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Sacred and Secular Spaces: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and "Großvater Zunge"¹

I

Labor migration from Muslim-majority countries to the Federal Republic of Germany between the 1961 agreement with the Turkish government and the *Anwerbestopp* in 1973 was followed by family reunions and successive waves of political refugees and asylum seekers predominantly from the Balkans and the Middle East, leading to an increasingly visible Muslim presence in all areas of German culture, politics and society. The German literary scene is no exception, as the success of prize-winning authors who identify as Muslims, such as Navid Kermani and Feridun Zaimoglu, demonstrates. There has also been a notable post-9/11 rise in Islamic themes in German literary texts regardless of their author's background, outlined by Karin E. Yeşilada's study of the "Muslim turn."² Yet the literary writing of Emine Sevgi Özdamar seems to contradict this trend. It is her publications in the early 1990s, not her post-9/11 work, that deal primarily with Islamic themes. Although her position within the many debates surrounding Islam in German society is more difficult to ascertain than that of other writers, such as Kermani, who have enthusiastically adopted the role of public intellectual, Özdamar's early semi-autobiographical works of fiction, including the novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992, henceforth *Karawanserei*) and the short story "Großvater Zunge" (the second story in the collection *Mutterzunge*, 1990), raise questions that are central to debates over Islam's place in society, be it in Germany or Turkey.

With the growing focus on and suspicion of Islam in the post-9/11 era, these early texts by Özdamar have gained a new relevance, not only in that they convey Islam's multifacetedness, including its mystical traditions (Sufism), but that they uncover the modernizing potential contained within this broad understanding of Islam, illuminating the nuances and ambivalences between the increasingly polarized extremes of normative secular modernity and institutionalized, patriarchal forms of Islam – it is perhaps for this reason that

Özdamar's novels were repackaged in 2006 under the title *Sonne auf halbem Weg: Die Istanbul-Berlin-Trilogie*. The many references in Özdamar's writing to the Turkish state's top-down process of modernization started under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is significant here, as it demonstrates that Turkey's preoccupations surrounding the place of Islam in the secular public sphere predate Germany's, secularism being one of the central tenets of Kemalism. Moreover, the Turkish state's attempts to limit and yet also control religion's influence has gone further than Germany's in many ways – for example, Turkish imams are appointed and monitored by the state-run Directorate of Religious Affairs, leading to criticisms that church and state are not at all separate in the Turkish system (Çinar, 17).³

Previous Özdamar scholarship has been influenced by the “spatial turn” in the humanities, which has led to a focus on spatial experiences and practices as a means of analyzing how power dynamics are shaped and contested. Since the psychology of Özdamar's protagonists plays such a minor role (Littler 2010, 98), their behavior in the spaces they inhabit is key to our understanding of the texts. Critics have examined her protagonists' interlacing movements that disrupt borders, and their transformative engagements with space that lead to new feelings of home in a migratory context.⁴ Özdamar's cityscapes have been viewed both as archival, as preserving memories of the past and hence stabilizing identities,⁵ and conversely also as cartographical in terms of a Deleuzian sense of becoming, that is to say, as “mapping something new, not just tracing a Turkish past that we presume to know” (Littler 2007, 178). A methodological approach that focuses on space and spatial practices forms an equally productive framework for exploring both how *Karawanserei* and “Großvater Zunge” emphasize the interwoven nature of secular and sacred space, that is to say spaces in which there is a connection between the worldly and the divine, in the everyday lives of many Muslims, and how the protagonists assert their agency by reworking spaces under the hegemony of the state or of institutionalized Islam. Sacred and secular spaces appear in a state of constant flux in these texts, meaning that the very possibility of religious devotion being compartmentalized in the private sphere (a key concern of both German liberal cosmopolitanisms and Kemalist secularism) is challenged, and yet the female protagonists in particular convey fluid religious identities and a sense of religious freedom precisely because they are often confined to the private sphere, away from sanctioned places of worship.

II

Karawanserei and “Großvater Zunge” are linked in many ways and can be understood as part of the same narrative strand; as Margaret Littler asserts, it is “important to view [Özdamar’s] oeuvre as a whole when approaching any part of it” (Littler 2010, 95). *Karawanserei* centers on the female protagonist’s journey from fetus to womanhood during her family’s inner migration around Turkey in the 1950s and early ‘60s, and ends with her journey to Germany where she will work as a guest worker. Although the texts “Mutter Zunge” and “Großvater Zunge” do not follow *Karawanserei* directly, they come after it, featuring a female Turkish protagonist who begins Arabic lessons in Berlin in order to reconnect with her Turkish heritage, from which the reforms of Turkey’s early Republican government and the authoritarian politics of the 1970s have alienated her. For this reason, I discuss them here in the chronological order of their plots rather than their publication.

Ottmar Ette emphasizes the importance of space in *Karawanserei*: “The title [...] features two doors, which leaves no doubt that, for [...] Özdamar, space – including the epochs of her life – is always an area of transit, a place of transition with more than one exit and more than one system of reference and communication” (Ette, 374). Regarding the role of Islam in the text, Islamic cultural associations surrounding gendered hygiene practices and the Arabic language have been explored.⁶ Yet the spiritual significance of Islam is yet to be analyzed in depth, and this is because, as Frauke Matthes indicates, although the narrator “approaches a more conscious dealing with her customs in the form of prayers,” “she continues to perceive the Arabic words of prayer as a sensual experience rather than as expressions that carry religious meaning” (Matthes 2011, 64). Although less so than “Großvater Zunge,” *Karawanserei* does nonetheless raise spiritual questions about Muslim women’s participation in religious life and the implications of a specifically Islamic notion of sacred space.

The novel is set during a time of rapid political, societal, economic and technological developments in Turkey. Hale Yilmaz cautions against viewing the Turkish population of the early Republic as a dichotomy of those who enthusiastically embraced reforms and those who engaged in violent rebellion. Instead, she proposes “a more comprehensive understanding of social and cultural life by focusing on the meeting grounds of and the dialogue between the state and the society” (Yilmaz, 2). The protagonists of *Karawanserei* enter into such negotiations with the state’s reforms, and these frequently play out in spatial terms. In this regard, Michel de Certeau’s theorization of spatial practices in “Walking in the City” (1984) can prove illuminating,

as he emphasizes how people creatively engage with urban space in unexpected ways in their everyday lives, rather than being mere passive recipients of ideological forces: “Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer” (Certeau, 95). This framework need not only inform our understanding of the protagonists’ behavior in the urban environment, however; it can also shed light on the ways in which characters take ownership of and reimagine sacred space beyond the often coercive control of the state and of institutionalized forms of Islam.

As the family move from place to place throughout *Karawanserei*, the architecture of their homes signals the type of community they are in contact with and their social class at the given time, underlining the sense of flux dominating Turkey during this era. Whereas old wooden houses are associated with pre-Kemalist traditions, Islam and rural life, the (often only partially built) modern concrete villas can be associated with the new Republic. As Banu Gökarksel explains: “modernization [in the Turkish Republic] has targeted public *and* private spheres [...]. Spatial changes were key to ‘living modern’ in the new cubic houses and apartments decorated according to European and American styles” (Gökarksel, 66). This change can be seen in the family’s modern American-style furniture, purchased to impress the bank manager’s wife (*SahW*, 244). The attempts to discursively construct the urban environment as either traditional or modern is most obvious in Bursa, whose key landmarks include the Holy Mountain, the Holy Mosque and the Holy Bridge, with the more recent addition of an equestrian statue of Atatürk (*SahW*, 122), reflecting how “[t]he placement of Atatürk statues and pictures has served to mark a space as secular and to represent devotion to the state project of modernity” (Gökarksel, 68), a function also served by military parades in the novel.

The clothing that people wear in public and private equally plays a central role, since in Turkey “[w]omen’s bodies, dress, and practices are key to the construction of each space as secular, modern, or religious” (Gökarksel, 62). In *Karawanserei*, the Kemalist reforms related to clothing come to the fore in a surreal history lesson, in which events are conjured in rapid succession by a grandfather figure from his carpet-like beard, emphasizing the speed of change at the time:

Es lebe die Republik, sagten die Männer im Frack und Melonenhüten. Religion und Staat sind getrennte Sachen, sagten sie und warfen die arabische Schrift auch ins Meer und holten mit europäischen Flugzeugen

die lateinische Schrift in das Land, nahmen den Frauen ihre Schleier weg, und die Minarette ließen sie verfaulen, und zu europäischer Musik tanzten sie auf den Bällen. Einen Panamahut hielt der blauäugige Mann in der Hand, dann setzte er ihn auf. Die armen Männer im Land mußten auch nicht mehr Fez, sondern auch Hüte tragen. In einer Kleinstadt trugen alle Männer auf einmal europäische Damenhüte, alte Ladenhüter, die ein schlauer Kaufmann ihnen verkauft hatte. (*SahW*, 44)

This scene refers to the so-called “hat revolution” that banned the wearing of the fez – itself the result of the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms in the wake of the French Revolution – and the father’s Western hat is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel, demonstrating his desire to appear modern and climb the social ladder (*SahW*, 29). The imagery in this scene of rotting minarets and the empathy shown toward the poorer women and men who would become stereotyped as anti-modern for still wanting to cover their heads suggest a hastiness and negativity to the reforms.

Unlike the blanket ban of the fez, the headscarf (“hijab”) was only banned in public institutions, such as universities and the army, something which is being overturned under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Atatürk’s reforms are credited with improving women’s lives through the liberalization of dress (Yilmaz, 78), and the “hijab” is viewed critically in the novel at times, often being linked to patriarchal control. This coercive aspect is embodied by the narrator’s grandfather, who quotes suras about female modesty and marital discipline, and even killed the protagonist’s maternal grandmother, one of his many wives, with a cruel punishment (*SahW*, 329–331). The link between modesty and the “hijab” comes to the fore as the narrator uses her headscarf to avoid a predatory male (*SahW*, 323–324), a particular worry once she reaches puberty (*SahW*, 373). Such events link the veil to male behavior, rather than female agency, and Özdamar can be criticized here for reinforcing the assumption that immodesty encourages sexual harassment. Yet these events also imply, as the feminist Fatima Mernissi argues (Mernissi 1985, 41), that it is men who are constructed as the passive, weaker side of the Islamic gender binary, unable, unlike women, to control their own sexual urges.

Karawanserei does, nevertheless, highlight reasons other than patriarchal domination for wearing the “hijab”, such as custom and religious devotion. The narrator’s mother does not normally wear a headscarf, which is unsurprising given her secular schooling in the early days of the Republic and her affection and support for Atatürk (*SahW*, 147). Yet she does wear one in public during their time in

the “religiösen Straße” in the rural town of Yenişehir, demonstrating how women negotiate between spaces that are defined as modern and traditional: “Wenn Vater unsere Villa fertig gebaut hat, braucht sie dort kein Kopftuch tragen, weil dort nur die Memurs (Bürokraten) wohnen werden” (*SahW*, 70). The grandmother, by contrast, constantly wears a headscarf, sometimes two, and the narrator also wears one when she is being taught how to pray by her grandmother (*SahW*, 84), a scene in which a connection between the “hijab” and the creation of sacred space is formed.

As Fadwa El Guindi argues, the traditional Islamic sense of space “enables ordinary Muslims temporarily to convert any worldly place (street, shop, aircraft isle) into a sacred space set apart, simply by marking it and occupying it in a ritually pure state facing Makka” (El Guindi, 77–78). In the novel, we see the grandmother educate the narrator in the importance of ritualized space for the daily namaz prayers, which is comically alluded to later as a man in a boat on choppy waters is trying in vain to face Mecca (*SahW*, 392). Just as the “hijab” and prayer are linked in *Karawanserei*, veiling behavior for El Guindi is also “about sacred privacy, sanctity and the rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life, linking women as the guardians of family sanctuaries and the realm of the sacred in this world” (96). This movement between the holy and the wholly ordinary is emphasized by the child narrator’s perspective, as she at times completes her ritualized movements and talks to Allah, converting worldly space into something sacred, and at times is distracted by profane matters, such as the flatulence of those praying in front of her (*SahW*, 85). This uniquely Islamic conceptualization of space is tied to the omnipresence of Allah, as Annemarie Schimmel explains: “the conviction that God is not restricted to a single place but is *hādīr nāzīr*, ‘present and watching’ everywhere, and that mankind feels his presence wherever it may be, has permeated the Muslims’ attitude to sacred space” (Schimmel 1991, 163). This is also comically alluded to in the text, as the child fails to understand not only how Allah can see her and her mother simultaneously, but also how he can see through the roof. Here, the sacred invades the profane for the narrator, suggesting a religious experience of sacred space that cannot be contained or controlled as secularization demands. The narrator tests Allah’s omnipresence by provoking him: “Ich ging auf die Toilette, ich wußte, da wohnte der Teufel, ich sagte: ‘Allah, ich scheiße auf deinen Mund, mit Teufel!’” (*SahW*, 226).

This understanding of space also has implications for institutionalized and patriarchal forms of Islam, which are at times experienced by

the narrator and other females as coercive and can hence be linked in spatial terms to de Certeau's understanding of the rationally planned city that "must [...] repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it" (Certeau, 94). Gendered division of space is common in Islam and yet the potential for every Muslim to create their own sacred space gives women autonomy; as de Certeau argues, elements excluded from strictly controlled spaces can become "contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power" (Certeau, 95). At one point in the novel, the women of Bursa are praying at home while the men are in the mosque. Yet the use of simile allows these domestic prayers to match their male counterparts in spiritual significance:

Ich sah beim Namaz durch die großen Fenster, daß auch unsere Nachbarinnen sich bücken, hochheben, Namaz machen. In dem Moment war diese neue Gasse für mich wie eine sehr große Moschee. Ich merkte, daß meine Gebetsbewegungen die Bewegungen der Nachbarinnen, die ich aus dem Fenster sah, nachmachten. [...] Ich hatte [die Bewegungen] in meinem Körper, ich sah nur mich und meinen Gebetsteppich, die Gebetswörter kamen zusammen aus meinem und Großmutter's Mund halblaut heraus. (*SahW*, 176)

The narrator appears concentrated on her prayer, and the performative nature of the ritual and the female community it creates is emphasized by their shared movements (Littler 2010, 103). As Schimmel states: "The one direction of prayer around which the people of the world are placed [...] is the most visible sign of the unity of Muslims; it is, so to speak, the spacialization of their belief in one, and only one, God" (Schimmel 1991, 164).

Visits to shrines also emphasize the dynamic nature of sacred space in the text, while also serving to reinforce a distinctly feminine Muslim community by allowing women to momentarily escape the family home. Aunt Sıdıka's comment, "Allah sei Dank, daß es so viele heilige Männer gibt, so lüften alle Frauen im Frühling ihr in Mottepulver gelegtes Leben und ihre Schachteln" (*SahW*, 263), resonates with Mernissi: "Undeniably therapeutic, the sanctuary [of the shrine] stimulates the energies of women against their discontent and allows them to bathe in an intrinsically female community of soothers, supporters and advisers" (Mernissi, 1996, 25). Indeed, shrines function, to use Michel Foucault's term, as "heterotopias" in the novel, as they operate in non-hegemonic ways, in that otherness is reluctantly permitted and norms are suspended, if only temporarily.

Women can take charge of their own spirituality in these spaces and are justified in doing so on religious grounds:

Muslim theologians denounced the visitation of tombs, the building of shrines over them, the association of mosques with them, and the mixing of classes and genders that happened around them. However [...], these theologians had to admit that the practice of building tombs, visiting them, and considering the dead as present within them was an authentic part of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. (Kugle, 47-48)

Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden stress that “[m]any women, even those committed to life within patriarchal institutions, have resisted and revisioned men’s definitions of them and their forms of spirituality” (Devlin-Glass / McCredden, 7), and this is also the case for the novel’s female figures, whose religious spatial practices provide access to the divine, while also undermining imposed norms. Their distinctly female and at times heterodox form of Islam is, according to Azade Seyhan, an example of “Islam with a Turkish accent,” by which she means that

the practice of Islam has been tempered by superstition, iconoclastic humor, and early Islamic mysticism [...]. A nomadic people of the Central Asian steppes, the pre-Islamic Turks practiced various shamanistic religions. Furthermore, their social structure was not patriarchal by any measure. Orthodox Islam practice could never be properly hooked up with this nomadic history. (Seyhan 1996, 422)

The women’s understanding of sacred space equally plays an important role in this regard, as it means that their form of Islam, unlike the men’s version, does not become fixed in one institutionalized place, but is rather fluid, mobile and outside the reach of religious authority figures.

The two scenes that take place in bathhouses provide space for the most striking examples of intergenerational, interreligious, feminine space in the novel, here for the purpose of rest, relaxation, spiritual purity and the critique of male-dominated politics. As with collective prayer, the collective removal of pubic hair becomes a performative, shared experience that links the women (Matthes 2008, 169). The narrator refers back to the scene of the prayers at home at this point to underline both the feeling of female community and also the link between ritual purity and the creation of sacred space:

“Unsere steile Gasse, die öfter wie eine große Moschee aussah, in der sich die Menschen für Namaz-Gebete zusammen hoch- und herunterbückten, war jetzt ein heiliger Mutter-Meryem-Maria-Mösenplanet, der sich von seinen Haaren putzte” (*SahW*, 281). Since this space is hidden from male authority, as the contrast with the lap-dancing club in the subsequent scene markedly highlights, it too can be viewed as a heterotopia, as a space where deviation from societal norms can take place, and Foucault explicitly mentions the hammam and the shared rituals that define it:

Either the entry [to a heterotopia] is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. Moreover, there are even heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to these activities of purification – purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic, such as the [hammam] of the Moslems. (Foucault, 25)

Male hegemony is, however, not subverted in every respect here. This coming-of-age experience is ambivalent for the girl; as Matthes indicates, it is coupled with feelings of community and of bodily shame (Matthes 2008, 171), just like when the protagonist gets her first period (*SahW*, 347). Yet it is, ironically, patriarchal ideas of modesty and hygiene that ultimately allow the women to occupy their own private space, be it at home or in the hammam, and it is typical of Özdamar to highlight the multifaceted nature of various Islamic traditions, demonstrating how they can control the female body, while also providing space for resistance. In Seyhan’s words: “The narrative is told almost exclusively in women’s voices that symbolize the conflicts of historical transitions. In their voices, songs, tales, and litanies, they reinvent cultural traditions whose modernized spirituality can absorb the shocks of modernity” (Seyhan 1996, 422).

The nature of sacred space not only plays an important role in the protagonists’ negotiation of Islamic traditions, but equally their position between tradition and modernity, which is never a clear-cut binary in the novel. Spirituality interrupts state-sanctioned secular modernity, and the focus on Ottoman tradition, folk heterodoxy, patriarchal Islam and modern Kemalist ideas is constantly shifting. More rural areas, such as the “religiöse Straße,” seem devoid of almost all modernity. Symbols of technological advancement are notably absent, as not planes, but birds with the appearance of Arabic letters fill the sky, establishing a connection between rural life and

contrast with the gas lights of rural Anatolia, but also with moonlight, which appears as a connecting force at different points in the novel: “Nur der Mond nähte mich an die anderen Menschen, die ich liebte, aber nicht finden konnte” (*SahW*, 107). Since the star and crescent moon form the symbol of Islam, this lunar imagery introduces a further religious dimension to the tradition-modernity divide, underscoring the connecting force religion plays in the communal aspects of the narrator’s life, standing in contrast to the electric light of modernity, which only allows for a fraction of the spatial dimension of moonlight. The religious street is said to be under the “Halbmondlicht” (*SahW*, 71), and similar imagery also features in the Sufi-inspired poetic verses of “Großvater Zunge”: “Bevor ich sterbe, will ich ihn noch mal sehen, sein Gesicht, mein Gesicht, zwischen uns der Mond” (*M*, 32).⁸ The moon also fulfills a connecting role here, positioned as it is between the lovers’ faces. Hence this is not only a reference to Islam’s aesthetics, but also to its unifying power as a belief system involving a set of cultural practices with a spatial dimension that can potentially extend into any sphere.

Just as Islam can be both a positive and a negative force in the novel, Kemalism too can be experienced as both liberating and alienating. The narrator’s confrontation with Kemalism also occurs in spatial terms, as she loses her sense of self when faced with the unfamiliar architecture of the Atatürk mausoleum in Ankara, whose marble rooms she believes are there to make visitors feel inadequately modern (*SahW*, 333–335). The intimidating appearance of the mausoleum is just one way in which the Kemalist modernization project appears just as prescriptive and overbearing as institutionalized religion, suggesting continuity as well as change – something which can be seen in the state regulations surrounding dress, as mentioned earlier. A devotional attitude toward Atatürk is expressed by a soldier in the novel, just after the Republican coup has reasserted Kemalist values: “Mit Uniform schreit man nicht, mit Uniform geht man nicht in den Puff, Atatürk ist in uns” (*SahW*, 297). This scene again demonstrates the defining and performative power of clothing, and the quote even affords Atatürk a quasi-divine aspect, reflecting the “unio mystica” that takes place in “Großvater Zunge”. The artefacts in the Atatürk mausoleum, “[s]eine Teetasse, seine Rasierpinsel, seine Hüte, seine Jacken, seine Hosen”, etc. (*SahW*, 336), not only emphasize his Western appearance, but also remind the reader of religious relics. There is even a story of a young woman having sex with one of the guards in the mausoleum basement, and later saying “daß sie von Atatürk schwanger geworden wäre, wie unsere heilige Mutter Meryem” (*SahW*, 344). As

Haldun Gülalp asserts, Kemalism can be viewed as merely replacing Sunni Islam as an organizing principle to be obeyed: “The revolution that ushered the society into modernity was a state-led ‘modernization from above’ experience [...]. But this seems to have led to a replication of the structural characteristics of the religious mode of legitimation” (Gülalp, 368).

Thus, *Karawanserei* is critical of all authoritarian ways of organizing society, be they religious or secularizing, and the protagonists are constantly involved in finding spaces of otherness outside this coercion, although they cannot ever really hope to overturn it. The overall picture nevertheless suggests that Kemalist ideas of modernity were too hasty and at times too oppressive, and that Islamic traditions that provide these spaces of otherness and of togetherness were side-lined to the detriment of many. The mother and daughter of *Karawanserei* are happiest in the “steile Gasse” of Bursa, where there is a strong sense of community and of Muslim identity, and they become mentally ill and suicidal while living in Ankara and its vicinity, implying that the reforms had a damaging effect upon them. The stark aesthetic of Atatürk’s mausoleum emphasizes this radical break with the past, and the bleak steppe symbolizes the apparent caesura of the new Republic (*SahW*, 305). Yet, even though the lack of any mosque in the steppe surrounding Ankara characterizes it as secular, the nature of Islamic sacred space allows this absence to be overcome: “In allen Zimmern bückten wir uns, setzten wir uns mit den Gebetswörtern auf die Erde, Allahs und Mohammeds Namen kamen laut aus den Zimmern. So waren die Zimmer wieder eine Moschee” (*SahW*, 326). Thus the Islamic understanding of sacred space, together with the protagonists’ unorthodox forms of Islam “tempered by superstition, iconoclastic humor, and early Islamic mysticism” (Seyhan 1996, 422), allows the characters of *Karawanserei* to resist both secularizing and orthodox pressures, and this is equally the case for the female protagonist of “Großvater Zunge.”

Space not only plays a central role in “Großvater Zunge” because the narrator repeatedly travels across Cold War divides, but also because she frequently moves between sacred and secular spaces. The critique of Turkey’s ongoing modernization process is a shared focus of both *Karawanserei* and “Großvater Zunge,” which has been foregrounded in the scholarship.⁹ The narrator’s attempt to learn Arabic as a route back to her mother tongue, Turkish, is therefore read as reconnecting with Turkey’s Ottoman and pre-Ottoman past, which can also mean reconnecting with Islam. More so than in *Karawanserei*, Islam plays a spiritual role for the protagonist here, as, despite

her Westernized politics, her Arabic lessons with Ibni Abdullah result in a love affair with ambiguous mystical aspects.¹⁰ As the protagonist says of her inner turmoil, torn between modernization and a mystical association with Islam and pre-Kemalist culture: “Ich habe zu Atatürk-Todestagen schreiend Gedichte gelesen und geweint, aber er hätte die arabische Schrift nicht verbieten müssen. Dieses Verbot ist so, wie wenn die Hälfte von meinem Kopf abgeschnitten ist” (*M*, 29). Both the violent imagery and the use of the indicative rather than the subjunctive in the last sentence underline the sense of loss felt by the protagonist and her conflicted sense of self.

As in *Karawanserei*, space in “Großvater Zunge,” although often seemingly constructed as either traditional and sacred, or modern and secular, ultimately undermines such binaries. In the opening scene, the reader initially views Ibni Abdullah’s room as very much forming a sacred space apart from the outside world:

In Wilmersdorf machte Ibni Abdullah die Tür auf, seine Hand roch nach Rosen. Ich lief hinter diesem Duft, ich trat in eine kleine Moschee, er hat ein 200-DM-Zimmer und seine Wände und Boden und Decke mit Teppichen und seidenen Stoffen angezogen, die Kissen sitzen auf der Erde artig, schläfrig, nur das Fenster zum Hof war unheilig unbarmherzig wach. Großmutter sagte mal, Paradies und Hölle sind zwei Nachbarn, ihre Türen stehen gegenüber. (*M*, 15)

The aroma and decoration of the mosque-like room underscore the sacred, otherworldly nature of the space for the protagonist, which contrasts with the real geographical location of Wilmersdorf, while also resonating with it as the location of Germany’s oldest surviving mosque. Although the window hints at a connection to the external world, the stark difference to the outside hints at how Muslims “move in and out during the course of the day between worldly and sacred spheres” (El Guindi, 78-79), and also plays on German fears of *Parallelgesellschaften*. This makes the classroom into a heterotopia of sorts, a sacred space for which “the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (Foucault, 25), distinct from the ostensibly secular public sphere. This is reflected in the ritualistic exchange of Arabic sayings as the narrator enters: “Ibni Abdullah sprach: ‘Selamünaleyküm’. ‘Aleykümselam’” (*M*, 15). This greeting has religious connotations from the Koran: “When you enter the house, greet one another with a greeting of blessing and goodness as enjoined by God” (sura 24:61).¹¹ The use of Turkish here, rather than Arabic, not only hints at the connections between the two languages to be

explored in the story, but also emphasizes the closed nature of this space for the monolingual German reader of presumably non-Muslim heritage – something reflected in the divergent ways in which the narrator and Ibni Abdullah's other students experience the space of the "Schriftzimmer."

However, despite being a space of otherness, the religious environment of the classroom is nevertheless often experienced as an oppressive place, implying a more conservative and puritanical form of Islam. Like in the Atatürk mausoleum, the interior itself exerts an influence on the narrator: "Ich schämte mich vor meinen offenen Haaren, vor meiner nackten Haut, ich dachte, alle Farben vom Schriftzimmer schreien auch aus Scham" (*M*, 42). The narrator appears to internalize this patriarchal view, as even the cushions make her well-behaved (*M*, 18). Among the characteristics that mark Ibni Abdullah's flat as a sacred space, sound again plays an important role, particularly in terms of Koran recitations. As Littler affirms (Littler 2002, 226), the scene in which the narrator begins to read from the Koran echoes Muhammad's revelation: "Lese, Gott hat es uns geschickt. Es kamen aus meinem Mund die Buchstaben raus" (*M*, 18). The description of the letters as animals here gives them a materiality and spatial dimension in the room, yet they are devoid of any customary denotative meaning, which serves to distance the narrator from the often punitive nature of the verses that make up Ibni Abdullah's teaching materials: "und wenn die Gräber umgekehrt werden, dann weiß die Seele, was sie getan und unterlassen hat. Oh Mensch, was hat dich von deinem hochsinnigen Herrn abwendig gemacht" (*M*, 19).

At one point, Ibni Abdullah divides the study with a curtain, a key moment in terms of religion and space in the text (*M*, 25). "Curtain" is one possible translation of "hijab" and hence Brigit Haines and Margaret Littler read this as a symbolic veiling to bring order into Ibni Abdullah's life after his relationship with the protagonist has turned it upside-down (Haines / Littler, 132). Since Ibni Abdullah does this to control *his* sexual urges, it can be viewed as a patriarchal gesture of oppressive confinement, echoing a familiar trope within cultural representations of Islamic/Turkish gender relations, such as in the film *40qm Deutschland* by Tevfik Başer (1985). The organization of space behind the "iron curtain" in the GDR is similarly oppressive, although linked, by contrast, to secular dictatorship: "Da stand eine Statue von Brecht, er sah wie ein pensionierter Alter aus [...], wenn die Kinder laut sind, wird er sie weggagen" (*M*, 17). Just as the narrator at times feels shame about her body and sexuality while in the "Schriftzimmer," the stern Brecht statue seems to exert

an authoritarian influence. Yet these spaces reflect neither the narrator's understanding of Islam nor of socialism. Just as she imagines an alternative, joyful Brecht statue "mit Mütze und Flöte" (*M*, 17), the version of Islam suggested by the narrator is inflected with mystical aspects that contrast with the, at times, conservative and sexually repressive nature of Ibni Abdullah's belief (Haines / Littler, 135-136; Roy, 174-175). Both protagonists are, however, conflicted people. Ibni Abdullah often wants a holy, pure love and gives the narrator wrathful Koran excerpts to read, but he also demonstrates increasingly mystical tendencies, particularly after returning from his mother in Arabia, who gives him a woolen vest (*M*, 23), wool being a possible root of the word "Sufi" (Schimmel 1975, 14). This reference to the woolen garments worn by early Sufis somewhat irreverently reduces the complexities of mystical theology and philosophy to a mere knitted cardigan, but it nevertheless emphasizes that it is the women in Ibni Abdullah's life who exert a benign, mystical influence, just as it is usually the women of *Karawanserei* who perform this role – the protagonist's "Raki-Trinker" father also displays mystical tendencies, like his mother (*SahW*, 64).

Sufism provides a context in which the spirituality and the sexual emancipation of the narrator are mutually compatible; as Haines and Littler comment, the protagonist's experience of unio mystica with Ibni Abdullah during a large part of the story resonates with "the Sufi desire to overcome the painful separation from God" (Haines / Littler, 228). Littler interprets the dream-like scene in which the narrator makes love to Ibni Abdullah in a mosque while dressed in both men's and women's clothing as an engagement with Sufi sensuality (Littler 2002, 226), which contains both an aesthetic/symbolic and a spiritually immanentist dimension:

mein Gesicht ist unter Kopftüchern, ich gehe mit Ibni Abdullah einmal zur Männergesellschaft, ich habe halb Mann-, halb Frauenkostüm, ich singe dort ein Lied aus dem Koran, ich habe Angst vor den Wangen von Ibni Abdullah, sie sind wie von Khomeinis Mullah. "Die Sünden sollst du tragen", sagt Ibni Abdullah und liebt mich in einer Moschee [...]. Die Lichter kommen von oben, zerbrechen auf dem Weg, legen sich auf die Teppiche, auf diesen Teppichen haben Menschen gegessen, ihre Hände aufgemacht, mit Allah gesprochen [...]. Ibni Abdullah setzt mich auf ein Blumenmotiv auf dem Teppich, er nahm meine Brustwarzen, ich lege meine Hände zur Sonne an seinem Hals. (*M*, 22)

It is, however, overwhelmingly Sufi men who find divine insight in human beauty and in sexual relations (with both women and men), whereas Sufi women are mostly remembered for their asceticism and abstinence (Butorovic, 143). Yet Özdamar challenges these traditional gender roles, as indeed some Sufis did. As Scott Kugle indicates: “Men become saints by tapping ‘feminine’ qualities that are normally hidden or repressed in men, while women become saints by tapping ‘masculine’ qualities within themselves that ordinary women do not actively manifest” (Kugle, 121). In this regard, Ibni Abdullah too takes on feminine traits, as he is described as being both “Mann und Frau” (*M*, 36).

Littler points out that the apparent conflict between Islam and modernity in the story is therefore better understood as a conflict between differing forms of Islam, namely Sunni orthodoxy and Sufism, the latter being compatible with the narrator’s sense of modernity (Littler 2002, 228–229). Yet further complexity emerges as differing ideas from within the Sufi tradition are also at play here, with implications for our understanding of the protagonist’s symbolic veiling. When viewed in terms of Sufi asceticism, this hermit-like period of withdrawal behind the curtain can be associated with the purification of the ego from worldly wants, including sexual desire. Furthermore, the symbolic forty days she spends behind the curtain, although isolated and characterized by an increased sense of shame, are also filled with strange, mystical happenings, as the words of the Koran mingle with Anatolian folk lyrics, conflating the flames of divine punishment and of passion (*M*, 33). As Amila Butorovic argues: “Sufism imbued women with the power to treat their socially constructed space as the principle site of mystical devotion and, in turn, remetaphorize the meaning of *islam* – submission” (Butorovic, 140). Although problematic from a Western feminist standpoint, the narrator’s willingness to take on a subordinate role to Ibni Abdullah and imbue it with a spiritual significance can, then, be linked to the literal meaning of “Islam.” In this regard, views from more orthodox Muslim feminists too describe the “hijab” as being primarily “about sacred privacy, sanctity and the rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life” (El Guindi, 96), rather than viewing it as an instrument of male domination.

Thus the narrator’s seemingly incongruous leap from identifying with “hijab”-wearing women to making love with Ibni Abdullah in a mosque equally demonstrates the variety within Sufi thought, encompassing its world-transcending and its world-affirming aspects respectively. This scene equally suggests a spiritual fervor that ultimately cannot be confined to the private sphere, as it spills out onto the streets of Berlin. Nevertheless, the various shifts in time and

space during this mystical event mean that it is not clear when it begins or if the action actually takes place: “Ich ging den arabischen Frauen mit Kopftüchern hinterher, ihre schwangeren Töchter neben ihnen, ich will unter ihre Röcke gehen, ganz klein sein, ich will ihre Tochter sein in Neukölln” (*M*, 21-22) – this desire to hide under the women’s skirts again links the narrator with the Prophet Muhammad, whose fear upon receiving divine revelation led him to hide under his wife Khadija’s garments, as outlined in the Hadith of Bukhari (1:3).¹² These conflicting aspects of Sufism are, however, linked through the Islamic understanding of sacred space. The connection between the “hijab”, symbolizing modesty, and the prayer mat on which they make love, which equates sexual passion with the more conventional method of prayer for accessing the divine, both rest on the ability to make any worldly space sacred. The narrator’s union with Ibni Abdullah, the termination of which the reader can only speculate about, can also be tied to Allah’s omnipresence.

Thus, following the path of female Sufi saints, the protagonist of “Großvater Zunge” strikes a balance between challenging patriarchal religious norms and reaching divine transcendence within the Islamic tradition, albeit a broad understanding of it. She negotiates a sense of modernity from within pre-Ottoman, Ottoman, and Kemalist traditions, blurring distinctions between them. Hence, what appears from a Western standpoint as a parallel society, in which female sexuality is repressed and shamed, can equally be regarded as something altogether more complex, as the narrator reappropriates her place within Islam in varying ways. The narrator’s sexual emancipation is, then, neither specifically Western nor Eastern, nor is it exclusively spiritual or secular. Rather, her modern outlook problematizes such a dichotomy. Ambiguity surrounds which “Schriften” (“heilige Schriften,” “Zeitungsschriften,” or both) she throws onto the motorway – a space symbolic of modernity (Littler 2004, 138) – toward the end of the narrative. Both would nevertheless be an accurate reflection of the narrator’s opposition to political oppression – the newspaper headline reads: “In Rio lagen Tote lange in der Gasse – zu wenig Leichenwagen”¹³ (*M*, 44) – and religious organizing principles, just as for some Sufis “‘to break the ink-pots and to tear the books’ was considered [...] the first step in Sufism” (Schimmel 1975, 17).

III

An understanding of space informed by an awareness of the significance within Islam of the omnipresence of Allah can illuminate how sacred and secular spaces constantly shift and overlap for the characters

of *Karawanserei* and “Großvater Zunge.” Yet Özdamar does more than merely educate her German readers about the nature of sacred space for many Muslims; her work calls into question the very idea that religion is something that can be controlled and confined to the private sphere, while also emphasizing a less oppressive and distinctly feminine religious outlook that is directly related to women’s confinement to the private sphere. The spiritual and worldly needs that this conceptualization of space fulfil for the female protagonists cannot be disentangled. Whether guided by Sufi or more orthodox mores, their conceptualization of sacred space allows them the freedom to take their faith into their own hands, without the need for the mediation of homogenizing institutions or of patriarchal figures, such as husbands, fathers and imams. This freedom manifests itself in spaces established on the one hand through prayer, and through visiting shrines and hammams, and on the other by finding divine insight in seclusion, submission and also sexual passion.

Although Özdamar’s texts do not avoid connecting some Islamic traditions with patriarchal violence, this violence is not solely linked to a monolithic view of “Islamic culture,” which instead emerges as varied in these texts and as providing protagonists with opportunities for spiritual insight, sexual intimacy, creativity and solidarity.¹⁴ Her female protagonists suggest that Turkey’s top-down process of modernization risks losing this modernizing potential already within Islamic traditions and, as Seyhan mentions, this also played into the hands of Turkish fundamentalists: “[t]his cultural rupture, it has often been asserted, has led to easy exploitation of religious sentiment by the Democratic party and other reactionary parties of Türkiye’s fragile democracy and has paved the way to a fundamentalist backlash” (1996, 422). Littler, while acknowledging the importance of the Turkish context, is keen to emphasize the political nature of Özdamar’s writing as German literature, not as a diasporic outpost of Turkish culture (Littler 2002, 222). Although both *Karawanserei* and “Großvater Zunge” arguably comment primarily on Turkish society and politics, they nonetheless add complexity to the debates surrounding Islam in Germany in the ‘90s, which have become ever more polarized in the post-9/11 era. Both a normative secularism that demonizes Islam and regards female Muslims as perpetual victims, and patriarchal, orthodox manifestations of Islam that perpetuate such views deny Muslim women their own voice and agency. By contrast, Özdamar portrays resourceful Muslim women, be they in Germany or Turkey, who negotiate their position in society through creative spatial practices. Her texts undermine any monolithic

understanding of the “Islamic world” and challenge the exclusion of Turks from the secular West, or of Islam from modernity.

Endnotes

¹ I am grateful to the National University of Ireland, Galway for supporting this research through the Moore Fellowship.

² See Karin E. Yeşilada, “Gottes Krieger und Jungfrauen: Islam im Werk Feridun Zaimoğlu” and Yeşilada, “Dialogues with Islam in the Writing of (Turkish-)German Intellectuals.”

³ It should, however, be noted that the influence of Islam as a political force is currently growing under the influence of president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party.

⁴ See Ette, “Urbanity and Literature” and Schade, “Rewriting Home and Migration.”

⁵ See Seyhan, “From Istanbul to Berlin.”

⁶ See Matthes, ““Die Sauberkeit kommt vom Glauben”” and Matthes, *Writing and Muslim Identity*, 58-65.

⁷ This also happens during the Republican national celebrations in the novel, when the electricity fails, the music stops, the lights go out, and somebody mutters “Bismillâhirrahmanirrahim” in the dark (*SahW*, 113).

⁸ Kate Roy uncovers various intertextual links to Sufi poetry in the text, which is replete with imagery of the unresponsive rose, standing for God and the beloved, and the nightingale, standing for the Sufi wayfarer and the lover (Roy, 174-175).

⁹ See Seyhan, “Lost in Translation”; Littler, “Diasporic Identity in Emine Sevgi Özdamar”; and Haines and Littler, *Contemporary Women’s Writing in German*, 118-138.

¹⁰ For insightful discussions of the mystical, Sufi elements of “Großvater Zunge,” see Littler “Diasporic Identity in Emine Sevgi Özdamar” and Roy, “German-Islamic Literary Interperceptions.”

¹¹ Quote from Abdel Haleem’s translation (2004).

¹² Ibnî Abdullah’s name and the light that emanates from his face in the love-making scene in the mosque also link him to the Prophet Muhammad (Haines / Littler, 124 and 133).

¹³ The military coup and authoritarian violence in Brazil between 1964 and 1985 echo the events in Turkey outlined in “Mutter Zunge.” For a discussion of the impact of 1970s Turkish politics upon the language of “Mutter Zunge,” see Yildiz, “Political Trauma and Literal Translation.”

¹⁴ For an in-depth discussion of secular violence in Özdamar’s writing, as well as a broader analysis of how German Muslim women in various spheres are casting off stereotypical labels, see Beverly M. Weber, *Violence and Gender in the “New” Europe*, 173-198.

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