

The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement: Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities

Isabel Käser, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021,
ISBN:9781009022194.

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Isabel Käser's book *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement: Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities* investigates how Kurdish women have filled the political and militarised spaces with their own specific organisational practices and ideological claim making (Käser 2021, p. 4). Based on ethnographic research both in

Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, she examines how the notions of gender and sexuality are being redefined in the pursuit of self-determination through violence. Käser (2021, p. 21) places her work among a broader tradition of literature where body, politics and space interact to provide explanations to problems related to power, sexuality, and gender (Butler

2006; Young 2005). Her research also lies between gender, war, militarism, and resistance, aiming to unfold a more complicated image of women in war; women are not seen solely as victims or as an exception to the rule when participating in violent acts (2021, p. 11).

Käser's (2021) reassessment of the linkages between gender, militarism and war challenges the idea that existing patriarchal norms are solely exacerbated by militarism and conflict and provides a more complex representation of reality through her analysis of the 'Kurdish female fighter'. Wars, revolutions, and political crises are significant because they create a political space (Hart 1996). Even though the importance of adapting to "everyday understandings" and acceptable cultural norms is necessary to mobilise the population, wars and political crises provide an opening for individuals to assume previously inconceivable roles to them (Hart 1996, p. 78). In essence, Kurdish women were provided with an opening, which allowed them to assume roles (that of the female

fighter) previously unimaginable to them and, simultaneously, challenge and redefine the sexual order and gender norms and relations (Käser, 2021).

Moreover, Käser avoids engaging in manichaeistic simplifications that understand female Kurdish fighters either as heroines fighting for the cause or as victims of yet another patriarchal system that governs their bodies. Since the Rojava Revolution, the worldwide spotlight has been on female Kurdish fighters, a focus that has often been essentialising, glossing over a more nuanced reality that includes various resistance(s) and contradictions. Toivanen and Başer (2016) have argued that the portrayal of Kurdish women combatants in Western media established a narrative that emphasised their heroism (Çağlayan and Coşar 2020, p. 2) while ignoring potentially contentious parts. The idea that women's emancipation is associated with militancy is part of a wider tradition of literature that has long identified the link between citizenship rights and military

(Yuval-Davis 2011; Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999). Military conscription and citizenship rights became a central argument in the exclusion of women from political representation in the West since the American and French Revolutions, respectively (1775–83 and 1789–99) (Nagel 1998; Ahlbäck 2014; Yuval-Davis 1991; Caglioti 2020). Risking one's life or even dying for one's nation is the ultimate price he (or she) must pay in exchange for citizenship privileges. Consequently, any exemption from this responsibility reduces the degree to which women may obtain full citizenship rights (Yuval-Davis 1991 cited in Malešević 2010, pp. 287-288).

In the same pattern as Nilsson's article on Kurdish women's experiences (2018), Käser testimonies of former prisoners, mothers of guerrillas, and female fighters allow her to evaluate how violence and anguish of state brutality reshape the identities and memories of Kurds. Käser's (2021, p. 19) observations regarding the creation of a certain feminine

militant identity are an important contribution to the field. For example, the latter (2021, p. 134) shows how the society in Maxmur is militarised and how this militarisation of society impacts the martyr's mothers. Understanding how a mother accepts to send her child to the frontline to fight and may die for the struggle is crucial to understanding the extent of militarisation in the region. This acceptance becomes evident in the ritualisation of death in the camp by the martyr's mothers. The family is not sad but rather proud of their child for having become a martyr for Kurdistan (Käser 2021: 140, 143-144). However, Käser (2021, p. 135) also argues that resistance exists against this militarisation of every aspect of life and what is might superficially perceived as a universal acceptance is not always the case.

The interviews with guerrilla fighters in the mountains shed light on how certain events push women to join the movement as fighters and engaged members, breaking with tradition that sees women as mothers and wives in combat support roles.

These “rupture points” differ from one generation to another, but they remain equally important and trigger women to participate in the movement. For example, for the younger generation, the fight for Kobane and the fight against the Islamic State was crucial to their “initiation” to the moment, while the older one was associated with the resistance of Bêrîtan and Zîlan that motivated to them join (Käser 2021, p. 107). Despite the different beginning points from generation to generation, what unites these women despite the generation gap between them concerns their decision to join the party as an alternative; either as an escape from a violent environment or as an ideological shelter (2021, p. 108).

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan-PKK) is not unique in its proclamations regarding women’s emancipation. Several left-wing movements, including national liberation movements (i.e., National Liberation Front in Vietnam) to terrorist organisations (i.e., Baader-Meinhof in West

Germany) throughout history, have proclaimed their willingness to emancipate women and set them free from capitalism. Yet, Käser rightly highlights the existing contradictions of women’s emancipation in the movement. The latter uses the term ‘militant femininities’ to explain the process of joining the party and becoming an engaged member. The concept of militant femininities describes how women in various fields, from the domestic milieu to the front lines and the city, contribute to the creation of a new political order in semi-autonomous organisational structures to maintain their central position within the movement (Käser 2021, p. 205).

Particularly interesting is the process of ‘subjectivation’ that articulates how a Kurdish woman becomes an engaged militant and simultaneously a free woman. This process is nothing but easy as they have to learn to control all their physical urges, including that of physical intimacy (Käser 2021, pp. 98, 126-128). This dipole (freedom and emancipation vs discipline and

restrictions on sexuality) seems incompatible at first glance. On the one hand, women are to become “disciplined soldiers” under the leadership of an ideology produced by a man (Öcalan) to dictate and shape women’s lives (Kurdish women). Women’s emancipation is not dictated from women to women but rather from a man to women. The ideal woman and the “faulty” one was articulated by Öcalan rather than by women themselves (Käser 2021, pp. 53-55). Even though Öcalan’s role on incorporation of women in leadership roles in the 1990s should not be diminished, it does not erase the contradictions that exist in the movement. Despite its obvious contradictions, Kurdish women through this process acquire a strength to resist and it gives them a noble ideal to die for. Women’s participation in a liberation movement might not initially be based on the ideals of gender equality and justice but may become a potent vehicle for women’s

emancipation as a result of the daily struggle of women themselves, who transform the movement from within (Käser 2021, p. 25). This has been the case for several social movements; women’s participation in the struggle becomes a vehicle for broader changes as it politicises them. Equally, the fact that several movements in the past did not explicitly declare their feminist loyalties does not mean they did not contribute to the progress of their women participants (i.e., National Liberation Front in Greece during the Second World War).

Käser’s analysis of the ‘abstinence contract’, which sees female Kurdish fighters strictly refraining from sexual relationships, further manifests the existing contradictions of women’s emancipation within the movement. Women, by renouncing their freedom to sexuality, become disciplined, ready to fight and die for the struggle.¹ This abstinence aims to avoid being absent-minded from

¹ Here it should be mentioned that refraining from sexual or romantic relations is not unique in the Kurdish movement. For instance, for the female and male partisans that participated in

the Greek People’s Liberation Army (*Ellinikos Laikos Apeleutherotikos Stratos -ELAS*) during the Greek resistance (1941-1944), romantic relations were also prohibited between men and

the revolutionary duties. (Käser 2021) However, this seems to contradict the notion of ‘free woman’, something that the movement fights for. Kaser (2021, p. 176) demonstrates how by handing in their right to sexuality, women acquire a set of tools for their emancipation. Despite the newly acquired skills necessary for liberation, Käser (2021, pp. 163, 194, 201) argues that this contract is a ‘party bargain,’ which allows the Party to control the fighters and sustain the resistance.

It is important to note that this ‘abstinence contract’ facilitates the acceptance of the female fighter in traditional societies (Käser 2021, p. 164). Any revolutionary movement can develop effectively under the precondition of speaking to the specific needs and realities of the people that constitute this society. It cannot survive if it does not reflect an understanding of the life experiences of those who are part of it (Ackelsberg 1985, p. 63). Despite

the fight for a more egalitarian society, the image of a woman fighter needs to be adapted to existing and acceptable cultural and social norms. In an attempt to counterbalance the uncomfortable thought of a female fighter, the movement reverted to acceptable depictions of women in battle by tracing back to goddess past (*Ishtar*) (Ibid, p. 164). Käser (2021, pp. 101, 108, 126-128) identifies these clashes between subordination and emancipation and other contradictory elements in the movement. Yet, it goes beyond the scope of her book to examine how these contradictions are pacified within the movement and maybe an impossible puzzle to solve until the actual gains from women’s *irade* (will to resist) through this process are materialised in a post-war Kurdistan (Käser, p. 203).

Käser (2021, pp. 30-32) provides a thorough analysis of the limitations of her fieldwork research due to external events related to the

women partisans. For more: Kotzioulas, Giorgos. 2015. *Otan Imoun me ton Ari: Anamniseis kai Martyries*. Athina: Ekdoseis Dromwn; Vervenioti, Tasoula. 2013. H

Gynaika tis Antistasis: H Isodos twn Gynaikwn stin Politiki. Athens; Koukida.

civil war in Syria and the deteriorating situation between the Turkish government and *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) that eventually led to the collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in July 2015. Limited as it may be due to the aforementioned events, Käser's engagement with fieldwork in several areas of Kurdistan provides a glance into the more nuanced reality of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and its regional particularities, especially the differences between the urban resistance and the one in the mountains. A point which can be further developed in the future concerns the reluctance of the movement to "use the F word" (Käser 2021, p. 76) and the identification of Kurdish women with feminism, while it also criticises Western feminism for its poor result in liberating women.

In sum, Käser's book provides a nuanced representation of women's participation in the

Kurdish Freedom Movement. The latter analyses the challenges women face in what is considered a predominantly male domain and the contradictions between the "free woman" and the restrictions imposed on women's bodies by the leadership. Käser manages to show that resistance is not a linear process towards progress; rather, it includes contradictory elements that might seem uncompromising at first through the lens of the manichaeistic Western tradition of dualism.² In contrast to Orientalist stereotypes of the female fighter, Käser provides us with a more thorough representation of the Kurdish female fighter. This more complex representation of the Kurdish movement is important for the debates on women's agency in social movements and political struggles in general. Avoiding simplistic generalisations that do not necessarily fit in specific cultural and social contexts help us gain a broader understanding of a topic. Her book is an undoubtedly valuable

² For more about the Western view of the world as a confrontation between 'us' vs 'the

other': Heuser, Beatrice. 2022. *War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, p. 266.

contribution not only to an audience interested in the Kurdish struggle in particular, but in war and gender in general.

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