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BOOK REVIEW

The mother, the politician, and the guerrilla: Women's political imagination in the Kurdish movement

By Nazan Üstündağ. New York: Fordham University Press, 2023. 272 pp.

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In this powerful book on Kurdish mothers, politicians, and guerrillas, Nazan Üstündağ maps out — theoretically, conceptually, and historically — how these “figures” mobilize a political and radical imagination of alterity and possibility. Each figure, Üstündağ claims, puts into question the power structures of Turkish colonial modernity and the dehumanization of Kurds as an internal colony of the Turkish nation-state. Inspired by Sylvia Wynter (2003), Üstündağ represents these Kurdish women figures as articulating and embodying a “new human, a new universality, a new future” (p. 13). Drawing on the Kurdish archaeological and precolonial past, the author shows how these women orient themselves toward, and in doing so reinvigorate, matricentric stories that animate other ways of being and doing human(ity). She examines this insurgent political imaginary through

ethnography, including interviews, as well as through the critical theoretical analysis of images, political speeches, and historical events. In doing so, the author uses her own vast personal archive and experience of working closely with the Kurdish women's movement for over two decades.

Primarily a work of political theory and gender studies, this book is situated firmly in the emergent and interdisciplinary space of Kurdish studies. The book's vast corpus and theoretical insights make for a rich analysis, one that is best understood through Üstündağ's metaphor of *halay*, a line dance central to Kurdish social life. *Halay* dancers of varying degrees of skill dance with linked hands, constituting a temporary unity that exceeds the sum of its individuated and differently resonating parts. This metaphor invites the reader to understand why the book draws on and intervenes in debates within several distinct yet overlapping theoretical traditions, such as black feminism, decolonial theory, and psychoanalysis, while still returning to the *halay*. It returns, that is, to the narratives and accounts of women themselves as they simultaneously dance, navigate a hostile colonial context, and experience "the joy of being insurgent" (p. 22). Üstündağ writes that she "could never stay long enough in any rhythm to learn it well enough because there was always the *halay* waiting" (p. 19); she thereby points to how different rhythms and theoretical registers are central to her own positionality as a Turkish scholar in exile, who wants to dance with her friends in Kurdistan even if she sometimes misses her steps.

Divided into three parts, Üstündağ's book centers on themes of decoloniality, questions of natality or rebirth, and the potentialities of resistance and resilience through the flesh of Kurdish female bodies amid an ongoing gendered war. The book's embodied feminine figures all share the potentiality to create, birth, and sustain a post-patriarchal imaginary, and they are all located at the limits of the law as they create new ways of being human—and by doing so change the matter of politics. These heterogeneous gendered figures forge a shared imaginary across time and space—an imaginary that is influenced by the broader philosophy and history of the Kurdish movement and the role of women therein. To better understand the influence of this imaginary, the author addresses the role of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and his political philosophy. In her reading of Öcalan, Üstündağ addresses his theorization of "Woman" and the centrality of gender oppression at the origins of colonial-capitalist civilization. She juxtaposes this with Wynter's (2003) emphasis on race (over gender) in her analysis of genres of being human and what she describes, from a Caribbean perspective, as the origins of colonial visions of the human (pp. 134–36). This is a well-articulated and poignant difference between these two decolonial thinkers, which to my mind highlights that critical and decolonial thought should attend to historical context and its role in formulating theoretical accounts of the colonality of power, and its role in determining the overrepresentation of Man.

Starting the analysis proper with the role of mothers, Üstündağ shows in part 1 how mothers are central to the imaginary of the freedom movement. Chapter 1, "The Voice of the Maternal," explores this theme through an analysis of linguicide and the relationship between voice and language. Highlighting the insurgent and "improper" nature of the Kurdish language and the mother's voice, as a source of critique and refusal, of excitement and fear, Üstündağ draws heavily on psychoanalysis to theorize easily overlooked sites of political struggle and resistance in and through language — always haunted by the echo of the mother tongue.

Üstündağ continues her engagement with psychoanalysis in chapter 2, "Law(s) of the Maternal: Kurdish Mothers in Public." Here, she puts Kurdish and Mesopotamian myths into conversation with the political struggles of Kurdish women and the psychoanalytic discourse on patriarchy, power, and matricidal fantasy. This chapter theorizes that Kurdish women have a unique capacity to build collective and political non-matricidal relations with their children (who are vulnerable to patriarchal fantasies) and with each other, thereby opening up spaces for imagining post-patriarchal futures.

Part 2 turns from the figure of the mother to that of the politician. It consists of two compelling chapters that push at the limits of contemporary theory. In chapter 3, "Antigone as Kurdish Politician: Gendered Dwellings in the Limit between Freedom and Peace," Üstündağ reads contemporary Kurdish female politicians alongside feminist interpretations of Antigone

(Butler, Honig). Allowing the stories of Leyla Zana, Emine Ayna, and Gültan Kışanak to speak with and against Antigone, this chapter shows how these female politicians dwell in a space of impropriety in various ways, between legality and illegality (carceral and symbolic), peace and the refusal to forgive or forget, and the represented and those who represent. They do so as figures of sovereignty who embrace an embodied politics of “pure means without a foreseeable end” (p. 99).

Chapter 4, “Kurdish Women Politicians at the Border between Body and Flesh,” continues in this theme, exploring how female politicians have used their flesh (drawing here on Spiller’s distinction between flesh and body) both to protect their communities and to symbolically remap humanity and Kurdistan in opposition to (Turkish) state law. Examining stories of politicians who belong to “the tradition of the flesh,” Üstündağ argues for a performative politics of autonomy, one that is insurgent and decolonial, and that takes the form of a gift.

Part 3, “The Guerrilla,” shifts political subject once more, and is my favorite part of the book. Chapter 5, “Who Are We and How Must We Live? Being a Friend in the Guerrilla Movement,” examines the forms of sociality, friendship, and ethics that participants in the movement cultivate after departing from the everyday. Central to this chapter is an engagement with Foucault’s writing on parrhesia and the Kurdish concept of *hevaltî*, examining the themes of attachment and self-cultivation. *Hevaltî* traditionally means

friendship, but in the Kurdish liberation movement, and its feminist wing, it has taken on a deeper meaning of comradeship, shared purpose and collective mindset (See: Sarican and Dirik 2022: 43-45).

Chapter 6, "A Promise, a Letter, a Funeral, and a Wedding," returns to the politics of female flesh, this time by reading the contemporary conjuncture in Turkish civil and political society. At stake in this scene, Üstündağ argues, is the struggle over the rearticulation of being Kurdish in Turkey, as the state demands unity in difference: the transformation of Kurdish suffering into Turkish citizenship—a demand that this book's analysis reveals to be a forgetting and erasure of the politics and imagination of the Kurdish liberation movement and its most powerful force: the flesh and bodies of mothers, politicians, and guerrillas.

The book stands in an interstitial space amid political theory, gender studies, and cultural anthropology, and it will be of interest to postgraduate researchers and scholars working in these domains or those who have an interest in decoloniality, the Middle East, and radical politics. Drawing on a wide variety of theoretical registers and traditions, from poststructuralist feminist theory to psychoanalysis, queer theory, decolonial thought, and black study, the argument is at times technical and perhaps intended more for readers in the Global North, educated in the critical humanities, rather than the activists whom it venerates. Central to the book's power and accomplishments is a situated and grounded exploration of themes from the

theoretical traditions noted above, requiring its readers to have some knowledge of and ease with developments in contemporary critical and cultural theory. That said, this book is a profound political intervention that articulates the contours and affective power of the political imaginary of the Kurdish liberation movement for our culture and times. It is beautifully written in a language that is deeply affective. Its writing style offers a captivating and rich analysis of many great women and their difficult struggles that nonetheless keep them laughing.

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