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Narrating the Unspeakable. Review of *Die Sommer* (The Summers) by Ronya Othmann

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Review:

Ronya Othmann: *Die Sommer* (The Summers).

Novel.

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Narrating the Unspeakable

With her autofictional text titled *Vierundsiebzig* (Seventy-four), German-Kurdish writer Ronya Othmann won the 2019 Audience Award of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt, Austria. In the literary competition, Othmann narrated her bearing witness to the (televised) genocide of the Yazidis in Shingal, Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014. While the author's own family is from a Kurdish-Yazidi village in Syria, the first-person narration speaks of the narrator's experience sitting in front of the TV, motionless, staring at the images of the catastrophe happening in front of her eyes in real-time: moving images of women like her grandmother or her aunts in floral dresses, men dressed like her grandfather, all running for their lives with nothing but what they carried.

The author then revisits a trip to Iraqi refugee camps, where she talked to survivors of the genocide, to women fighters, who showed her the remains of the catastrophe. She re-tells their narratives of remembrance.

A considerable part of the subsequent panel discussion in Klagenfurt concerning Othmann's *Vierundsiebzig* centred around the question of defining the work itself. Her text dealt with unspeakable suffering in an almost journalistic manner and is narrated by an author who belongs to the same religious community subjected to the genocide. A part of the panel questioned whether this could even fairly be reviewed and judged as a work of fiction at all. Some members said that they found themselves unable to do so.

It is telling, therefore, that the point of view in Othmann's subsequent debut novel is not a first-person narration as in her initial competition contribution, but a third-person narration about the girl, and later young woman, Leyla. Othmann's novel is called *Die Sommer* (The Summers) and its fictionalized point of view and plot around the 2014 genocide of the Yazidis have evolved beyond her earlier work. The story is intertwined with the history of the Kurdish people. In the first part of the novel, the narration focuses on the microcosm of the village Tel Khatoun next to the Turkish border. Every childhood summer, Leyla and her parents travel from Munich to her father's homeland, the Kurdish part of Syria. Although there are several hints that indicate Leyla's

partial alienation from village life, she seems to live her life in Germany from summer holiday to summer holiday.

For Leyla, Tel Khatoun is a place of warmth and familiarity. The vegetable beds and fruit trees, the chicken and the simple house with its three rooms make a humble idyllic scene. Because it is so hot during the summers, the whole family sleeps on a metal bunk bed in the courtyard.

Othmann describes all this in a sober narrative voice, almost documentary. And yet there is so much beauty in her narration. The reader is touched by this world, in which one is completely immersed despite the matter-of-fact tone. It is precisely this tension in Othmann's language that is so compelling, and – in the later part of the novel – so painful.

The central figure in Leyla's Kurdistan is her grandmother. She is a quiet, hard-working woman who holds the farm and family together. Her piety is viewed somewhat disparagingly by her son, Leyla's father. But she instructs Leyla in the Yazidi prayers and rituals and passes the religious mythology of the arch angel Melek Taus on to Leyla. Othmann describes practices of cultural memory within a religious community that is perpetually threatened by extinction. On a figurative level, all these practices performed together with her grandmother make Leyla feel accepted and at home, something she is often denied otherwise.

You could see the decades of work not only in the grandmother's body, in the hump, in the muscles and in her horny hands, but also in her movements. If she threw her grains to the chickens, for example, she always did so with the same hand movement. The metal bowl with the grains in her left hand, she grabbed the grains with her right hand and hurled them in a regular way that never changed. Leyla could still see it in front of her years later, like a movie. [...] Nothing about the grandmother ever left any doubt about anything. (p. 56–57)

This security hardly exists for Leyla in her Munich life, which increasingly comes to the fore. From the descriptive narration of the village idyll, the novel transforms into a postmigration narrative. Leyla and her mother's relationship remains distant and somewhat blurry, as does the character of the mother, a Swabian nurse. For her, things must be practical above all. This character trait becomes essential only in the last part of the novel, when the family from Tel Khatoun is granted political asylum through the mother's sedulous activism. More sharply drawn is the portrait of Leyla's father. As a former member of the Syrian Communist Party, he has to escape as an activist and so-called 'ajnabi' (foreigner), as a Kurd without Syrian citizenship. Actually an intellectual person, he works in construction in Germany and is too tired to read in the evenings. He passes on a different kind of cultural memory to Leyla: that of the Kurdish history of political persecution and oppression. His narrations of his

torture in Syrian prison, his family's displacement from the Turkish part of Kurdistan, that he went into exile so that she would have a better life all have a formative effect on Leyla. But he also tells Leyla comforting stories: about the village in spring, about the neighbours and his youth. She must never forget her Kurdish identity – this is his message to her. While German-language post-migrant literature is often concerned with the search for the self in or in between two or more cultures, Othmann addresses a different aspect of migrant identity here: the collective trauma of living in exile. It is not enough that her father is forced to hide his accent from his German neighbours and colleagues - Leyla is insulted at school because of her heritage. Teachers and friends know little and care little about her Kurdish-Yazidi identity. There is no place for her beloved village in her German life. Othmann's postmigrant narrative is radical because it defies the perpetual German narrative of 'integration'. What if Germany is not the promised land? What if the well-known cliché of the second generation that is only a summer guest in the old homeland of their parents turns into its exact opposite? What if you feel constantly misplaced in your own life? Othmann paints a very intense picture of her protagonist's state of being:

It's so cold here. The fig tree hardly bears any fruit, the father said. There's hardly any sun, the tomatoes don't ripen. The soil in the garden at home is more fertile, he said. [...]. As if her German garden was just a cheap copy of paradise, Leyla thought, her tomatoes just a substitute for the real tomatoes, her bread just a substitute for the real bread. Was their life, Leyla thought, just a substitute life for the life they could have actually lived. (p. 147–48)

As Leyla grows older and moves away for college, it seems as if the two ends of Leyla's narrative would find each other in her love for the silent Sasha. She seems at ease with her queer relationship. But this falls apart the moment disaster strikes in northern Iraq and fighters from the so-called Islamic State attack Yazidi villages. Leyla's world narrows down to the screen of her laptop, which now shows the same images as her father's television screen:

Leyla and he [her father] both stared at the women in their grandmother's clothes, their aunts, their cousins. Leyla saw a vast, bare plain, parched grass, straw. Leyla saw men like the grandfather, the father, the uncle. She saw them all running for their lives with nothing but what they carried. (p. 256)

This was the seventy-fourth attempt in the history of the Yazidis to kill their people and wipe out their community. Othmann's description of the media's conveyance of the unspeakable horror makes it so authentic to us as readers.

We have all seen these images on screen and have forgotten about them already. Ronya Othmann's debut novel is not only the first post-Yazidi-Kurdish work of fiction in German, it is also an impressive account of how cultural memory is established and at work in threatened communities today.

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