The women of Turkey are often characterized either as a secluded and inert mass oppressed by harsh patriarcal rules of Islam or as liberated citizens enjoying equal rights thanks to Mustafa Ataturk’s modernization reforms. The latter characterization has been promoted by the state and several privileged women, including the former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, and reinforced by the cross-national data that ranked Turkey higher on many gender development indicators than other Muslim populated countries.

Deconstructing Images of ‘The Turkish Woman’ is an effort to counter such oversimplifications. It problematizes the collapsing of multiples of people into a prototypical singula as a practice of domination (repeated throughout the history) by focusing on the negation of the diversity and individuality of the women of Turkey. Locating various images of uniformity, employed to define the ‘ideal Turkish woman’ or to describe her ‘pitiful’ condition, Deconstructing Image scrutinizes the cultural, socio-political, and historical construction of the ‘Turkish woman’ and the imperialistic, nationalistic, religious and other currents behind it. It also shows how opposing groups have built upon and reinforced similar images and inquiries into the role of women in these processes.

In an effort to illustrate the revival and reproduction of the representations of women, the volume attempts to contextualize discourses chronologically by organizing the essays into three politically distinct periods. The first section explores the late Ottoman era and begins with a chapter by Palmina Brummett, who examines the cartoon images of women in the revolutionary press of the Empire between 1908 and 1911. Depicting, though numerous and diverse, all collapse into an image of women as weak and vulnerable and therefore needing to be protected and controlled. For example, the cartoons that depict the country as a woman flirting with European men may be a warning about European imperialism but also point to the perils of women’s common experience of Westernization. Examining women’s journals from the same era, Ayrun Denizredi’s essay questions whether these women were indeed deserving certain rights. Despite their relatively small number, these women had been influential in shaping the debates on the ‘woman question’, and their demands for education and the right to vote, and for women in family law had some resonance in the reforms undertaken first by the Young Turks and later by the Kemalists.

Two essays by Livin Cemil Schick and Pelin Bajo are concerned with the images created through the Western gaze. In agreement with the earlier critiques of orientalism, Schick argues that exotic literature and eroticism and claims to be the representation of reality eroticized the East, facilitated gendering, and forged a powerful colonial discourse. Another crucial function of sexuality, he adds, was allowing Europe to form a distinct identity and define its place in the world. Thus, attributing several conflicting images to Ottoman women (e.g. disgusting filthy and obsessed with bathing) was not self-contradictory but consistent with the Western discourse, because each characterization contributed to Europe’s self-definition through ‘othering’. Schick’s analysis of the texts by American female missionaries shows strong links between missionaries’ perceptions and the Oriental discourse.

Commenting on how they related to the ‘other women’, she argues that by presenting the ‘Ottoman woman’ as both the ultimate victim and evidence of the country’s backwardness and by assigning themselves the role of her saviour, missionary women were able to justify their own recent emancipation and increasing public role.

The second section focuses on the gender ideology of the early Republican era. K E. Fleming’s study of the Ottoman sociologist Ziya Gokalp’s contribution to the nation builds on the earlier work of the state, Ays üe Du r a k b a ş a argues that that while Kemalism encouraged women’s participation in the public domain, it also restricted them by imposing moral and behavioral codes that emphasized family honour. Zehra Arat analyses the educational system as a device of socialization and discusses how the gendered curricula encouraged the regime to beget educated female citizens who would contribute to the modernization of the country without threatening its gender hierarchy.

The last section explores the lives of women since 1960. Isik Ural Zeytinoğlu points to women’s low participation rate and claims to be the representation of reality eroticized the East, facilitated gendering, and forged a powerful colonial discourse. Another crucial function of sexuality, she adds, was allowing Europe to form a distinct identity and define its place in the world. Thus, attributing several conflicting images to Ottoman women (e.g. disgustingly filthy and obsessed with bathing) was not self-contradictory but consistent with the Western discourse, because each characterization contributed to Europe’s self-definition through ‘othering’. Schick’s analysis of the texts by American female missionaries shows strong links between missionaries’ perceptions and the Oriental discourse.