

Living Islam in a German Family and Germanness in a Muslim family

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Abstract

Türkisch für Anfänger, a German sitcom directed by Bora Dagtekin, son to a Turkish father and a German mother, draws on the quotidian of a German-Turkish – *Deutsch-Türken*– family tossed together by fate in the city of Berlin in the years following 9/11. For the sake of brevity, focus is mainly placed on the first season whose twelve episodes shed light on some of the major issues Muslims, German Muslims, and Turks together with Germans, are faced with when fate brings them together in so cosmopolitan a city as Berlin. With this in the background, it goes without saying that much of the scriptwriter's personal life is brought to bear on his creation of an ethno-comedy intriguing enough to follow and retrace. This study aims at explicating the ways in which friction leads to the perception and the construction of Muslim Other within the gates as riddled with stereotypes. By deconstructing the stereotypical, the researchers seek to demonstrate how humour can be used to dispel and subvert clichés, thus creating a culture of resistance.

Keywords: construction, deconstructing, humour, resistance, stereotypes, Muslim, Other

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Introduction

There is more to ethnicised humour than the superficially obtrusive and abusive features it is often entwined with. Ethnicised humour, a humour permeated with stereotyping, functions as a safety valve relieving “hostilities and aggressions through individual or communal outbursts of merriment”, (Dudden, 1987, p. xvi). Neither the Germans nor the Turks can complain because both receive their due measure of sarcasm. As such, ethnic humour finds in the power to slander ethnicities a way to promote “pride and self-esteem” (Boskin and Dorinson, 1998, p. 206). In so doing, the oppressed deploy new weaponry as a ploy preparatory to creating a culture of resistance, a humour of resistance. Having premiered on March 14, 2006, *Türkisch für Anfänger* kept running for two more years on the German channel Das Erste before being aired in other countries as well. No wonder then that it made itself a household name, earning quite a few distinguished awards. Unlike most sitcoms produced prior to 9/11, the post-September and, for that matter, post-modernist experimental species of sitcoms, including *Türkisch für Anfänger*, break new grounds and take the viewer “in virtually any direction”, extending the narrative scope by “testing the very structures on which they stand in a constant, yet not always obvious confrontation” with previously well-established canons (Savorelli, 2010, p. 25). Were the characters summoned in this series all Muslim Turks, the director would produce a mono-ethnic sitcom whose monolithic discourse would probably only reinforce ghettoisation of audiences (Lotz, 2005, p. 144). What makes the sitcom under study exceptionally fun to watch, analyse and scrutinise is that Germans and Turks, both teens and adults, find themselves in a patchwork family. By living under the same roof, the Turks and Germans now have to make concessions to reach a compromise. Critics believe that the multicultural “casting was a clever decision, as it drew not only German and Turkish audiences, but also attracted audiences from other minorities...to watch ‘their’ identificatory figures on screen” (Yesilada, 2008, p. 87). The mixed family, which the viewers eagerly return to watch every episode, mirrors this metamorphosis that has now become commonplace in metropolitan hubs, Berlin being no exception. The bringing together of the Ozturks with the Schneiders, within the same claustrophobic shot, is in many ways an encounter of the “self” with the “other” with which audiences from near and afar will vicariously identify. The Ozturks are in more ways than one representative not only, though in the main, of Turks in Germany, but equally of other Muslim minorities all over Europe. One reason why this is the case is to be ascribed to the visibility of Turks owing to their ever-growing presence on German soil. The collision ensuing from such a juxtaposition of polar extremes, or perhaps not so, at such a juncture in such a locale serves as the basis for much of the anarchy and chaos which forms the stepping stone on the path to familiarisation and, hopefully, to reconciliation and orderliness. If the Ozturks and the Schneiders can co-exist, so can the three million Turks living in Germany and, by extension, other Muslims. Despite all the unsettling head-on confrontations marring the characters’ hitherto peaceful lives, they soon learn to leave their antagonism aside, their animosity behind and discard their prejudices. Benhabib (2006) posits that the “conflicting narratives” the show is built on “are woven together to form an epistemically plausible whole in the light of which cultural groups continue to resignify the good and the bad, the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure” (p. 384). The ideal and the real, the spiritual and the material, the heavenly and the earthly, all of which I will delve into in due course, are

grotesquely juxtaposed and brusquely upturned in keeping with the maxim that “laughter degrades and materializes”(Morris, 1994, p. 2006), but ‘le rire’ also uplifts and emancipates, according to Critchley (2002, p. 95).

1- Places, objects and names

Not only does migration redefine national borders, but it also leaves an indelible imprint across “the locales in which [immigrants] settle, converting them to translocational spaces, thereby affecting in different ways all who live within these spaces” (Anthias, 2008, p. 6). Berlin, a character in its own right, then becomes the transnational space where identity is imagined and practiced. The co-presence of two cameras, Lena’s and the director’s, function as a pretext to vehicle and mediate this quasi-reality/ hyperreality. The characters’ identities are not anchored in the singular space of the house but are rather constructed on many sites, including the street and the school. The home, the street and the school represent both the private and public “spheres of belonging; they together form the puzzle of the context where social relations, communication and action take place and shape the meanings of identity and community” (Georgiou, 2010, p. 22). *Türkisch für Anfänger* is replete with instances which confirm the now changed and still changing face of Berlin, hence Germany’s. Lena, the protagonist, has been leading a seemingly uneventful life until her mother Doris breaks the news that Lena will have to share the privacy of her room with a new sister, Yagmur; her house with a new brother, Cem; her mother with a step-father of Turkish descent, Metin. Like so many malcontent Germans, Lena remonstrates that the “familiarity, intimacy and security” of the home have all been lost to “the unknown, the distant and the large” (Georgiou, 2010, p. 23). Only when everyone is gone out does she feel free to do as she likes. With her only friend Katy gone to the US, she feels estranged in her own house and country. Not only does the 16-year old girl have to cope with the swift change that has turned her small family of three into an extended family of six, but she also has to come to grips with a culture and a religion totally foreign to her.

As Lena wanders in the streets of Berlin all alone, she ironically congratulates herself on the vacation she is taking. While her words sound derisive, the images her own camera catches reveal and unveil the multicultural face of Germany. This is a melting-pot culture where one can bump into Italians, Turks and Greeks all in the same spot in the playground. As Lena reports live to Katy from the streets of Berlin on her first day at school, the cameraman accidentally, or perhaps deliberately, takes us on a fast-paced tour of the city. We catch a glimpse of a boutique where mannequins are posing and posed to sell clothes for veiled women dotting the cityscape; next door is an advert for veils for Muslim women and, last but not least, a restaurant for what seems like ethnic food whose smell we can almost scent. This pastiche the canvas of which is Berlin offers a composite of the multicultural and multifaceted capital with which Lena has to reconcile.

Inside the multi-educational school, the viewer glances a mix of veiled women, Chinese and Greece students, black men and women etc. all oblivious of their nationalities, their religion and their race. Cynical as usual and with a supercilious smile written on her face, Lena likens the school to a ministry department. Prejudiced as she is, she walks inside the classroom,

thinking that some of the faces resemble nurses, others racist Eastern Europeans, Turks, Greeks and so on. She taxonomises people and, based on her taxonomies, bandies labels that do not stand when later tested out. Lena's disproportionately inflated ego, as Hobbes explains, is nothing but an example of self-worth "arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves" (Chafe, 2007, p. 141) not found in others one belittles and abhors. In treating others the way she does, Lena proves that she is racist and xenophobic, which may cost her the sympathy of the viewership. The names the teacher calls out while filling the attendance sheet hardly sound German, reflecting the diversity of the German society, a diversity Lena cannot take in. Defiant, she sits at the far back all alone unable to mix and mingle with the rest. What makes matters worse for Lena is that a student accidentally smashes the pen her father gave her before he disappeared for good. The teacher notices the commotion in the back and asks Lena to introduce herself. Lena explains that she is a new student, but the teacher cannot find her name on the list. Relieved, Lena leaves the classroom in a hurry but not without taking it out on Cem. Lena locks herself up in her bedroom and takes her camcorder to relate the events of the day to Katy, her only friend. Her mother knocks at the door and Lena pretends she has been speaking on the phone with her new school friends, which makes her mother proud of her. Soon enough, her Mum finds out Lena has been lying all along. Lena would rather live in solitude as many others do than have to befriend a foreigner, let alone a Muslim. Ironically, she cites Tom and Jerry, the cartoon characters, as examples of 'people' who lead a solitary life, but even these two need each other. The only friend Lena makes turns out to be a patient her mother has been treating for long. Lena thinks her mother set her up, which adds insult to her injuries. This is clearly an adolescent lacking in self-esteem and revolting against the status quo. Her mother's divorce is weighing heavily on her, it seems, so much so she fails to see the silver lining.

The mere presence of the other represents a threat. The school is the stage where Lena's fears of the other are staged and come out tumbling. The school, as a place where so many foreigners study, has become suggestive of society in miniature. However, her idea of school as an inferno soon changes when she bumps into Axel and decides to date him. Their friendship develops into a complicated love relationship. This new-found friend helps Lena regain much of her mother's confidence in her. In the last two episodes, the very school Lena so hates turns into a melting-spot, not to say pot, with the means and power necessary to channel the potential these youngsters from different ethnic backgrounds possess. Indeed, together with his classmates, Cem, a Turk, unexpectedly proves he is capable of doing lots of good. In the ward where cancer-stricken children lie, Cem sprinkles joy by telling the children humorous epic tales. Humour, as has been foregrounded, has in it what it takes to heal the soul of all misconceptions. In humouring the kids, Cem gains their trust, connects with them and with his entourage, and helps them transcend their bodily pain, albeit momentarily. The shared and collective laughter the sick and the healthy lose themselves to is a moment of transient relief, of détente, where all entranced participants forget their differences/misfortunes and laugh heartily. In fine, where the diminutive classificatory denominators of race, religion and nationalities are thought to engender incurable fissures, laughter comes in to unite Asians, Turks and Germans, Muslims and Christians, through invoking their shared humanity. By

volunteering to help the kids, Cem reasserts his humanity, a thing that wins him Lena over and “unites him with the audience, building sympathy and empathy” (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 42).

While Lena thought of school as hell until she realised otherwise, the religious school Yagmur goes to offers her that which her makeshift family cannot provide. The Muslim school girls have formed may be described as a diasporic community where “the identity of the individual” is largely contingent on “collective identities”, (Habermas, 1994, p. 129) in an embodiment of Anderson’s idea of a “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). A “feeling of connectedness” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 49) is thereby born out of common grievances and shared aspirations. This connection is “shaped by their history of migration and their hopes and aspirations for return to and reconstruction of their communities, often in the remembered images of the past” (Afshar, Aitken & Franks, 2006, p. 170). This is the case with Yagmur who constantly and persistently fantasises about journeying back. The dim memory of her mother hovers on her in moments of distress, being thus symbolic of everything that constitutes ‘home’. Fully aware that the return home is now next to impossible, Yagmur still retrospectively memorialises and immortalises “the trace of a memory of dispersion, of separation...of contempt, of loss of identity and of transplantation,” (Helly, 2006, p. 7) of separation from her mother/ her home and of contempt for things German, which Lena incarnates. Because the physical journey back en route home is impractical, Yagmur sets out on an introspective mental journey reviving memories of the past, engaging in posthumous epistolary writing and observing some rites such as fasting, praying and attending a mono-educational Islamic school in an attempt to revive her roots.

As a matter of fact, the diasporic moment is a moment of contraction and delivery that begets a novel reality individuals find themselves compelled to adapt to and benefit from. The girls in the school Yagmur attends constitute what Appadurai (1996) terms “ethnoscapes” crossing over both geographical and cultural boundaries. Such a movement, forced or voluntary, raises issues of “belonging or territoriality” (Lazarus, 1999, p. 137) which find in the diasporic community an anchor. The movement through space and time which immigration allows for entails a shift in women’s status, one that empowers them to aspire to positions of leadership previously denied them. This is made apparent in the new roles assigned to women or rather the role these women assign to themselves by taking the lead, hence the community leader’s position has been brushed with a female stroke. The diasporic moment is then caught in those hybridised instances of continuity and change with the same religious practices traveling along and being reproduced, all the while giving birth to transformations which the new actors embody. In an exemplification of this duality which brings forth a tertiary terrain, one can see in the “translocative symbols”, the Islamic school, the veil and the observed rituals, how “the diaspora imaginatively constructs its collective identity” (Tweed, 1997, p. 10). The transformation is visible in the readaptation of a space formerly reserved for secular purposes to a now ritualised parallel religious space without it having to completely resemble those places of worship found in their country of origin. Concepts are no longer space-bound in that they travel and survive in the host culture. The sanctity of space is lost or perhaps conferred to yet another sanctified space that is converted in the process of endowing the new found space

with newer meanings that transcend the limitations of architecture (Metcalf, 1996). For a diasporic community to thrive, it summons “the main elements of its iconography” and concocts ways to “have places for periodic gatherings of a religious, cultural ...nature” (Bruneau, 2010, p. 37). In Young’s appraisal (1995), “hybridity is itself an example of hybridity, of a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation”(p. 21), a fact which Yagmur’s school/mosque epitomises. However, unless Yagmur learns to relax her stance on religion, she runs the risk of ending up all by herself and ruining her relationship with her family.

Of Precepts and Concepts

Characters on both sides of the spectrum have different and, at times, conflicting views. Watching them step out of their comfort zone will induce outbursts of laughter worth catching. Episode 3, like every other episode, opens with Lena reporting live from the scene of the crisis, as she so aptly describes it. The conflict, she goes on to add, between the Turkish commissioner for tradition and the German secretary for modernisation has been resolved, or perhaps not so. Lena, we infer, has been trying to convince Yagmur to go swimming with her. Yagmur refuses because she does not want to undress in public. Lena invites Yagmur to watch a sex movie, but Yagmur declines her offer saying that she does not watch pornographic movies. Sex for Lena has nothing to do with pornography and it is only normal to watch movies of this genre. Just as Yagmur feels offended because her step-sister invites her to watch a pornographic movie, so does Lena feeling hurt that her invitation has been turned down. Lena has a better proposal. “Why not go dancing in a nightclub?” she suggests. Yagmur thinks it would be a sin to go to a place where people dance naked to titillating music in the hope of getting hooked by drug addicts. Lena stalks her with her insistence that she bring proof from her “Turk-Bible”, or else join in. Yagmur leafs through the Qur’an, but fails to procure evidence in support of her claim. Then, she argues that her refusal to go emanates from her conviction that it is immoral to lose one’s virginity. Feeling embarrassed, she adds that even if she wanted, her father would not let her go out after 9:00 P.M. Lena asks her mother for permission to go to a bar, Doris readily agrees adding that she trusts her daughter will do the right thing. Lena’s mother encourages her to have a boyfriend. She feels proud that her daughter has finally found herself a soulmate. Little does she know that Lena made it all up so her mother would stop treating her as though she were a kid. At the end of episode six, Lena changes her mind about growing up. She would rather stay young than have to solve problems on her own. Metin, however, argues otherwise. He says there are rules Yagmur cannot go against. Lena explains that they will do as they like, and there is nothing he can do to deter them.

Doris thinks it is best for the girls to live their lives fully. Although Metin appreciates her liberal attitude, he acts illiberal. Metin contends that he wants his daughter to grow into a good and obedient Muslim. Doris berates him for his double standards, an attitude that enfetters girls and allows boys unrestrained freedom. Whilst refusing to let his daughter out at night, Metin hypocritically allows his son unconditional freedom to stay out as late as he wishes to. He even encourages him to find a girlfriend, something, we can deduce, he would never do for his daughter. Metin plays the secret agent and goes to extreme lengths so Cem and Ching can

start a love relationship. These gendered double standards are the corollary of a patriarchal upbringing that needs to be reconsidered and rethought.

Much to Yagmur's surprise, Doris and Lena discuss how Lena's breasts would appear to be flat were she to wear a pink top. The mother wants her daughter to have sex appeal, but Yagmur, as conservative as she is, finds their licentious discussion of bodily parts utterly inappropriate. Doris is a modern mother who is open about discussing anything with her daughter unlike Metin who has never been seen talking to his daughter about relationships, let alone her sexuality. On the way to the disco, Lena and Yagmur discuss their upbringing. Yagmur thinks Lena's mother is far too indulgent, but Lena thinks Yagmur has grown used to obeying orders and observing rules the way a slave would. Cem meets them on the way and forbids Yagmur from going. Whilst the father may be thought to have relinquished his role as a patriarch, Cem is the living testament that such an authority cannot be lost but is rather delegated and vested to the son. His argument that it is too late for the duo to be going out is hollow given his habit of doing just that. Cem deploys what Duncan (1996) views as "the public/private dichotomy (both the political and spatial dimensions)... to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures." (p. 128) This is made all the more apparent in his despotic assertion that he rules on the street, in the neighbourhood and, by extension, in the house oblivious of the fact that "where there is power, there is resistance." (Foucault, 1990, p. 95) Aided and abetted by Lena, Yagmur, who has been thus far submissive and subordinate, revolts spasmodically in the face of a figure of male dominance long dreaded and unchallenged. Cem is left murmuring that as soon as the Germans moved in, respect was lost, ironically forgetting that it is he who moved in. In speaking out, Yagmur divests herself of the normative and conventional role she was supposed to play. Still consumed with fear, Yagmur, who has never been out this late, hopes they will not be allowed in the disco. Lena advises her to pretend to be eighteen, but Yagmur tells the bouncer that she is under age, hoping to be dismissed. Unfortunately, this is children's night and the bouncer is lenient enough to allow them in. While Lena seems to be having fun drinking and dancing, Yagmur feels out of place. While the two girls are out, their parents' reactions are worth seeing. Metin is so worried about the kids he cannot sleep a wink and keeps checking his cell phone, should they call. Doris, who is equally worried, pretends that she is not. To prove it, she calls the girls and warns them not to come before 4 A.M. She even switches off her cell phone. This is a German mother who believes children should be given the space needed to grow into fully-fledged women.

As the girls go out of the bar, a teenager who has been drinking with Lena wants to escort her home to take advantage of her. Yagmur tries to stop him, but there is nothing she can do. In the manner of a hero, Cem shows up at the right time, knocks the boy out, and carries Lena on his shoulders back home. She wakes up sober and, much to her embarrassment, she recalls how she clung to Cem's buttocks, and threw up all over Nils's PlayStation. Doris has no words to console Lena except that she too had a terrible experience once.

Lena, a 16 year-old adolescent, wants her mother to give her some rules to go by to avoid mishaps. Her mother believes that Lena has to figure things out on her own. Lena turns to world religions for rules of conduct, but finds Islam is way too demanding, and so is

Buddhism. She finally comes to the decision that Judaism has the best rules. Lena speaks like a Jew would, prays like a Jew, reads the Talmud and observes the Sabbath. Yagmur, Doris and Metin are all dazzled and puzzled by Lena's conversion to Judaism. Lena thinks they are being anti-Semitic. She only stops playing the Jew when her mother issues a list of 10 rules for her to follow. What Lena cares about is not so much the rules her mother has set for her, but the fact that her mother now cares about what she does. In times past, when she did as she liked, she thought her mother did not care much about her. Lena scolds her Mom for her libertine upbringing of her. Lena thinks she is far too young, immature and irresponsible to be left to grope her way on her own. Her mother should not have let her fly to Ibiza with Kathie. Lena also blames her mother for her laxity when she caught her smoking. Lena thinks her mother does not worry enough about her, and so she does not love her. All Doris has wanted is for Lena to be independent and to trust her in keeping with the Western way of bringing kids up to be self-reliant. But Lena wants parental authority so she would feel she is loved as much as Yagmur is, forgetting that Yagmur comes from a more conservative background where freedom, especially that of girls, is undesirable. In the last episode but one, the viewer sees so much more of the psychotherapist's private life as to elucidate some of the mystery surrounding her decisions to leave Lena on her own. In fact, the generational conflict that both Metin and Doris have with Lena and Yagmur also shapes the relationship Doris has with her father. In seeking to prove themselves in the eyes of adults, Lena and Yagmur go to extreme lengths to show their true mettle. Doris went against her father's wish to become his living image and fought against all the odds to become that which her father hates to see. Doris's encounter with her father is fraught with animosity. She hides the address so he would not find her. She even lies to Metin, saying that she wants to have it cleaned, a lie which eventually compromises her relationship. However, the father does manage to find the house. His first utterance is revelatory of the generation gap he and Doris have yet to bridge. "You have opened the door to your enemy", says he ironically. Once inside the house, Doris tells him to his face that he came to visit without prior arrangement. Doris complains to Nils, her son, about the way her father interferes in her private life. He asks her all sorts of embarrassing questions about her work, her income and even about her long gone husband, Marcos. He wanted her to grow into a businesswoman, but he feels disappointed now that she has pursued her dream of becoming a psychotherapist. This somehow explains why Doris makes it a fast rule of the thumb to never poke her nose into Lena's private life. However she tries, she cannot avoid but run into other problems with Lena, who gauges her mother's laxity as some sort of disengagement from motherly duties. In other words, the generation conflict repeats itself over and over in a new and subtle guise.

Conclusion

Insofar as humour does not happen in a vacuum, locating the experiences of the characters temporally and spatially in "the total social situation" (Douglas, 1991, p. 293) does indeed lift the veil on those laughed at and those laughing, hence the relevance of the contrapuntal reading of names, places, objects, precepts and concepts we propose. It is no coincidence then that laughter is directed at those who laugh, including the audience whose personas it shakes. This is in keeping with the enunciation that "an egalitarian, multicultural

society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate,” (Fraser, 1992, p. 126) an arena which the diversified cast in *Türkisch für Anfänger* amply fills. Very much like carnivals, *Türkisch für Anfänger* is far from being merely “a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone [safely] participates because its very idea embraces all the people”. (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 7) With its polyphony of voices, its polyvocality and plurality, Bakhtin would argue, *Türkisch für Anfänger* accommodates, besides “the reigning voices of the era”, the emerging, not yet completely formed, voices of the weak, the disenfranchised”,(Nielsen, 2002, p. 31)and the Muslim Others/ Othered Muslims within.

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