolic legitimacy, such as through the construction of mosques and burial complexes, to strengthen their position within the power hierarchy.

Thus, Turhan Sultan's career illustrates both continuity and transformation in women's political agency within the framework of the ekberiyet system, confirming that women's power in the Ottoman Empire was not merely temporary, but part of a continuous and complex political configuration.

The shift from father-to-son succession to ekberiyet not only had practical implications for the mechanism of succession to the throne, but also transformed gender-based power relations within the Ottoman Empire's political structure. With the increasing agency of women within the court, particularly the valide sultans and haseki sultans, we are faced with a rereading of Islamic history, which has tended to neglect women's political roles.

This approach challenges the traditional narrative that views women as marginalized figures in Islamic political power. Instead, through the lens of Islamic epistemology, which emphasizes the principles of justice, benefit, and trust, women's roles in the Ottoman Empire can be understood as integral to legitimate power dynamics and serve to maintain state stability.

Thus, this study not only enriches the study of the social and political history of the Ottoman Empire, but also contributes to the broader discourse on gender roles in Islamic history, opening up space for a more inclusive and complex understanding.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transition from a direct patrilineal inheritance system to the seniority principle fundamentally reshaped the configuration of power within the Ottoman Empire. The adoption of ekberiyet created institutional spaces through which palace women—most notably Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan—could assert political agency and intervene in state affairs. Their authority was not merely the outcome of personal charisma or palace intrigue, but a structural consequence of a succession mechanism that required stable regency arrangements, administrative oversight, and the navigation of competing court factions. Within this environment, women utilized their positions as valide sultan and haseki sultan to safeguard dynastic continuity, influence policy, and maintain equilibrium among political actors.

The central takeaway is that women’s political involvement in the Ottoman court was neither incidental nor a deviation from Islamic norms. Rather, it was congruent with Islamic moral and legal frameworks—such as amanah, maslahat, and broader principles of communal responsibility—that recognize the legitimacy of women's participation when aimed at preserving the public good and ensuring just governance. Their actions reveal that Islamic dynastic politics contained mechanisms through which women could become integral to statecraft, challenging reductionist assumptions about gender roles in Islamic history.

More broadly, the findings of this study contribute to discussions on gendered power in pre-modern Islamic polities. The Ottoman case illustrates that court structures, succession arrangements, and administrative hierarchies could produce conditions that elevated women's political authority. This invites a comparative reflection on similar patterns across other Islamic and non-Islamic courts—from the Abbasid harem bureaucracy to the Mughal zenana or even European regencies—where institutional constraints empowered women to shape political outcomes. Understanding these dynamics enriches our comprehension of how gender, power, and governance intersected in pre-modern societies and encourages a reevaluation of women's agency within broader Islamic political history.

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