

Transformations of Gender Identities and Roles in Novels of Flight and Exile by Olga Grjasnowa and Shida Bazayr

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Abstract Over the last several years, cultural studies scholars in Germany have closely examined the subject of refugees in recent German literature, focusing largely on aspects of spatial theory, the causes of migration and the figure of the refugee. However, while the migrant as *cultural Other* has received extensive attention, gender issues remain largely underrepresented. This contribution explores the ways in which forced migration, due mostly to war and violence, affects the gender identities and roles of characters in the novels of Olga Grjasnowa (*Gott ist nicht schüchtern*) and Shida Bazayr (*Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*).

Keywords Migration. Gender. Refugee. Cultural othering. Olga Grjasnowa. Shida Bazayr.

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1 Introduction: Gender and Exile in Literature

The way in which novelists Olga Grjasnowa and Shida Bazayr approach the subject of flight in their work marks a shift in contemporary German literature. During the 2000s, politically engaged literature was often regarded with skepticism, but since 2015 taking a political stance on mass migrations of refugees and the tragic fates of these individuals has almost become an “ethical, moral” duty (Herrmann 2018, 209).¹ Fictional biographies of escape that narrate the reasons for leaving the home country have become central to this new focus. Their intention is to sensitize readers to the difficulties and dangers refugees face in real life while fleeing and in the host country.

The protagonists of these novels are conceived as political exiles who had to leave their countries of origin – here Syria and Iran – due to political persecution. Against this backdrop, my analysis of these texts primarily considers research on the literature of exile, having its origins in exile literature of the Nazi era. More recent analyses approach the texts and biographies of authors dealing with this narrative corpus from a gender perspective (see Schöll 2002; Brinson, Hammel 2016; Messinger, Prager 2019). In the second volume of Charmian Brinson and Andrea Hammel’s yearbook on exile research they examine the various facets of gendered authorship and gendered relations in exile as well as how gender as a category is reflected in various texts. The volume opens with the following questions: “What did it mean to be a woman in exile, what did it mean to be a man in exile? How were these experiences reflected in everyday lives and the exiles’ creative outputs?” (Brinson, Hammel 2016, 1). Spearheaded by Irene Messinger and Katharina Prager, the *Doing Gender in Exile* conference concluded that normative ideas of gender relations are often shaken or renegotiated in and through exile, which often has a liberating effect on those exiled. On the other hand, many refugees simply try “to survive” (see Messinger, Prager 2017). Thus, various formations of doing gender “in the gendered spaces of the host country are reincorporated, rejected or translated” (ibid). In her volume *Gender - Exil - Schreiben*, Julia Schöll focused solely on female authors, some of whom are new to scholars working on the theme of exile. The articles in her book “explore the body images in exile texts as well as the gender roles that women and men took on in exile” (2002, 13). Here Schöll considers in particular “gender perceptions *within* the exile texts”.

Drawing on this research, my analysis is premised on the conclusion that migration movements have “a marked influence on the change and inertia of gender relations” (Bereswill, Rieker, Schnitzer

¹ All German sources are translated by Vivian Ia.

2012, 10) and that exile provokes “a renewed engagement with traditional gender roles and their redesign” (Messinger, Prager 2019, 9). I examine the backgrounds of gender identities and the ways these identities are transformed, focusing especially on their construction in gender roles, during the processes of flight and arrival represented in two contemporary novels, Olga Grjasnowa's *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (translated into English as *City of Jasmine*) and Shida Bazyar's *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*. Taking up a related aspect of this question, I also consider how gender identities are often transformed by armed conflict in the home country even before characters flee.

I also assume that “neither gender nor ethnicity [are] natural and immutable” (Hausbacher et al. 2012, 8). Indeed, both categories can be seen as the “ever negotiable (interim) result of processes of foreign and self-inscription” (Krüger-Potratz 2007, 452). According to Judith Butler's (1990), both “sex” and “gender” are cultural constructs and dynamically changing categories rather than essential conditions. As Sara Salih puts it in her discussion of Butler:

[G]ender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being”. (Salih 2007, 55)

In this article I will also focus on individual processes of change within the sociopolitical macrocosm of these two texts that frame how normative ideas of gender are discursively generated and reinforced. Within these processes, gender and sexuality norms are closely tied to imaginary communities, such as nation, culture, and religion, with the result that the procedures of “othering” and delimitation are frequently grounded in differing normative ideas or behavior related to gender and sexuality (Scheibelhofer 2018, 26).

The main focus here will be on Olga Grjasnowa's novel *City of Jasmine* (2019). Narrated from the points of view of its two main characters, the book tells the story of how a young actress, Amal, and a surgeon named Hammoudi flee from Syria to Germany.² I will also compare Grjasnowa's narrative to Shida Bazyar's debut novel *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* (2016).³ Shida Bazyar weaves a tale of multiple viewpoints in the story of Behsad and Nahid, a married couple, and their two small children, Laleh and Mo, set during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran.

2 Hereafter all citations from the novel *City of Jasmine* will be abbreviated as CJ. The book was originally published in German as *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* by Aufbau Verlag, Berlin 2017.

3 Hereafter all citations from the novel *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* will be abbreviated as NT.

2 'Oriental-Muslim' Figuration in the Context of Cultural and Gender Dominance

In *City of Jasmine*, the protagonist-character Amal, belongs to the well-off upper middle class. She has her own comfortably situated apartment in the center of Damascus - financed by her father - and surrounds herself with luxury items. Described as elegantly and "femininely" dressed, she constructs an outer image that includes high heels, red finger nails, and costly jewelry. As a self-determined woman, she maintains casual sexual relationships, has already lost her "virginity aged fifteen" (CJ 15), and refuses an early marriage. In her relations to men, she is confrontational and unintimidated. In this way, she defies not only her father's patriarchal fits, but also her director's sexual advances.

Amal embodies an 'Oriental-Muslim' female character that is rare in German literature because she contradicts, in every respect, the cliché of the oppressed, desexualized Muslim woman, fitting all too well into the ideal image of Western emancipated femininity:

She is a Muslim that liberals in Europe and North America are likely to feel comfortable with - she embodies a version of Islam that (in the terms of the debate raging in Germany and elsewhere) is compatible with Western values, including women's rights. (Taberner 2019, 827)

Despite her defiance of male behavior that would dominate women, Amal is nonetheless situated in a dependent, ultimately inferior position within gender power relations. After her father fails to enforce his will in an authoritarian manner, he takes on the role of the provider and protector of his adult daughter, for whom he can fix almost any problem with money and connections. Her dependence also manifests itself on a professional level, through male directors (in Syria and Germany) who both insult and sexually harass her. The reality of male dominance becomes especially clear during the protest against the Assad regime depicted in the novel, in the form of sexual violence against her and other women after they are arrested:

Amal feels a hot, rough hand on her ribs and smells a sour, solid body next to hers. More hands grab at her waist; she tries to evade their grip but she can't; someone holds her in place from behind. Now someone kneads Amal's breasts like a butcher clutching a piece of cheap meat, tuts and suddenly throws her against a wall. (CJ 70)

In the text a binary gender order is revealed within which the hierarchically superior male position in the social macrocosm is obvious.

From this perspective, Amal is an innovative female character only against the backdrop of the white European perspective on 'Oriental-Muslim' women. Within the hierarchical power relations between genders, she nevertheless remains in female gender-conforming roles that relegate her to a socially inferior position.

By contrast, Nahid, an Iranian in Shida Bazayr's novel *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*, embodies a more multifaceted female character that fits less into occidental or Oriental templates of femininity. This book foregrounds Nahid's politically engaged identity and her passion for literature and language. Nahid is not an individualist like Amal; rather she considers herself wholly part of the family and political community to which she belongs. For example, she feels closely connected to her husband. The book recounts how these figures engaged in political resistance in Iran during the 1970s, as well as in Germany, the host country; most of their dialogue revolves around politics and the realization of socialism.

Yet gender relations in *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* are highly contradictory. Nahid repeatedly and vehemently refers to the misogynistic laws of the Islamic political order in Iran. But she also has her own view on marital gender relations. She articulates this view most plainly when her friend Ulla directly refers her to Betty Mahmoody's novel, *Not without my Daughter* (1987), which portrays the escape of an American woman and her daughter from her violent Iranian husband.⁴ On the one hand, Nahid cannot believe that the woman could flee alone with her daughter:

That can't possibly be. That must be an American invention that hasn't a clue about the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. No woman can leave the country without the consent of her husband. (NT 74)

On the other hand, she is surprised at Ulla's outrage towards the Iranian husband's violence:

I have to think of my mother's neighbor, whose husband always beat, blackmailed, and confined her, my brother-in-law's sister, whose husband always beat, blackmailed, and confined her. Bear in mind that both are in happy marriages, have successful children, love and respect their husbands and are hospitable neighbors. (NT 73)

What becomes clear here is that Nahid privately holds values that differ from those of Ulla - that she is more willing to balance posi-

⁴ Published in German as *Nicht ohne meine Tochter* by Bastei Lübbe, Bergisch Gladbach 1990.

tive and negative aspects of the gender relations in her society, even of violent and hierarchical patriarchy. But it is precisely this deviation in her views from the Western notion of a well-functioning family that ensures Nahid does not fit into Western ideas of female emancipation in the same way that Amal's character does.

Hammoudi, the other protagonist in *City of Jasmine*, also comes from a privileged family, though he went through a long struggle to gain his father's respect because he chose a profession so late. In Paris, he has a glimpse of his future as a reputable surgeon together with his girlfriend Claire. But this is followed by a forced, long-term return to Syria that he experiences as the "greatest defeat of his life" (CJ 28). Thrown back into dependence on his family, he sinks into a depressive, hopeless mood and has the feeling he is a "loser" (CJ 26): "He came home to celebrate his future, and now he's moved back into his childhood bedroom" (CJ 26). His lack of prospects and anger at his own fate ultimately brings him to join the opposition and, as the only remaining doctor in the embattled East Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, to perform underground operations on severely injured patients. In the midst of all the scenes of unceasing violence, Hammoudi represents a postheroic war hero who displays humanity and operates on injured patients from enemy lines. Yet his involvement is not as selfless as it initially appears:

It seems that Hammoudi's courageousness is motivated not (only) by altruism or his duty as a doctor, but by an urgency to distract himself from the pain of separation from his girlfriend that is overwhelming and occasionally even nihilistic. (Taberner 2019, 827)

Hammoudi deifies Claire, who "got the best results in her university year" (CJ 18) and in many respects is a role model for him. He enjoys their rapport as equals and values her as an equal partner "who took him seriously and criticized him" (CJ 19). He perceives her Jewish family as a safe haven from his own strident kin who interfere in his life and pressure him to marry. The story of the two ends in the classically gendered fate of the returning soldier. After years of waiting, without having received any messages at all, Claire believes Hammoudi has fallen victim to the war and has meanwhile also had a child with her new partner.

Like Amal, Youssef (the second main male protagonist of *City of Jasmine*) attended acting school, where he completed a degree in directing. He is described as a reserved, sensitive man whom Amal treats with great respect, and as an elegantly dressed and attractive man who "radiates calm and contentment" (CJ 39). However, it also becomes clear that his family has a tragic history, having suffered greatly under the authoritarian regimes in the region. His grandmother fled Palestine to Damascus in 1948 and lost two of her four

children, after which she lived with her hated husband in the Yarmouk refugee camp. His father died a broken and embittered man when Youssef was only ten years old, after being jailed twice because of an absurd criminal charge. Youssef's mother died early of heart failure after years of working hard as a single parent.

Just as Amal and Nahid are female foils of the Oriental stereotype, Hammoudi - and Youssef - are foils of the stereotype of the Arabic man in political media discourse. Especially after the events on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne, the Oriental stereotype of the violent patriarch saw a revival in German discourse. On the square before the main train station, hundreds of women were sexually harassed, mobbed, and mugged by drunken men whom the media clearly identified as being of primarily Arabic origin. It was revealed later that the Cologne police were entirely overwhelmed by the situation and could not ensure protection for the women. In the following weeks, a heated media and political debate about the sexual assault of 'white German' women ensued, which fueled the idea that sexual violence is an exclusive problem of Muslim cultures and not a global problem of gender power relations.

By staging the masculine Arabic refugee as a threat to white German women, "a figuration was found against which increasing migration control could be mobilized as refugee influx was increasing" (Dietze 2017, 296). Analogously to the sexually oppressed Muslim woman, an Arabic, Muslim, and male figuration gained currency, characterized and generalized as a misogynistic groper, a homophobic migrant teenager, or an anti-Semite. By staging an equal relationship between Hammoudi and Claire and embedding it in a Jewish family story, Grjasnowa writes against the discriminating stereotype of the Arabic man. Hammoudi, like Amal, can be understood as a counterdiscursive figure in sexualized migration discourse. This discourse is manifested here by means of the figuration whom Grjasnowa conceives as "a corrective to the typically reductive portrayal of 'the refugee' in media and political discourses - as 'vulnerable outsider' or 'dangerous outsider'" (Taberner 2019, 826).

3 Restaging of Gender Roles and Identities in the Course of War and Flight

Despite the largely dichotomous gender order in *City of Jasmine*, in individual lives it nonetheless becomes apparent that war and flight can both revert gender roles and subvert them. This is revealed most noticeably in the relationship between Amal and Youssef. The two characters met during a protest campaign during the incipient resistance movement against the Assad regime, after which they start an affair. Constant distancing and rapprochement characterize the

relationship until they ultimately flee together to Europe and, on the way there, decide to marry. The disruption of habitual gender roles within the relationship commences during the resistance to the Assad regime, as Amal is the first of the two to be arrested and abused. As briefly explained above, the sexualized violence against the protesting, detained women that is portrayed in the text demonstrates how “the female body [becomes] a territory in wars” (Engels, Chojnacki 2007, 7).

Following Amal’s arrest, Youssef feels guilty towards her because he was unable to protect her, a sign that he identifies with the traditional role of the male protector, which he can no longer fulfill due to the armed conflict. But when intelligence officials come looking for him in Amal’s apartment, the role assignments reverse. While Youssef lies low, Amal is confronted with the men brutally infiltrating her apartment. By preparing a meal for the men, she uses the traditional role expectation of the caring woman as an act of resistance and retaliates against the men by mixing a laxative into the food. In this moment, she not only becomes Youssef’s protector and but actively exacts revenge. After this experience, Amal and Youssef separate, as they clearly sense the break in the familiar and normalized gender roles:

She ignores Youssef’s messages. He doesn’t prove particularly stubborn, though. Their last night together triggered something bad in both of them. Amal feels abandoned by him, and he’s ashamed of not having protected Amal from the secret service, of cowering in his hiding place instead of standing by her. (CJ 94)

Youssef’s character comes off here as a sensitive, vulnerable man who is scared of the militia’s violence and can no longer meet the expectations of his male role. This ‘atypical masculine’ behavior on the part of Youssef contradicts the ideal of the strong, courageous resistance fighter and triggers aversion and loss of feeling in Amal:

Amal waits for the white Opel to disappear from sight and then goes upstairs, where she finds Youssef rolled up, crying. She strokes his head, though she feels nothing for him at that moment. (CJ 92)

The relationship previously characterized largely by erotic attraction transforms here into a relationship similar to mother and child as Amal takes on the comforting, protective mother role, in turn taking on her normalized role as a caretaker.

Because Youssef is a male, which is marked as superior within the social context detailed in the novel, the loss of Youssef’s habitual gender identity in *City of Jasmine* weighs more heavily than that of Amal

on account of the war. Youssef is subject to the pressure of “having to prove his belongingness to this select group” (Scheibelhofer 2018, 21) because “being a man means a priori being put in a position that implies power and privileges, but also duties” (Bourdieu 1997a, 188). These duties primarily consist of conforming again and again to the social standardization of masculinity, especially in confrontations with other men. Yet Youssef’s posture, described as stooped, illustrates Youssef’s ‘feminization’, if one follows Bourdieu’s description of the female gender as being “curved”, “bent”, and “empty” – in contrast to the masculine traits of “straight”, “upright”, and “full” (1997a, 189). Failing to have proven his masculinity, Youssef no longer fits society’s normative ideas of masculinity and thus loses his status as heroic resistance fighter. Instead he is shown in all of his weaknesses and fears, which are ultimately stronger than his own idealism and the social norm of masculinity.

Nachts ist es leise in Teheran narrates a more severe disruption of gender roles in wartime. During a demonstration by the Iranian exile community in Berlin, Nahid remembers an acquaintance detained in Iran who was to be tortured into disclosing the names of opposition members but was ultimately executed because of her refusal to do so. “She didn’t give any names, I said. Protected her husband. Her husband, who was in jail years later and ever since has been skinnier than is right for a man” (NT 98). This example drives home how traditional gender roles can be transformed in wartime. Here the wife’s staunch resistance amounts to assuming the role assignment of the intrepid male hero and rejection of “the woman to-be-protected”, which strongly subverts the conventionally gendered power relationship. Here, the woman has become the protector of her husband while also taking a stand against the torturer’s male power apparatus.

Contrary to Hammoudi, who sees no reason whatsoever to live in Syria, for Amal leaving her hometown means a life change, a felt loss of identity “because it’s the only place where the real version of herself exists” (CJ 100). This “version” is defined by the economic privileges and comforts as well as the social relationships Amal loses by fleeing. She gets an early sense of these changes in Beirut. Her glamorous life in the spotlight and her economic security are lost, replaced by an ordinary, nondescript life. In tandem with her social decline, a change in her self-perceived gender identity arises, triggered by her job as a kitchen assistant, where, in the windowless kitchen, she “feels like a coalminer” (CJ 137). This reference to a “coalminer” illustrates not only her own place in the lower sector of society, but also a felt loss of femininity in the form of a new invisibility for Amal as refugee – in contradistinction to her earlier life in Damascus as a star of sorts. Flight and exile can therefore be considered a negative influence on her outward appearance as a woman, epitomized by her now unpolished, short fingernails.

Just before she lands in Europe, an irrevocable loss of the Syrian “version” of herself occurs when she and Youssef have to reduce their belongings to the bare necessities. Amal has to leave behind “tubes and pots of creams, mascara, lipsticks, powder, primer, foundation, nail varnish, soft brushes”, “her backless black Chanel dress [...] and a pair of soft black velvet court shoes that go with it so wonderfully” (CJ 184), which prompts the narrator to notes, “Now she has to say a final farewell to them” (CJ 184). She is left with documents, money, and family jewelry, as well as functional clothing.

This scene is exemplary on two accounts. First, the interplay between the loss of possessions and her previous gender identity becomes apparent. As such, Amal loses her sense of ‘being perceived’ as a woman, which here – in Bourdieu’s sense – is more a matter of “appearance” (1997b, 229) determined by bodily self-presentation than that of a sense of being. And second, at this juncture the binary gender order between Youssef and Amal becomes especially manifest. As she flees, Amal carries a plethora of ‘feminine’ beauty products, fully in accordance with the feminine stereotype, while Youssef has only his diploma in his luggage. From this we can infer that the narrative voice identifies Youssef with his ‘vocation’, whereas Amal’s identity is realized in the performance of gender presentation.

4 Marriage and Motherhood as Refuge and Reassurance for Gender Identity

“Recourse to traditional role and work distribution occurs” through the losses of gender-specific self-images and roles determined in the course of fleeing, as Bettina Engels and Sven Chojnacki argue (2007, 6).

As we saw in the previous section, Amal’s loss of privilege is closely connected to the change in her previous self-perception as a woman. But this change is not only contingent on fleeing. It also originates from the fact that Amal must get by for the first time without her father’s protection and financial support. Stuart Taberner assesses the discord with her father preceding her flight as being so drastic that it serves as an additional trigger for her decision to flee (2019, 828). But this does not merely involve the damage done to Amal upon discovering her father’s second family. The fact that Amal’s father, Bassel, does not show up to clear the air ultimately means that Amal can no longer count on his support and protection. As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that Amal is trying to find a new male protector in Youssef in order to be able to continue the familiar gender constellation. But when they unintentionally find themselves in Beirut as hapless refugees, Youssef’s ‘masculinity’ alone is not enough to meet Amal’s usual expectations of protection. For Youssef’s social status in Beirut differs vastly from the high status Amal’s father enjoyed in Damascus,

where his good relations to the apparatus of political power enabled him to help his daughter out of any unfortunate situation. In the novel this becomes especially apparent during Youssef's and Amal's stay in Beirut, where society looks down on them as Syrian refugees. On an evening walk, the narrator comments, "Amal's hand is safely in Youssef's" (CJ 154). Yet the role of the masculine protector cannot be so easily recovered in the situation threatening Syrian refugees in Beirut - as the Lebanese militia beat Youssef up before Amal's eyes.

It is first in the transit country of Turkey that Youssef's marriage proposal promises to reestablish a semblance of traditional gender roles. Yet Amal cannot really take delight in the coming wedding due to the dangers of their pending escape over the Mediterranean Sea. In the following passage we see her panic:

Looking at the ring on her finger, Amal thinks that they might die together, the very next week. An abyss opens up before her and thoughts of all kind come streaming out of it.

"We could always stay here, you know", she says.

"But what kind of life would that be?"

"I don't know!" Amal shrugs and looks back at her engagement ring. "Maybe three kids and a dog?" (CJ 181)

The fear of possible death engenders in Amal a deep-seated need for security that expresses itself in the desire for a classic family arrangement. While Amal saw herself in Damascus as a self-determined independent woman, a need for a traditional, bourgeois gender relationship develops in the course of her escape as she is faced with constant threats. This accords with Sandra Annika Meyer's observation that in contemporary literature the family gains "a new meaning as a microcosm that protects and is worthy of protection" in the context of "experiences of displacement, flight, and borderlines" (2019, 9). According to Meyer, "[T]he transgression of territorial and cultural boundaries in the course of a voluntary migration movement or politically motivated flight plays out against the backdrop of concomitant shifts in the family with remarkable frequency" (2019, 9).

The displacement Amal and Youssef already experienced in their land of origin within their families seems to intensify during their flight, triggering a desire for the security of a new family. This desire ultimately culminates in Amal's desire to have a baby, which she expresses during the perilous crossing to Europe. Escaping on the ship, Amal and Youssef make the acquaintance of a young mother, Fatima, and her daughter, Amina, who is just a few months old. Amal and Youssef help Fatima with the baby as much as they can. When Amal holds the baby in her arm one night, this triggers in her "here of all places, in the belly of the ship [...] an all-encompassing desire for her own child" (CJ 191, 2).

The yearning is physical and hard to explain, except perhaps in the international language of pheromones. Amal knows now that she needs a baby, the tiny arms against her chest, the legs against her belly, the warm breath and the blind trust of which only an infant is capable. (CJ 192)

Here, Grjasnowa both takes up the metaphorical combination of sea - ship - life and alludes to the myth of the Argonauts. The Argonauts' passage and the "metaphor of the pregnant ship's belly" (Klotz 2006, 146) used in the myth, which Volker Klotz calls the "last pregnant event" of the story, becomes "a concrete incident" (146) for Grjasnowa. But as the ship sinks in Grjasnowa's novel, and Youssef and Amal save little Amina, it is not warriors but rather refugees who fall from the ship's belly. And it is the refugee child Amina who, figuratively speaking, is socially (re)born, as Klotz put it regarding the ship's crew in the myth. Amina's birth mother, Fatima, goes missing after the wreck, and from this point on Youssef and Amal pass off Amina as their daughter.

The "international language of pheromones" reproduces the myth of biologically founded, female, maternal feelings, which Élisabeth Badinter (1980) has revealed to be a historical construction. The multiple interlocking belly imagery narrates a retreat 'inward', while at the same time the outer world collapses and threatens. With the imagery of inwardness, the book evokes a second traditional imaginary of femininity that refers to the feminine as interior and fluid. Summarizing these observations, two preliminary conclusions can be drawn in relation to the changes in Amal's gender identity.

First, Amal's sudden change exhibits a parallel to the "representation of women as inherently maternal" (Schmidt-Ott 2002, 122) in 1930s exile literature. The softness, warmth and powerlessness of the infant manifest themselves as a desire contrary to the lived coldness and horror of the war, and here specifically to the threat of the cold sea. In this sense, motherliness appears as self-rescue from the coldness and emptiness of feeling, as well as from the continuous threat to Amal's own life. Amal's desire refers entirely to self-rescue. It arises from a feeling of loneliness and hopelessness and the loss of all previously lived gender identifications.

Second, in light of the loss of her previous self-identification as a woman, motherhood here must be understood as a role "that markedly enhances the woman's status" (Meyer 2019, 54) because in the ship's belly Amal is headed for an uncertain future. Amal has lost all of her female status symbols and needs a new form of self-enactment, which materializes here as 'doing motherhood.' Despite the biologically founded maternal feelings in the book, motherhood is a cultural practice and not "an essentially precultural reality" (Butler 1990, 80). Amina is not Amal's biological child.

Here a restaging of gender identity arises with “recourse to traditional gender role models” (Engels, Chojnacki 2007, 7), which become, in the context of war and flight, the classic “concept of safeguarding coexistence” (Meyer 2019, 14). Refuge in the maternal role is, however, not genuinely defined as female. This becomes apparent when Youssef, shortly after saving Amal at sea, also looks after a two-year-old boy who ends up falling asleep on his lap: “Something about Youssef’s touch surprises Amal; for the first time, she sees what tenderness he’s capable of” (CJ, 196). Indeed, Youssef appears as an empathic and caring man who feels drawn to the baby and provides for it as he did for Amal.

5 Cultural Dominances and Gender in Exile

Having finally arrived as a refugee in Germany, Amal realizes that motherhood does not suffice for a new gender identity. Rather, in Germany she keenly perceives the loss of her own belonging to a community of women.

Amal watches the women passing by on the street. Different women, well dressed and beautiful women, with long sleek hair or smart short cuts. Women in expensive dresses and high heels. Women on bikes, women with buggies, women with full shopping bags, women rushing somewhere, women stopping to look at shop windows. Suddenly Amal realizes she’s no longer one of them. Nobody takes any notice of her now. (CJ 216)

She has become invisible as a woman, for her gender identity, like her entire life story, is now overshadowed in the host country by the ascription ‘refugee.’ As Wiebke Porombka (2017) rightly notes, Amal’s “biographical background, her career as an actress”, is “no longer recognizable for passersby. They see, if at all, just one of countless refugees”.

As becomes apparent in the novel, experiences of disrespect and humiliation are particularly linked with this new ‘existence’, which culminate in the perception of the refugee as belonging to a “new race”:

Amal hates moving around the city as a refugee – hesitant and frightened. She hates her entire existence. She hates not being able to speak German and the way no one in the municipal authorities other than the security guards is capable of speaking even basic English. She hates being seen as a Muslim and a scrounger and she hates herself. The world has invented a new race – the race of refugees, *Flüchtlinge*, Muslims or newcomers. The condescension is palpable in every breath. (CJ 217)

Amal's re-enactments of her gender role take place primarily on the performative level. She can only rediscover a new feminine role when she agrees to an ethnic self-dramatization as the lead in the cooking show, *Mein Flüchtling kocht* (My refugee cooks), and presents herself as a Syrian refugee. An intersectional connection of 'doing gender', 'doing ethnicity', and 'doing class' characterizes her performance. Because the show "might be generously supported by a large chain of organic supermarkets" (CJ 228), Amal has to adapt her outer appearance accordingly:

not too much make-up, her hair mid-length and curly, her clothes understated and expensive. But they couldn't do without certain Orientalist touches – she always wore striking jewelry referred to as *ethnic*, usually from Dolce & Gabbana. (CJ 228)

Here Amal uses stereotypical ideas of the Oriental woman and is thoroughly aware of her audience's expectations:

In Amal's case, the molding of self to meet expectations is even more explicit. [...] For the media-savvy Syrian actress, it is immediately obvious that her latest role is to play to her German audience's orientalizing nostalgia for a Middle East of alluringly modest young women and exotic spices, inflected by a melancholic anticipation of the region's strategic ruination. (Taberner 2019, 828)

By behaving according to cultural expectations, Amal performs both the Syrian refugee and the Oriental woman.

Nahid, who fled to Germany with her family from 1970s Iran, is also confronted with Oriental stereotypes from her German leftist, alternative acquaintance, Ulla. Ulla, who discovered Betty Mahmoody's controversial best seller *Not without my Daughter*, draws mental parallels between the protagonist's fate and Nahid's origins:

The husband was always nice and sociable in America, they have a young daughter, and not long in Iran he showed his true colors, Ulla said. I don't know if I'm making this up, but her eyes briefly roam to Walter and Behsad. (NT 72-4)

Confessional novels like *Not without my Daughter* are predestined to confirm cultural stereotypes with a kind of key witness authority. They lend themselves to unveiling 'truths' about the 'nature of the Orient' on the basis of personal experience. As Edward Said showed in his seminal work, *Orientalism*:

The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes. (1978, 93)

Through this authorization of the authentic account of a true witness, Nahid loses her subject status as a political activist and literary scholar and is initially marshalled into an imagined community of wives oppressed by deceptive Oriental men. This confirms the following observation by Irene Messenger and Katharina Prager:

[I]n the political discourse in host countries [...] particularly Muslim women are marked as backward and inferior to their husbands. Yet simultaneously disregarded is that they are also oppositionists, feminists, and political activists of various ideological camps who already had to oppose such ascriptions and limiting gender regimes in their countries of origin. (2019, 9)

However, both Amal and Nahid reverse these ascriptions in their view of German women. Ulla's women's group alienates Nahid, an "association of mothers who were worried about their children after Chernobyl" (NT 82). Nahid, an educated, leftist political activist, reacts with incomprehension and shame. She refuses the invitation to participate in the women's group with an excuse:

That's not true, but I also don't want to tell Ulla that I'm not up for her women's group. That her women's group embarrasses me and I'd feel bad becoming active in it. That I see Azar and my other friends in front of me furrowing their brows and thinking, Nahid, so that's what it means for you be active as a woman? Talking about vegetables and air with other women? (NT 83)

Compared to Olga Grjasnowa's novel, *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* makes clear that Nahid did not accomplish a self-selected transformation from activist to mother and wife and does not conform to expectations, for example, by joining the women's group or taking up knitting. She remains a political thinker and her engagement with the situation in Iran, or with socialist and revolutionary values, persists. The situation of exile in conjunction with the host society's gender and cultural ascriptions entails Nahid's reduction to the partial identities of wife and mother, and she falls into lethargy. Resigned, she realizes, "I am a woman with two children, for whom everybody knits things, I think [...]" (NT 69). Here, too, family is a warm refuge from the place of exile felt to be emotionally cold:

Had the alarm clock not gone off, I could have for a moment believed there was no world beyond our narrow bed. [...] There were only the slumbering children's souls in the next room and Behsad's arm and the breath on my ear. (NT 100-1)

Nahid's thoughts and her attitude towards Ulla's women's group demonstrate that not only does the host society determine "common values and norms of behavior [...] about the category gender" (Engels, Chojnacki 2007, 5), but also that the refugees create boundaries towards the host society with different gender norms and behavior. Just as in *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*, in Olga Grjasnowa's novel the German housewife appears as the opposite of the 'Oriental woman', as Amal sarcastically comments on the success of her 'Oriental' cooking show on TV:

"The pilot has proved a big success. It seems the bored housewives of the Western world have been waiting all this time for Amal and her exotic cuisine". (CJ 229)

While Nahid's character justifies criticism and skepticism towards the German women's group, Amal adopts the exotic staging as a self-image to distance herself from Western housewives. In doing so, she reconstructs the dichotomy between the western European and exotic Oriental woman. Yet the sarcastic, ironic tone suggests an act of self-empowerment. For the life of the 'Muslim Oriental' woman is not being presented as monotonous and domestic; the German housewives are the ones, with their longing for exoticism and hobbies like knitting, who are presented as simplistic and 'foreign'.

To be sure, in *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* the chapter on Nahid ends with the two women converging. Here it is precisely Ulla's reading of Betty Mahmoody's book that leads her suddenly to ask "other questions than before" (NT 119) and take an interest in Nahid's studies and the political situation in Iran. Ulla also encourages Nahid to go back to her studies. The incipient one-dimensional and critical vantage point on the respective 'foreign' women has developed into an exchange on equal terms.

Hammoudi is exposed to numerous episodes of harassment and humiliation while fleeing his homeland and in the arrival country. In the refugee shelter he and the other residents are repeatedly attacked by neo-Nazis. One day, when an Afghani boy returns to the shelter with a serious injury, the men decide to get their revenge on the local neo-Nazis. The narrator subsequently defines the refugees' masculinity as the last of their belongings: "They were still men, even if they had nothing else left" (CJ 238). Masculinity is narrated here as a biologically essential fact, in marked contrast to Amal, and is unable to affect their new refugee identity and its associated losses. Yet, in *City of Jasmine* the so-called victory of the refugees in the shelter

is short lives, for the novel ends with the host country's racist system intact. The neo-Nazis get their revenge by bombing the shelter and killing Hammoudi. In this way Grjasnowa narrates the refugees' powerless, lawless situation as a warlike condition, in which Arabic-Muslim men are declared enemies and women hardly seem to exist.

In conclusion, *City of Jasmine* and *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* reveal that warlike conflicts lead to a crisis of lived and/or traditional gender roles and identifications. While women are instrumentalized for the purposes of war, the male characters who show weakness and vulnerability and reject the role of the war hero experience a loss of masculinity – which, in the example of Youssef's character, manifests itself as the inability to perform his expected role as a protector.

The analysis of the constellations of 'Oriental-Muslim' characters has shown that in occidental discourse both male and female characters are designed not only contrary to culturalized gender stereotypes, but also to gender-specific images of refugees, such as the vulnerable victim or threatening perpetrator. Thus, neither Hammoudi nor Youssef conform to the increasing demonization of the Arab man. As for the female characters, Amal and Nahid, they too fail to fit into the stereotypical image of the repressed Muslim Oriental woman. In particular, *City of Jasmine* shows how multiple transformations of gender identity arise during flight, and how, in situations of marked uncertainty and threat, characters have recourse to traditional gender relations and roles. This becomes especially apparent in Amal's desire for motherhood, which is justified biologically but then turns out to be a new social role defined by her flight and the threats she faces – serving to valorize her status as a woman and to satisfy her need for warmth and security in the nuclear family.

For Amal and Nahid, escape from an 'Oriental' country to a Western country has no emancipatory effect – as is so often assumed. Not only must they forfeit their privileges and gender identifications while fleeing; in exile, they are directly pressured into the traditional female roles of wives and mothers via others' perception of them. As both female characters demonstrate, visibility as women is only attained when they defer to stereotypical cultural expectations of the host society. At the same time, a male character such as Hammoudi reveals that feelings of powerlessness and the refugee's lawless status lead to male fantasies of violent self-empowerment as the last remaining identification available to the martial, embattled man. In both of the novels I have dealt with, "ethnosexist discourses" are "first generated in the [relevant] power relationships" of homeland and host country (Dietze 2017, 301). Despite individual rebellions against attributions contingent on gender or culture, it turns out that the refugee's status as refugee tends to place them on the bottom end of power relationships. This is certainly the case in the novels of Olga Grjasnowa and Shida Bazayr.

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