I. INTRODUCTION

In this series of essays, it is aimed at reflecting the social, economic and educational position of Turkish women through the works of Namık Kemal (1840-1888) and Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar (1864-1944). A brief account of the actual status of women at that period may help towards a better understanding of the immense role these two men of letters played in criticizing henceforth contributing to the emancipation of women in Turkey. Yet though our two authors combine in forwarding their opinions of common subjects, H. R. Gürpınar, being nearer to the spirit of the twentieth century, attacks and copes with additional problems each of which will individually be discussed.

The various history and travel books of the nineteenth century,¹ reveal a very full picture of women’s conditions of life at that time. But as their position, prior to their emancipation when the Republic was declared in 1923, will be considered from various


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standpoints in the following essays, we may leave this matter on one side for the present. Yet we must not disregard the fact that towards the end of the nineteenth century, owing to the penetration of Western ideas into Ottoman society, the status of women began in some measure to improve. It became fashionable to allow them a certain amount of education, and a number of cultured women of letters appeared. In 1908 with the Second Constitution—İkinci Meşrutiyet—their education was considered necessary, and a group of women tried to enter the Parliament building as observers. The reaction to this venture was reported in the foreign press. Although the initial step towards recognition of their status was in 1916, when their position with regard to marriage, polygamy and divorce was seriously discussed in the Parliament, no vital remedy was brought forward to raise them from their inferior status. Their problem was discussed, however, among other social problems in some periodicals of the time and their position was compared disadvantageously with that of women in European society.

Nevertheless, in the First World War, disregarding every artificial social law set around them from the ancient past, Turkish women played their part, and in Turkey’s War of Independence (1919-1923) they founded their own units and some even fought in the ranks. From the earliest days of the Republic the rights of women were agreed as part of the social revolution. But the change could not of course be immediate, and the constitution which was adopted in 1924 did not give women the right to vote. Not until 1926 was the Holy Law replaced by the Civil Code which prohibited polygamy, made divorce a matter for the Law Courts and gave women the right to demand divorce equally with men. Marriage became a civil ceremony; women were allowed to become legal guardians

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2 The Çapa Elementary School, the first for girls, dates from 1870.
3 See Ahmet İhsan, Matbuat Hâtradehâr (My Memories of the Press). İstanbul, 1931, p. 27.
4 See La Turquie, January 1909.
6 For example: Terakki Mecmuası (Progress Magazine), Nos. 5 and 13, 1869.