

## From Zin the Mythical Heroine to Zilan, the First Kurdish Female Suicide Bomber: The PKK's Creation of a New Feminist Figuration

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan draw inspiration for their national struggle, through an appropriation of the female figure Zin from the 1692 classic Kurdish love myth *Mem and Zin* written by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), turning her into a symbol of love for the nation. Based on interviews with some fully-fledged members of PKK and Abdullah Öcalan's written works, as well as observations from fieldwork conducted in the mountainous areas of Iraq, this article will analyse how an old love story has become entangled with the PKK's national struggle and its pursuit of a new human type, one that might truly represent a new type of freedom fighter. In this re-configuration, love for the opposite sex must be transformed radically into love for the native land, with death as a consequence if sacrifice is seen as necessary. Drawing on the work of Donna J. Haraway, Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, this analysis examines how history, nature, geography, myth, and nostalgia are employed in the re-configuration of gender and love, and in the creation of a new feminist figuration that recalls Haraway's cyborg figure.

**Keywords:** women fighters, PKK, the story of Mem and Zin, gender and love, cyborg

### INTRODUCTION

This article analyses how the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) – also called the Kurdistan Workers' Party – and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, draw inspiration for its national struggle to free itself from the stronghold of feudal societies, through an appropriation of the female figure Zin from the 1692 classic Kurdish love myth *Mem and Zin* written by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), turning her into a symbol of love for the nation. Öcalan draws a comparison between the heroine of Xanî's story, Zin, and the PKK's first suicide bomber, Zilan (d. 1996), whom Öcalan considers to be the PKK's most successful female fighter. Based on Öcalan's written works and interviews with some fully-fledged members of the PKK (known as *cadres*), and my observations from fieldwork in the mountainous areas of Iraq where the PKK has its camps, this article will analyse how an old love story has become entangled with a national struggle in the pursuit of a new human type, one that might truly represent a new type of freedom fighter. In the PKK's re-configuration of gender and love, love for the opposite sex must be radically transformed into love for the native land, with death as a consequence if sacrifice is seen as necessary. Drawing on the feminist work of Donna J. Haraway, Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, this analysis examines how history, nature, geography, myth, and nostalgia are employed in the PKK's construction of gender and love, towards the creation of a new feminist figuration that recalls Haraway's cyborg figure. Applying these feminist perspectives affords a broader and more in-depth understanding of the capacity to act in militant and national conflicts in ways that transform the phenomena of gender and love, thereby contributing to new understandings and visions for the formation of identity without falling back into determinism or essentialism. On this basis the article will examine the interaction between cultural and material factors behind the PKK's understanding of gender identity, and consequently, their re-configuration of love. This re-configuration, with roots in Kurdish culture, seems able to mobilise women and generate new horizons for them, even as they continue to fight to secure the freedom of the Kurdish community.

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## METHODOLOGY

This article relies on empirical data that I collected for my PhD thesis, entitled *Female Fighters in the Kurdish National Movement PKK: A Gender-Reflective Perspective* (2020, Roskilde University, Denmark). The crucial part of the data consists of 10 days of fieldwork studies conducted in Iraq in the company of cadres who are members of PKK and qualitative interviews with members of the PKK. The 22 interviews were carried out in Iraq and Europe between June 2017 and April 2018. I have interviewed 16 women and 6 men, who consist of new participants, experienced members of the PKK and the leadership. The youngest was 20 years old while the oldest was 53 years old. That way I could focus on several generations in the PKK. 18 of the informants were fighters, while the last four were stationed in Europe in political work for the PKK.

Secondary sources of empirical data include written works by Öcalan (1997; 2001; 2004; 2009; 2012) and periodicals by the PKK. The interviews with informants of Kurdish origin and one Iranian were conducted in Kurdish. All interviews have been transcribed by me and translations into English are mine. Before the interview, all informants were verbally informed about the purpose of the interview and the research. According to an IRB (Institutional Review Boards) protocol, all interviewees were told that the conversations were anonymous: the interviewees' original codenames, places of birth or other personal details were anonymised, to prevent putting them or their networks at risk. All have subsequently given oral consent to the interview and their consent was recorded on a Dictaphone.

The doctoral fieldwork took place in a war zone, which creates an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion affecting all parties in addition to the usual ethical and moral dilemmas (Fujii, 2010). My own Kurdish ethnicity probably made a difference in creating access to the movement, and made it possible for me to carry out my fieldwork. While my background as a Kurd conferred a number of advantages, I also had to establish an analytical gaze 'from outside' to produce knowledge and not take things for granted. As a researcher, I had to take account of the significance of my own position and of attitudes, prejudices, norms and so on that might hinder me in revealing hidden social mechanisms (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 62-75); I also had consciously to avoid being subjective in reporting my research (Bourdieu, 1993: 51), as a male researcher. I believed it was important to work from an intersectional perspective to develop a richer understanding of the 'becomings' of researchers and informants, where gender is constituted and interacts with many other categories. For these reasons, I did not want to make my gender invisible in the analysis, especially not when gender is so central to my study. Overall, as Haraway says, the researcher's gaze and access to the field comes, not from 'nowhere', but from 'somewhere in particular' (Haraway, 1991: 188).

## THE PKK AND ITS UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER AND LOVE

The PKK was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey. Today, the party fights for the recognition and improvement of Kurdish people's rights in the region extending across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In 1984, with most of Kurdistan being under Turkish supremacy, the PKK initiated a guerrilla war against the Turkish government. Today, a substantial number of Kurdish youths have joined the PKK's national struggle, with the resolve to gain increased scope for representation and greater opportunities for the Kurdish people. With its bases and training camps in the mountains, the PKK, as a political force and social movement based on a particular agenda, creates space for subversion that includes radical changes in culture and transformative ways of looking at identity and gender in pursuit of a new collective Kurdish identity (Topal, 2020b: 241).

In terms of gender roles, the PKK focuses on both biological sex and socio-cultural gender, in which the relationship between the body, sexuality and love challenges and redefines the relationship between culture and nature. The PKK does not however always operate in a consistent manner; while endorsing gender as a cultural construct, there are times it falls back on biological essentialism. In the PKK, women and men are perceived as two different, natural genders, where gender is thought of in binaristic terms. Although gender is conceived of as a social construct, women and men are believed to have their own naturality. While the women I interviewed balked at describing this naturality as biological, they believed, however, that gender was something inherent in 'their character', referring to natural properties that go to define femininity and masculinity (Topal, 2020b: 233). Based on this belief, a woman's natural gender contains the potential for an especially strong and attractive attachment to nature, including the mountains in and from which the PKK conducts its campaign. Because the PKK believes that women and men have 'their own naturality', Kurdish women's arrival in the mountains is associated with a perception that they, in contrast to men, are especially attached to nature and that this attachment carries obligations (Topal 2020a: 345).

The physical separation from men in the mountains, including the perception that they are living far from patriarchal social norms, gives women fighters in the PKK the opportunity to collectively form new perceptions of their body. For these women fighters, the point is to recognise and maintain bodily difference between the sexes

to serve the militant goals of the party, a move that recalls the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray writes that without sexual difference, there can be no life as we know it. Sexual difference is the engine of life and the impetus for the eruption of all other human variations. Irigaray thus considers sexual difference to be foundational for difference in other social categories:

Between man and woman, there really is otherness: biological, morphological, relational. To be able to have a child constitutes a difference, but also being born a girl or a boy of a woman, who is of the same or the other gender as oneself, as well as to be or to appear corporeally with differing properties and qualities. Some of our prosperous or naive contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out this difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex. This new opium of the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity. The dream of dissolving material, corporeal or social identity leads to a whole set of delusions, to endless and unresolvable conflicts, to a war of images or reflections and to powers being accredited to somebody or other more for imaginary or narcissistic reasons than for their actual abilities. (Irigaray, 1996: 61-62)

The physiological bodily difference between men and women is thereby not conceived as something oppositional, but as a form of differentiation; in the Kurdish context, this differentiation encompasses variations within, as well as connectedness to the PKK, Kurdish nature, Kurdish history, all Kurds and the national struggle (Topal, 2020a: 345-346). The assertion of gender difference has also led the women fighters to establish their own party, their own military units and female quotas in the leadership, and even to develop their own ideology, *'jineoloji'* (Kurdish: woman's science) in which they draw up ideals for the future on the basis of notions of matriarchal societies in Neolithic times. However mythical and romanticised the women fighters' description of the Neolithic period and Kurdish history may sound, this sort of female configuration seems to have helped the women fighters reinterpret, redefine and recreate a new understanding of themselves and their bodies, while also being a part of the national struggle (Topal, 2020a).

In the PKK, new members undergo a powerful ideological and gender-specific course of instruction in which they are re-socialised. Instruction and training are combined with methods of self-criticism and an almost ascetic self-discipline to curb individual needs and desires, as a means of preparing oneself to become a *'cadre'*.<sup>1</sup> In this way, members' life processes can be controlled, and the assimilation into a new culture secured (Topal, 2020b: 219-261). For example, cadres in the PKK may not marry for the rest of their lives, be anyone's boyfriend or girlfriend, declare romantic feelings towards each other or have sex with anyone. The PKK believes that sexual energy cannot be repressed and must therefore be tamed and transformed into consciousness and a form of ideological energy to strengthen the fighting spirit. Men and women in the movement must repudiate heteronormative love, to focus on their warrior identity and engage in the PKK's struggle. Instead, relationships must be comradely, because cadres must have no other lifestyle or agenda than to liberate the country (Öcalan, 2012: 277). Öcalan writes that love in modern society is viewed by the cadres as being detached from accepted standards of morality, having been reduced to erotic love and underscored by capitalist ideology (Öcalan, 2012: 161). As an alternative to capitalist and patriarchal understandings of gender and love, Öcalan therefore attempts to create a new collective identity based on 'authentic' Kurdish values. Öcalan takes inspiration for these values, gender roles and alternative interpretations of love from cultural narratives of the past, such as the love story *Mem and Zin*, to create 'new and free roles' for women and men. History and culture are appropriated to recreate the cadre, which Öcalan considers to be 'the new human'. This new human, as the complete human, is the revolutionist, who among other things, believes in ideals such as 'ultimate truth', 'ultimate love' and 'ultimate fighter' (Öcalan, 2001).

## THE STORY OF MEM AND ZIN

*Mem and Zin* is a classic of Kurdish literature written in 1692 by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707). The narrative concerns the pauper Mem of the Alan clan and Princess Zin from Botan Province, who fall in love on Newroz Day, which marks the start of the Kurdish new year. In the story, Zin's father refuses to allow Mem and Zin to have a relationship, and he imprisons Mem. Mem dies in Zin's father's prison, and Zin subsequently commits suicide out of grief at losing Mem, but also to punish her father. The story of Mem and Zin has been interpreted politically, and called 'the national epic of the Kurds' (Kurdo, 2010), especially as, in a story written long before the phenomenon of nationalism, Xanî urges the Kurds to independence:

<sup>1</sup> *'Cadre'* refers to a full member of the PKK who has dedicated his or her life to the struggle for shared humanity, to his or her people and to the leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

I am puzzled by the wisdom of God  
The Kurds among [all] the countries of the world  
Why have they all been subjected? (Xanî in Mirawdeli, 2012: 99).

Here, Xanî is puzzled by and questions God's will, asking why he has given a state to everybody but left the Kurdish people without a state and abandoned them to their fate. Because of such references to nation, the story is treated by Kurdish literary figures and political representatives as a national origin story on par with a saga (Bilici, 2021). In these interpretations, Zin represents the country of Kurdistan, while Mem stands for its people, the Kurds. Like the two lovers in *Mem and Zin*, however, the country and its people cannot be united with each other, as observed by historian and literary scholar Izeddin Mustafa Resul in his book *Ehmedê Xanî as a Poet, Thinker, Philosopher and Mystic* (Resul, 2007/1979). Resul maintains that *Mem and Zin* was written with the sole purpose of bringing to light the reality of the Kurds, and Xanî was trying to show that the Kurds, like people of other nations, deserve to be a nation, and that they should extricate themselves from Persian and Ottoman domination (Resul, 2007: 8-9). Resul also argues that Xanî was attempting to show the world that the great and famous love stories that figure prominently in the philosophy of the East are also to be found among the Kurds, and that Kurds too are capable of telling these stories in their own language (Resul, 2007: 54). *Mem and Zin* is thus not merely a love story, but a narrative that suggests how Kurdish nationalism and social cohesion can be achieved, and what life in an independent Kurdistan could look like.

### PKK AND ÖCALAN'S UNDERSTANDING OF XANÎ AND MEM AND ZIN

According to Cemşid Bender, a Kurdish historian who is also often cited by the PKK, the celebration of national festivals, recorded accounts of historical events and retelling of stories such as *Mem and Zin*, are tangible indicators that a population qualifies to call itself a nation (Bender, 1991: 134-136). This is probably why retellings of other Kurdish ancient stories such as *Kawa the Blacksmith*, *Meme Alan* and *Derwese Evdî û Edule*, aimed at strengthening Kurds' national consciousness, are common in the PKK. Kurdish academic Handan Çağlayan notes that the PKK moderated its aims in the early 1990s in the light of global changes, particularly the collapse of the Soviet Union and its system of government. Instead of Marxist-Leninist ideological and political symbols, the PKK began to make use of more ethno-cultural norms aiming at a more nationalistically oriented movement in order to unite the Kurds under its roof (Çağlayan, 2007: 114-117; 2012). In a similar development, the significance of 'Newroz Day' has changed character since the PKK's uprising, as has the way Kurds celebrate it. Traditionally, Newroz was a day when Kurds celebrated the arrival of the new year with a vernacular festival that was apolitical. After the PKK's uprising, though, it became increasingly political and turned into a national festival during which Kurds were urged to join in solidarity and rise up against the power holders who had colonised their lands (Bulut, 2003: 31; Güneş, 2012: 180; 2013: 254). On a similar note, the story of Mem and Zin seems to serve a dual function for the PKK, both contributing to the Kurds' ethno-cultural value base and serving as inspiration for the ongoing national struggle, and as legitimation for the PKK's rebellion. PKK leader Öcalan attaches great significance to Xanî's story of Mem and Zin and mentions it frequently in his written works, to bolster his belief that the Kurds must think of themselves as a nation, having been very divided throughout most of its history. This, among other things, has prevented them from extricating themselves from the dominance of other power holders. Regarding the story of Mem and Zin as a national saga enables Öcalan to use it to create a kind of Kurdish insurrectionary culture and transmute it into the PKK's current struggle.

In her book, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, Elizabeth Grosz maintains that human beings need concepts in order to think their way around a world of forces that they do not control (Grosz, 2011: 80). One can say that Öcalan and the PKK create and re-create concepts, narratives and ideas with regard to concrete events, precisely in order to produce solidarity, motivation, a kind of desire or a particular agenda, where concepts, narratives, sagas and artworks, are used to protect against chaos – concepts, like art, being relatively open to re-creation and reformulation (Grosz, 2011: 34-39). National affinity requires not only a community based on a common language or religion, but also a belief in narratives as sagas (Smith, 1981: 65). What results is 'an imagined community' as described by Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1991: 6), being one in which communion and a sense of national belonging is fostered in the minds of the people, precisely through shared narratives. The above-mentioned Kurdish sagas go toward enabling the PKK and Öcalan to unite the divided Kurds around a common possible history and hence to help demonstrate that the Kurds are a nation deserving of their own country. In this context, Öcalan considers the narrative of Mem and Zin to be the national manifesto that the Kurds currently lack:

You should see this love [in the Mem and Zin story, ed.] as a national love; this is the theme. Although the story finds expression in the personalities of Mem and Zin, there is a unifying element, a love element. But feudal filth will never make this [a unified nation, ed.] possible. It [the nation, ed.] is in great pain.

Regard the non-development of this love [between Mem and Zin, ed.] as the non-development of Kurdish unity and Kurdish love [...] The consequence is that nor was Kurdish love [unity, ed.] created 300 years ago. Take note that nor was colonialism as brutal as it is now. [...] It [feudalism, ed.] is an obstacle to Kurdish unity and Kurdish love. This is perfectly expressed in Mem and Zin. There was literature then. People's pain and betrayal are perfectly described. (Öcalan, 1997: 159) [Translation: Author]

Following on from this, Öcalan adds that, if there were no pen, there would be no sword. That is, without Xani's manifesto, neither the PKK nor its armed revolution would exist (Öcalan, 1997: 242). Öcalan draws attention to Xani's detailed account in *Mem and Zin* of how the Kurds can take up arms and use their strength, to fight for an independent Kurdish state. He who takes up the sword founds a state, writes Xani (Xani in Resul, 2007: 20-21), as, according to Resul, Xani fears that if the Kurds do not take up arms, their history will come to an end like the sad death of Mem (Resul, 2007: 102). Öcalan uses Xani's nationalism and his call to arms as justification for the PKK's armed struggle, which has had particularly major consequences for the Kurdish people. Öcalan asserts that as 'New Mems and Zins', the members of the PKK are together fighting against patriarchal Kurdish society and the colonial power in Kurdistan. What is needed is the creation of new Kurds who will love, fight and die for the national struggle. Above all, their great love must be love of the land, not love between individuals (Öcalan, 1997: 240). To truly appreciate Öcalan's re-configuration of love in the service of the national struggle, it is important to understand the role played by the female fighter Zilan, regarded by the PKK as their first 'woman suicide bomber', and her conception as a modern 'Zin', the lover and war figure.

## FROM 'DESPERATE ZIN' TO BECOMING-GODDESS ZILAN

Öcalan sees the PKK's first female suicide bomber, Zilan (Zeynep Kinaci, 1972-1996) as 'the PKK's most successful female fighter' and compares her to Zin from Xani's story. In 1996, Zilan killed numerous Turkish soldiers in the Kurdish city of Dersim in Turkey by blowing herself up with a bomb. In her farewell letter to Öcalan, left behind at the time of the attack, she wrote that her act was an attempt to make her life meaningful:

I see myself as a candidate for a voluntary death. I willingly concede that to give our lives is, from the standpoint of your unending and tireless work for our liberation, not enough. I hope to be able to contribute much more than my life. [...] By exploding a bomb against my body, I want to protest against the policies of imperialism which enslaves women and express my rage and become a symbol of resistance of Kurdish women. (Letter excerpt, Zilan 1996) [Translation: Author]

Zilan has in fact subsequently achieved this symbolic position as the woman of the uprising, as she is without doubt seen as the greatest heroine in the history of the PKK and a role model not only for female, but also for male fighters in the PKK. All the female and male fighters I interviewed idolise Zilan and desire to live a strong-willed, militant and meaningful life like hers. By a 'meaningful life', they mean living a valuable life in the PKK, fully devoting themselves to the struggle and being willing to die if necessary. In the time since Zilan's attack, Öcalan has held her up as an example to all PKK fighters:

We call it realising the love. You have the will. But how? It cannot be done by dying. Mem and Zin tried that 300 years ago. You must put it into effect. Among us, Zeynep has done it. If you can manage it, you must put it into effect. How did Zeynep manage to eliminate 50 enemy officers and soldiers in a place like Dersim, where there were always massacres? What she did in military-technical terms was good and error-free. It is of great importance politically. [...] Zilan is my goddess. (Öcalan, 1997: 90-91) [Translation: Author]

Öcalan insists that PKK women fighters should be like Zin in the way they understand love as sacrifice, but like Zilan in the way they act. The new female fighters must be an amalgamation of Zin and Zilan. At this point, Zilan's act transforms her into Öcalan's goddess, because she is the first woman fighter to have turned into a modern-day Zin. However, new Zins like Zilan will no longer die a desperate death as the lovers did in the narrative, but will die in an attack that eliminates the enemy. Unlike Zin's death, Zilan's act is not thought of as a suicide, but rather as a heroic deed or personal sacrifice on behalf of the Kurds. Moreover, Öcalan writes that Zilan was not a weak individual but, on the contrary, a strong-willed and complete human being, making her act a 'fedai-attack', being an act of conviction (Kurdish: *çalakiya fedai*), rather than a suicide. Here, *fedai* means that the person sacrifices his or her life to attain a higher end or to achieve a better outcome for the struggle and the ideology. To a *fedai*, there is a higher purpose to the act than merely using their body to kill the enemy out of desperation (Hasso, 2005). Zilan's unexpected attack – unexpected because the PKK leadership knew nothing of

it – is viewed by Öcalan as the answer: that the right way for the new Kurds to live is both through struggle and through love. This is why Öcalan describes Zilan as a warrior of love – because her love was directed toward her country, and because that love helped her to wage her struggle in a new way (Öcalan, 1997: 90). Zilan endorses this view of her act taken by Öcalan, writing in a letter that her act is not to be seen as a suicide, but as a quest for the infinite and true love in which she wishes to take love and the struggle for the land to a higher level. In this view, love, rooted in the significance of Zilan's attack, is not heterosexual intimacy, nor does it involve a close, direct relationship between women and men. It is instead ideological, emancipatory and unconditional, and this love is therefore without embodiment and incorporal.

## INSPIRATION FROM MEM AND ZIN FOR PURE LOVE AND NATURAL GENDER ROLES

To gain an understanding of the appropriation of Zin's love for Mem into a symbol of 'pure' love of the people for the nation, it is important to analyse the PKK's radical new account of gender roles and love as derived from the story of Mem and Zin. Çağlayan points out that Öcalan's praise of Zilan and the PKK's other female martyrs should also be understood as exemplifying the PKK's new gender perspective. Earlier works by Öcalan and the PKK highlight the saga of Kawa the Blacksmith as a national epic about a male hero, but from the 1990s onward it is evident that the PKK begins to mention Ishtar, as the goddess of war and love from Babylonian/Syrian mythology, more often than Kawa the Blacksmith. This was due partly to the growing numbers of women joining the movement and partly to women fighters beginning to gain a strong voice in the movement on the strength of their contribution to the national struggle. Women fighters' potential in the PKK thus entailed fresh ideological and strategic changes to come up with, for example, new symbols and narratives able to help mobilise more women and value their contribution (Çağlayan, 2007: 114-115). It would therefore not be mistaken to assume that Zilan's attack and Öcalan's endorsement of it heralded a new period in the PKK in which the old masculinity, which had not brought the Kurds their liberation, was side-lined to make way for women as the nation's new saviours, setting the scene for them to become goddesses. As Öcalan himself puts it: 'When Zilan's identity was revealed, old manhood was entirely dead' (Öcalan, 2009: 117).

In Xani's fictional work, the story of Mem and Zin takes place in Botan in central Kurdistan. The nostalgic narrative of the story exhibits many similarities with the period – the Neolithic – that is often mentioned by the PKK in connection with the re-creation of the above-mentioned new gender roles that the PKK calls 'natural gender roles', where sexual difference is emphasised. Öcalan sees Zilan as a modern rendition of the woman Zin of the Neolithic period, about 12,000 years ago, when the first developments of farming appeared in the Epipalaeolithic Near East. Öcalan claims that women were not oppressed at that time and had a central role in the organisation of society due to their reproductive ability. The cultural and historical references in *Mem and Zin* to the time before Islam, for instance to Zarathustrianism, and to partly rebellious, anti-Islamic ideas (Bulut, 2003: 32- 36), contribute to the creation of a role model for 'true and original Kurdish women'. Öcalan describes the Kurds throughout history, not as a modern society or as a great empire of power, but as nomadic and peaceful tribes living away from the big cities, in villages and mountain areas, in harmony with nature (Öcalan 2004). In his nostalgic description of the Neolithic period, Öcalan romanticises Kurdish women and calls them *sterk*, the Kurdish word for star, associated with the goddess Ishtar:

Production developed with the unity of land and woman. In the history of humanity, Mesopotamia is the best known and proven example of the realization of primitive communal society. That is, it is revealed that this society was shaped between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Animals were domesticated, seeded plants were cultivated, and women did the majority of these jobs. Ishtar was the goddess of this culture. [...] For me, Ishtar is *Star*. In fact, *Star* in Kurdish is *Sterk*. *Star* means star in the European languages. The origins of the word are Kurdish, from Mesopotamia. (Öcalan 2009: 147) [Translation: Author]

The interviews with women fighters also demonstrated that they too take inspiration from history in an attempt to re-establish the status and identity that women 'once' had:

First, we looked at history. Where are we in these sciences? We asked, how was science developed in the course of history, and where were women? Where has the woman lost? How and why did she lose? How can women become free? [...] This precept of the Leader [Abdullah Öcalan] is very important: 'The history of women's slavery was not written down, but the history of women's liberation will be'. (Interview with Delal, 15 June 2017)

Female fighter Delal speaking here stresses the importance of history for women, which must be written anew and reinterpreted. The Kurdish women's movement therefore took inspiration from mythological and oral narratives instead of adhering to the known, official written history. In this context, the myth of Ishtar, the goddess of war and love in Babylonian/Syrian mythology, helps in this regard to create a gendered solidarity, not only among Kurdish women, but also among all women in the region, as authentic women of Mesopotamia. PKK frames Ishtar as the woman/goddess of a time when women were not yet oppressed and when they played a central role in society.

In Zarathustrianism, too, the woman – like the sun – was regarded as sacred because of her reproductive capacity. This characterisation of women is present in *Mem and Zin*, where Mem's best friend Tacdin's sexual overture to Zin's sister Siti is described as a religious adoration of Siti. Kurdish historian and scholar Bulut points out that the emergence of Islam as a religion helped to hasten the formation of patriarchal society and hence of female oppression (Bulut, 2003: 34). Regarding gender roles in pre-Islamic times, Bulut points out that in *Mem and Zin*, when Xani describes popular festivals and activities, he draws no great gender-based distinction between women and men. For example, when Mem and Zin meet each other for the first time in the story, they are dressed contrary to their biological sex (Bulut, 2003: 145). Mem falls for Zin's masculinity while Zin falls for Mem's femininity (Bulut, 2003: 51). The narrative focuses more on the Platonic love and affection between them, and less on the body, its sexuality or its gender. Such love can thus equally be felt for the people, for nature, or for a utopian ideology. In Xani's narrative, Zin does not get to experience love in the form of unity with Mem, but rather dies for it, separated from Mem. The same can be of Zilan's love for the nation, although it can be assumed from Öcalan's interpretation of Zilan's act and from Zilan's own letter, that Zilan died with zeal as her underlying emotion, not sorrow as was the case for Zin. That things worked out as they did for Mem and Zin was in Öcalan's view, as previously mentioned, due to their inability to fight in the 'right way', which means here to maximise one's fighting ability and to die out of love for the country rather than out of love for a romantic partner. With this in mind, seemingly, Öcalan's objective was to create optimal conditions for the development of new Kurdish fighters who would love, fight and die in the right way. Here, their great love must be directed towards the 'homeland'. Without liberation of the land and its nature, without improving the cultural living conditions of the nation, it will be impossible for young Kurds to experience love. Öcalan writes:

Love is homeland. Love means freedom in the homeland, definite success in the organisation. Love is struggle. Love means victory in struggle. (Öcalan 2009: 195) [Translation: Author]

In Öcalan's understanding of love, love is unable to exist or be experienced between Kurdish women and men without the land. Therefore, Kurdistan must first be liberated. Love as Öcalan understands it is directed first and foremost toward the land, its nature and its population, and this is also something that fighters articulated in their interviews with me. They experience love for the land as an act of anti-colonisation and anti-occupation, and hence something that will benefit the nation. Love is now radically linked to an obligation to liberate the land, and is experienced as an act of resistance, while at the same time allowing the person in the process of realising him- or herself in the struggle against oppression. In her work on love, Irigaray argues that love has the potential for creating a new society, where difference, especially sexual difference, will have a crucial role in building a democratic society, in which everyone respects each other's rights (Irigaray 1999). Philosopher Alain Badiou shares a similar sentiment regarding the potential of love to create a world based on difference and respect for the other:

Starting out from something that is simply an encounter, a trifle, you learn that you can experience the world on the basis of difference and not only in terms of identity. And you can even be tested and suffer in the process. In today's world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest. Love is an antidote to that. Provided it isn't conceived only as an exchange of mutual favours, or isn't calculated way in advance as a profitable investment, love really is a unique trust placed in chance. It takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference. (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 16)

Love in this context is no longer irrational, random, sentimental, romantic, sexual, and gender- and eros-related, but about developing a common horizon of understanding and an orientation to the boundaries of the self. That is among other things, the reason why women fighters have the perception that love is the driving force and passion of their struggle that can bring them a new society with better conditions for women. As Grosz perhaps would say, women's love for the land, as a feeling, helps them in the struggle to utilise their resources in processes of self-overcoming and by self-realising that explains individual impulses against prevailing norms (Grosz, 2008: 40-41). Female fighter Zelal expressed a similar sentiment regarding love:

What the PKK is doing is actually to create the free life via love. Love therefore can't be confined to a relationship between a man and a woman. It's falling in love with your own soil. It's not about falling in

love with your partner, but about falling in love with the struggle. Being in love is therefore a passion. It is a quest for ultimate truth. (Interview with Zelal, 17 September 2017)

Phenomena such as ‘the ultimate love’, in common with others such as ‘the ultimate truth’ or ‘the ultimate fighter’ are often framed by the women fighters as the final, greatest goal that they must achieve in order to experience revolution, sacred love and total liberation. In this connection, fighters define love – including intimate love between members of the movement – as an experience with transcendent potential that enables them to transcend themselves and endure anything, including the confrontation with death, in a radical manner as a *fedai*. Female fighters Zeri and Bese spoke about such a love, emphasising its transcendent potential:

I fulfil my need for love through togetherness with my comrades [...] There is no need to say much: a look, a smile, doing something together. It’s lovely to feel that you’re together, in sorrow, in joy... Believe me, it is higher than a mother’s or a father’s love. We become soul twins [both men and women]. We become a whole. It [love] affects me a lot. You become complete. It [love] doesn’t own you. However, it is always with you. (Interview with Zeri, 26 March 2018)

If a man is strong or brave in war, he will also attract your attention and your emotions. Your love turns toward him. The same is true of a man who is highly respected by those around him. So you think, ‘I must go to war together with him. I must have the honour of waging war together with him’. You also want to be in his unit. (Interview with Bese, 22 March 2018)

Women fighters experience their love towards each other as something that strengthens their vital energy. Love is therefore described in the PKK as being free of the body and of sexuality. This love is found in the collective. It is therefore everywhere and becomes in intra-action, but never in connection with just one particular body and specific personality. On this point, Bese explained:

Among us, love is something collective. We don’t practise individual love. Of course, it may happen to someone. We don’t say it never happens. There are some people who have different inner forms of searching that don’t mean anything to us. For us, love is a shared goal. A shared life. A shared perspective. A collectivity. Something that makes us more alive, puts us in a better mood, makes us happy. We have no other recipe for love. (Interview with Bese, 22 March 2018)

The interviewees call the love they have for each other pure love, as opposed to that which is called eros love, where physical bodily attraction between couples is present.

## ZILAN AS THE FIGURATION OF NEW WAYS OF FIGHTING AND LOVING

There is no doubt that, according to Öcalan and all PKK members, Zilan is a modern female fighter of love and the ideal, complete PKK fighter. To Öcalan, Zilan can serve as a feminist figuration to create alternative identifications for the PKK’s female fighters. Like Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ (Haraway, 1992: 297) – a metaphorised description of a blend of human and non-human elements including discourse and technology that go together to make a subject – Zilan becomes, for the PKK, a metaphorised description of nature, history, nationalism, war and love. Haraway’s cyborg is especially suggested as an allied partner for feminists to fight against systems of hegemonic power that thrive on class, gender, and racial segregation. The configuration is developed to avoid the dualism between nature and culture, subject and object, that helps to maintain universal, essentialist assumptions. According to Haraway the human body today can change in an interaction with technology, so that we can adapt to new surroundings and terms. Body, gender, and nature are not immutable concepts (Haraway, 1992: 297). By creating chaos, disorder, rebellions and new self-consciousness, a cyborg moves us towards a world that signifies new potentials. The role of the new figuration is not to set boundaries, but to inspire, guide and usher subjects towards a new self-conception and an alternative identification leading to what one might call the re-creation of a feminine self, writes Haraway (Haraway, 1997: 52-70).

Extending Haraway’s feminist figuration, Braidotti maintains that the key point about feminist figurations is that it is embodied, that is, not just a fiction springing simply from fantasy or imagination. Figuration, in other words, contains on the one hand a tangible and substantive positioning, but at the same time an embodied notion that it is on the way to becoming, arriving at its own sovereignty, where states such as emotions, fantasies or the body are experienced as unique. Braidotti calls this ‘political fiction’ (Braidotti, 2002: 7), and Haraway calls being on the way to ‘an imagined elsewhere’ (Haraway, 1992: 295). This state gives the subject the possibility of thinking of an alternative to its present existence (Braidotti, 1994: 169). Braidotti thus claims that figurations can help in creating a female feminist subject and breaking down existing subject positions so that the subject is nomadically



on the way to alternative places and is seeking alternative identifications (Braidotti, 1994: 200). Braidotti's own figuration is 'a nomadic subject':

In my reading, the feminist subject is nomadic because it is intensive, multiple, embodied, and therefore perfectly cultural. I think that this new figuration can be taken as an attempt to come to terms with what I have chosen to call the new nomadism of our historical condition. I have argued that the task of redefining female subjectivity requires as a preliminary method the working through of the stock of cumulated images, concepts, and representations of women, of female identity, such as they have been codified by the culture in which we live. (Braidotti, 1994: 169)

Like Irigaray (1985/1974) and Grosz (1994), Braidotti's purpose is a non-deterministic theorisation of the differentness of the female body, which seeks to break the indifference of gender constructionism, towards gender difference and how it matters. Like Haraway, Braidotti tries to involve positive visions of alternative ways to regard gender, and create new and dynamic horizons to understand gender, without falling back on a form of universalisation or determinism:

The term figuration refers to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallogocentric vision of the subject. A figuration is a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity. I feel a real urgency to elaborate alternative accounts, to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought. This entails a move beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely monological mental habits of phallogocentrism. (Braidotti, 1994: 1-2)

In a similar vein to this point of Braidotti's, where the nomadic subject becomes a critical and energetic movement, Zin, the 'natural' woman of Neolithic times, is appropriated by the PKK to create new embodied subject positions - as Zilan - to enable women to overcome the patriarchal and colonial discourses constraining women's self-realisation. Juxtaposing the thoughts of Darwin and Deleuze, Grosz points out that people have a tendency to use their spare energy and creativity for self-realisation, a process not necessarily subject to the laws of natural selection and evolutionary purpose (Grosz, 2011: 2). Self-realisation is about the potential for facilitating and maximising action. Here, self-realisation is to be understood not as a linear evolution, but as an involution aimed at the establishment of connections and transubstantiation, as an exertion of complexity (Grosz, 2011: 53). Self-realisation thus acquires a double meaning in Grosz's work: to develop, and to regulate differently. Grosz claims that the prospect of self-realising in an infinite process gives us options (Grosz, 2011: 60). From this theoretical understanding then, as a new feminist figuration, the metaphorisation of Zilan - with inspiration from Zin - offers all women PKK fighters a new, alternative world in the present and in the future.

In light of Haraway, Braidotti and Grosz, the amalgamation of Zin and Zilan, as the cyborg figure, guides and inspires transformation within the PKK. Female fighters are encouraged to experience a new womanhood - in line with 'the nature of women' - to create a subject-identity, that is free from male dominance. For instance, by feminising all *fedai* acts and to motivate women fighters to sacrifice themselves in the anti-colonial struggle in the name of love, the PKK gives women fighters the opportunity to show that they are superior fighters than their male fighters, being 'ready' to sacrifice themselves for love of the land. Moreover, this aim appears to have been achieved: since Zilan's first action, most *fedai* actions in the PKK have been carried out by women. Femininity is being re-defined in the figuration of the female fighter while women's gender creates advantages for them compared to men. According to another female fighter Zelal:

Woman has proved herself. Beritan<sup>2</sup> did that with her personality. Zilan did it, too. They drew a line for us regarding how the free woman should be. They didn't only influence us, but men, too. The men have since changed and evolved a lot. They [Zilan and Beritan] created a new ideological and military warrior spirit for us. A 'fedai spirit'. Zilan and Beritan woke everybody from death. Woman is no longer just a mother. Or someone who cooks food. Or a sister. Woman is the colour of life. Woman's will is strong now. Woman is now a 'guide'. [...] They each contributed to a new transition. (Interview with Zelal, 17 September 2017)

The women fighters thus have a perception that *fedai* actions make a gendered statement. The point of *fedai* actions is therefore not simple killing or self-destruction, but to bring about a feminine transformation in the formation of a new type of fighter and a new type of woman. These actions are therefore more of a quest for a becoming at

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<sup>2</sup> Beritan (Gülnoz Karataş) as the member of the PKK died when she threw herself from the cliffs during fighting to avoid being captured by 'the enemies' in 1992.

the cost of violence, in which death is politically grounded (Ransirini, 2017: 24). This form of self-realisation is also evident in Zilan's letter in which she expresses her commitment through sacrifice:

To show my commitment to our party the PKK, our Leader APO, our great resistance fighters, our prison resistance fighters, to our comrades who are fighting for freedom in the mountains, my country and my people I will carry out this 'sacrificial action'. With this action, I will attack the enemy with the spirit and strength that I take from my people. This shouldn't be the fate of our people anymore. We are the ones with the most love for peace, brotherhood, love itself, humanity, nature and life. Its [sic] this love that forces us to fight [...] My will to live is very strong. My desire is to have a fulfilled life through a strong action. The reason for my actions is my love for human beings and for life! (Letter excerpt, Zilan 1996) [Translation: Author]

With this love, Zilan presents that she no longer fears to sacrifice herself in death. The fedai-love has now overtaken her identity, which makes her able to love. Using Deleuze's ontology here, the conditions of love have now changed for Zilan. Experiencing the transcendental potential of the fedai-love causes Zilan to experience that she is no longer the same person and has begun to differentiate herself from herself (Deleuze, 2001: 69). Zilan is now in the process of generating change, re-realising herself and putting her potential to use. Grosz, in extension of her new feminist project<sup>3</sup>, adds that the desire is about people willingly forging connections and wanting to re-realise themselves. Desire is no longer defined as a lack, but as a creative relation and production. It is about utilising one's energy and creativity for self-realisation, being about the potential in facilitating and maximising action (Grosz, 1993: 171). In this instance, the body is not a static, essential entity, but a dynamic process regarded as a theoretical explanatory model (Grosz, 1993: 170-171). Grosz's interpretation of the body should be understood in relation to her definition of life, which she describes as the ongoing tendency to realise the virtual, in order to make tendencies and potentials real, to explore organs and activities in order to ease and maximise the acts they make possible (Grosz, 2011: 20). Turning her gaze to iterative actions, she emphasises: 'I am not the same subject in each repetition [...]' (Grosz, 2011: 32). Differentiations and repetitions thus become the concept of life, according to Grosz. From this understanding, the world thus acquires a new order of meaning for Zilan after she makes a choice, when she comes to see herself and others in a way that opens the world to one in a new way.

In this context, love is regarded, not as an individual emotion felt by one person for another, but as sense-making, transcendent and anticolonial. Love makes it possible for the individual to transcend her- or himself and the constraints of duality in relation to the opposite sex and thereby to produce creativity in the realisation of one's potential. This type of love, conceived as having the autonomous capacity to create a new world, is encapsulated in Alain Badiou's philosophy of love:

If we, on the contrary, want to open ourselves up to difference and its implications, so the collective can become the whole world, then the defence of love becomes one point individuals have to practise. The identity cult of repetition must be challenged by love of what is different, is unique, is unrepeatable, unstable and foreign. (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 98)

Sacrifice-ready love is not experienced voluntary, but mandatory and imposed. This love is something that happens to us, and we must submit to it. Zilan too, like Zin, must sacrifice herself by using her positive potential for self-realisation or capacity for action, as she wishes to achieve an alternative way of understanding herself and doing agency. Love, in the form of sacrifice, in the story of Mem and Zin therefore here plays a special part, demonstrating a close and profound link between love and death, where the lover sacrifices him- /herself for his/her love (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 32). In this context, Zilan therefore no longer sees her female body as a constraint as per sociocultural norms, but as a tool or implement of the anti-colonial struggle, to be sacrificed when necessary. She is on a journey of experiment, exploring something new. Death is therefore not a simple act of suicide but a new way of fighting, of loving the land and nation. Öcalan sees the love in Zilan's action (being driven

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<sup>3</sup> According to Grosz, the dominant constructivist feminism and the dualistic gender divisions thinking, understood in terms of historically and socially specific constructions and connected by categories such as race, class, gender and ethnicity, will ultimately lead to an individuality in which subjectivity is reduced to identity. Women from different parts of the world who are in similarly unequal positions will thereby lose their connection with each other, so that they will be unable to share experiences and support each other's struggles. Grosz stresses that it will also lead to the abolition of feminist struggle if feminism concerns itself only with the constraints imposed on women and their identities by patriarchal power relations. The solution, says Grosz, is that feminist theory produces new interpretations of identity in order to help oppressed women (Grosz, 2011: 92-93). For Grosz, it is not about creating and producing a universal expression – e.g., union of two genders, if we are talking about women and men – that can be levelled until neutralised, but about difference, variation and differentiation. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Grosz maintains that differentiation produces more difference: 'Difference is internal determination' [...] 'Difference produces its own differentiations from undifferentiated' (Grosz, 2011: 93).

by love for the land) as being stronger than Zin's (being driven by love for another person), yet this is not solely because of its great purpose, but also because it is free of being gender-romantic, and because it is infinite and not dependent on anybody or anything. As Braidotti says of death, and Badiou of love, love takes on a new shape but does not become an 'experience' separate from all else. Death is one of the many becomings in which the subject weaves together the world and its many forces, where everything, human and non-human, affects everything else, but the effects are different. The wish to die can therefore be understood, not within traditional morality as a rejection of life, but as a [radical] statement made about life, which encourages us to strive beyond the satiation of short-term desires (Braidotti, 2006: 153) to achieve a political subjectivity (Ransirini, 2017: 24). This form of subjectivity is what Stark (2012: 100) with reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), calls to create the extremely abstract and virtual subject. Zin and Zilan are now not the corporeal women-subjects of love, but virtual female subjects, that alone through their *fedai*-actions have become abstract women-subjects. Zin as a myth and Zilan as a political identity contributes to deconstructing the lines between the cultural and the natural, where reality then becomes a virtual reality, informed by potential, possibility and an elsewhere (Haraway: 1991; 149-182). Being 'women fighters' can thereby be understood as a cyborg identity. As the new woman, Zilan becomes a sort of nostalgic feminist figuration that can guide, inspire and direct women fighters toward a new subject position leading to self-decolonisation.

## CONCLUSION

The empirical material gained through this research shows that PKK members have an idea that, having participated in the PKK, they have gained a new view of the world. It appears to them in this regard that the world has changed and that they now have the opportunity to re-realise their will and their desire. They acquire, in this context, a new understanding of love as an emotion with transcendent potential that enables them to transcend themselves, endure anything and finally merge with the unknown. Here, love is experienced as an inner creative act or as a tool in the anti-colonial struggle. It is therefore generative of possibilities, while they renounce their individuality to achieve a higher end. Love is not only an individuated feeling in the dominant paradigm of romantic heterosexual coupledness, but a special sense-making capacity that joins humans, nature, animals, ideology together, rather than being dependent on the existence of the other person or the only one.

Such love becomes a striving for wholeness and infinity, presenting as an attraction to a union and a completeness, and not detached from sociopolitical, sociohistorical and sociogeographic conditions. In the Kurdish context, inspiration for this form of love comes from authentic Kurdish cultural sources, appropriated towards the production of cadres in the anti-colonial struggle. This also enables the PKK to create a new discourse against the dominant discourse, thereby distancing itself from the capitalist and colonialist conception of gender and love. In this way, the PKK produces its own original, national concept of gender and love, including the figure of woman. One of the female fighters, Delal, referred to this woman figure in the PKK as 'the natural woman of the Neolithic times'. The woman of the Neolithic, whose roots go back into Kurdish culture (whether it is patriarchal or matriarchal), seems to be mythical, and may not at first glance offer new individual opportunities for action from a feminist perspective. But together with the re-configuration of love from romantic love to love for the land and nation, a new feminist figuration might emerge, able to mobilise women and generate new horizons for them while they also fight to secure the freedom of the community and the land.

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