

Güner Yasemin Balci: *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger*. Fischer, 2016

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1 Güner Yasemin Balci's latest novel, *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* (2016) (*The Girl and the Jihadist*, my translation), explores what inspires young women to radicalize themselves and join Islamist terror groups. Balci's sixteen-year-old protagonist, Nimet, is a hopeless romantic whose idea of a life in the Islamic State consists of preparing raspberry ice cream with a whipped topping for her jihadist boyfriend, Saed. Research into modern jihadist recruiting narratives suggests that, although fictional, Nimet's story is fairly typical for young, female Europeans being courted. According to Islamic studies scholar Hamideh Mohagheghi, the wish for an intact family can be a driving force behind women's decisions to join ISIS. In 2015, Mohagheghi published an elaborate commentary on the IS women's manifesto in *Frauen für den Dschihad: Das Manifest der IS-Kämpferinnen* (2015) (*Women for the Jihad: The Manifesto of Female IS Fighters*, my translation). The manifesto was written by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, a kind of religious female police force that arrests and punishes women who do not abide by the strict dress and behavioral codes upheld in IS territory. In her commentary, Mohagheghi demonstrates how Al-Khanssaa paints a picture-perfect family idyll, in which women are able to thrive as mothers and housewives while their loving husbands provide financial stability and protection (131). In order to attract young women like Balci's Nimet who pursue this perceived domestic security, the authors downplay and idealize the strict Sharia laws as interpreted by Daesh that govern everyday life.

2 In the tradition of *Arabboy* (2008), *ArabQueen* (2010), and *Aliyahs Flucht* (2014) (*Aliyah's Escape*, my translation), *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* is yet another example of a trademark Balci young adult novel. We immediately gain insight into each character's psyche and are therefore able to distinguish between manipulators and the manipulated. Again, Balci serves her reader a straightforward plot that avoids complicated metaphors and subtexts. Balci forgoes her customary preface, in which she assures the reader that her characters and events are based on her own experiences as a social worker in Berlin's problem borough Neukölln. Nimet is purely fictional, but her character and her social background resemble those of women who are systematically targeted by IS members. In her work *In the Skin of a Jihadist* (2015), French journalist Anna Erelle, for example, tells the story of Mélodie, a Facebook avatar Erelle created for the purpose of investigating IS recruitment tactics. Like Nimet, Erelle's Mélodie lives in a

predominantly Muslim working class neighborhood in a European city. After her parents' divorce, she misses her father deeply and tries to seek solace by converting to Islam. The lack of a guiding male figure in her life, combined with her social upbringing, makes Mélodie an ideal candidate for IS manipulators like Abu Bilel, who contacts the young woman and tries to lure her to Syria. Like Mélodie, Balci's Nimet longs for a happy and intact family, as she sees her mother suffer from depression after her father leaves. Nimet's recruiter, the devout convert to Islam, Nour, who follows Nimet around after a friend introduces them, puts her in touch with jihadist Saed, who becomes the object of her romantic wish for a male savior. She particularly enjoys Saed's Koran teachings, and she starts to observe Islamic customs, like praying five times a day and wearing a headscarf, with pleasure. Her peaceful way of observing and learning about Islam suddenly comes to a halt when Nour and Saed manipulate her into despising people who do not hold her newfound beliefs. Unfortunately, Nimet does not realize that the two merely abuse Islam for their own radical ideologies, which Nimet blindly follows. Her Facebook account begins to fill with anti-American propaganda and anti-Semitic slurs, and she starts to idealize a life in the IS territory under strict Sharia law, as instituted by Daesh. Moreover, she morally supports Saed's mission to defend IS territory, even if it means killing others. Eventually, she agrees to join the young jihadist in Syria.

3 On the surface, Nimet's radicalization seems like a stretch. Before she meets Saed, Nimet behaves like a typical teenager: she goes dancing, flirts innocently with boys, and revels in the latest fashions. If we dig a little deeper, however, we see that Balci constructs a young woman who we could pigeonhole into psychologist Ahmad Mansour's definition of "Generation Allah," put forth in his work *Generation Allah. Warum wir im Kampf gegen religiösen Extremismus umdenken müssen* (2015) (*Generation Allah. Why we have to rethink our opinion in the fight against religious Extremism*, my translation). For Mansour, Generation Allah consists of teenagers who grow up in predominantly Muslim parallel worlds in which any identification with Western culture is vehemently rejected. The influence of an isolated, albeit self-inflicted, milieu might potentially lead the way to more extremist forms of living out Islam, which plays into the cards of radical Islamists, Mansour argues. Many critics, including Abdassamad El Yazidi from the Central Council for Muslims in Germany (ZMD), denounce opinions like Mansour's that Muslims actively isolate themselves. In a 2016 statement in the ARD¹ political TV talkshow *Hart*

¹ The ARD is the association of public service broadcasters in Germany.

aber Fair (*Challenging but Fair*, my translation), El Yazidi explains that Germany's failed integration policies force Muslims into segregated neighborhoods. As a result of European society not accepting Muslim youth in their midst, some of those youths fall prey to IS recruiters. El Yazidi believes that German society as a whole shares great responsibility in young adults' radicalization. Much to his regret, El Yazidi observes that discussions on radical Islam always contribute to a fundamental lack of trust of all Muslims, even if only a small minority are amenable to extremism. In Balci's texts, we do not find a differentiated discussion of multiple external factors that might lead a young woman like Nimet to radicalization. Like Mansour, Balci risks potentially stigmatizing German Muslims in *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger*. She depicts a homogenous Muslim parallel world highly intolerant of Western lifestyles and protective of orthodox traditions like women's pre-marital virginity. Nimet's world consists predominantly of male and female stereotypes; Muslim characters who are progressive and would break up the gender apartheid are almost non-existent. Nimet knows that even the suspicion of having lost her virginity can make her a target for psychological and possibly sexual abuse by men in her neighborhood, as she has witnessed this happen to her sister and other women close to her. Nimet's safe and non-sexual relationship with the jihadist stands in stark relief against the male brutality in her midst. Her obvious devotion to one man, compounded with a newfound conservative appearance and religious demeanor, lifts her social status drastically in her familial Muslim environment. That immediate public confirmation, combined with her wish for guidance and protection, strengthens her ties to Saed and his ideologies. In that sense, Nimet's transition from a traditional male-dominated Islamic environment to a radical one is fluid; one feeds off of the other.

4 Güner Balci is, first and foremost, an activist for women's rights. Her public appearances, her films, and her writings serve to enlighten others about female suffering in the aforementioned 'parallel worlds' in Germany's cities. *ArabQueen* and *Aliyahs Flucht*, for instance, both tell the stories of young women escaping from their families who forced them, under the threat of corporeal punishment, to marry. The girls' paths to freedom are rocky, as the overbearing and powerful members of their neighborhood assist their families in their search for the lost daughters. While Balci's texts depict brutal realities, however, they never leave their protagonists high and dry. Balci allows her seemingly naïve and victimized characters to develop agency in moments of the utmost physical danger. This is also the case for Nimet. When she arrives in the IS territory, she realizes that she has fallen prey to Nour's manipulations. Saed is supposedly

dead, and Nimet finds herself in a kind of entrepôt for future jihad brides. Horrified, she develops an escape plan that leads her to the boarder of Turkey. Of course, the ease of her escape is unrealistic and tailored to the young adult audience. As in *ArabQueen*, Balci wants to inspire hope by constructing alternative and happy endings to stories that in reality would end grimly. The potential danger of such positive accounts might downplay the threat for women, who, as we know from actual cases like the murder of Hatun Sürücü², often pay for their courage with their own lives.

5 *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* would be a perfect fit for an undergraduate class dealing with a gendered perspective on IS recruitment tactics in Western Europe. Balci's novel may also be used as a segue to discussing the shortcomings of German integration policies and the consequences for young adults. Problematic issues of *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* lie in the fact that Balci depicts Nimet's neighborhood in Neukölln as a misogynistic environment only, when in fact the majority of Muslims in Germany observe their religion in accordance with a progressive lifestyle. Instead, Balci chooses to create a closed-off universe, which, in her depiction, paves the way to radicalization. It is crucial that instructors critically discuss the novel's fluid transition from Islamic culture to Extremist ideologies. Such a simplified construction, even if fictional, might possibly lead to potential Islamophobic biases in uninformed readers. In order to prevent the spread of cultural stereotyping, instructors may discuss how the story might have benefitted from the inclusion of liberal Muslim characters who might have positively affected Nimet's life.

² In 2005, Hatun Sürücü was brutally murdered by her younger brother. He and the rest of Hatun's family felt provoked by her way of life after Hatun separated from her husband and decided to raise her son by herself. Hatun's murder was classified as an honor killing.

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