

Werner Schiffauer, “Battleground Woman” (2005)

Abstract

Werner Schiffauer is Professor of Comparative Cultural and Social Anthropology at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt an der Oder. His research focuses on the experiences of Muslim immigrants in Germany. “Honor killings” of Muslim women are a central theme in media coverage of the lives of immigrants. It is the topic of the award-winning film *Die Fremde* (2010) starring Sibel Kekilli.

Hatun Sürücü was killed by multiple gunshots to the head at a bus stop in Berlin on February 7, 2005. Shortly thereafter, her three brothers were arrested. Sürücü’s youngest brother was sentenced to nine years of juvenile detention in 2007, while the two older brothers were acquitted for lack of evidence and are now in Turkey.

Source

The number of “honor killings” of Turkish-born women has recently increased drastically. That has little to do with Islam—but much to do with self-exclusion.

The murder of the young German-Turkish woman Hatin Sürücü in Berlin confronts us with a horrifying fact: The number of honor killings has increased drastically in recent times, after we had observed a clear decrease over the years.

The decrease was often not very clear because in the German public the tendency is to label every family or jealousy drama in a Turkish family an honor killing.

In addition, perpetrators in family dramas of this kind sometimes bring honor into play to justify themselves. However, honor killings like the one in Berlin, i.e., murders that are carried out in the name of the family with the assistance of family members—in this case possibly by the brothers of Hatin Sürücü—had become rare.

Before now, it was assumed that with immigration the rug had been pulled out from under the honor system. In Anatolian, South Italian, Albanian, and Arabic countries, the farming family was the decisive social, political, and economic unit.

They worked together, stuck together in conflicts, and relied on each other in social emergencies. The value of honor reflected the preeminent position of the family. It expressed the family’s sanctity.

The Bodies of Women Symbolized Honor

Any attack on the family demanded retribution. To a special extent, the bodies of women—their sexual integrity—symbolized honor.

Any extramarital sexual contact called not only the honor of the woman but also the honor of the family into question. In the village, respect for honor was necessary for survival: people respected the integrity of others, because any injury would have far-reaching consequences.

Anyone who did not take care of his honor was quickly excluded—he could no longer arrange marriages for his children, his daughters were fair game, and he got nowhere in village conflicts.

Furthermore, people in the village were also very much aware of the fact that the demand for honor had nothing to do with Islam. If honor conflicts escalated and people died, the commentary was the statement, “Nothing of Islam remains here.”

The meaning of honor became relative with migration to Turkish big cities, but especially with immigration to Germany. In the urban milieu, the compulsion to hold one’s ground against others disappeared.

A bad reputation was still unpleasant—but no longer a life-and-death matter. In addition, migrants to the city were much less reliant on family than in the village.

With greater latitude of the individual, the concept of honor shared by all the family members faded into the background. Now when there was talk of honor, it was more often in relation to the individual.

Violations of the chastity rules no longer reflected on the family; at most the affected family member was considered without honor.

The pressure to take active steps in cases of insults to honor that in the village affected the entire family disappeared. Of course, all of this is still true, which is apparent from the fact that, despite the large number of dysfunctional immigrant families, honor killings are an extremely rare exception.

However, the fact that there were places where the discussion of honor—in a modified way—lived on even in an urban environment went largely unnoticed. Especially important were gangs of male juveniles. In these groups, the concept of the family’s honor was transferred to the gang. An attack on one was an attack on all.

She’s Made It. He Has Not.

The gangs stuck together, were united, strong—and prepared to resort to violence. The concept of honor also colored their image of women: “Street girls” of dubious honor with whom sexual relationships were initiated were differentiated from “family girls,” who were acceptable for marriage.

And there was a tendency to control one’s own sisters, if they no longer conformed to the image of the “family girl.” In one case to which I was called in as a court expert, bragging within the group set off a murder attempt.

What’s new is the emphasis on ethnicity, the consciousness of being a Turk, Arab, “foreigner,” put on display. Male juveniles in Kreuzberg schools, it is reported, harass young Turkish women for not wearing headscarves.

The statements after the murder of Hatin Sürücü also point in this direction. At the Thomas Morus High School near the crime scene, youths said that they could understand the perpetrators: “It’s her own fault. The whore ran around like a German.”

This corresponds to a new self-concept of young immigrants. The more they are at home in Germany, the more their consciousness of exclusion increases.

In somewhat abbreviated form, the first generation of immigrants was strongly homeland-oriented—they felt about Germany as aliens would and were definitely conscious of not belonging. For the second generation, Germany had become a—difficult—homeland.

The second generation had to master the balancing act between the parental home and school, which were mired in clichés and disparaged each other. The parental home saw in the German environment only moral corruption and immorality; in turn, the school regarded the Turkish parental home as a stronghold of patriarchy, authoritarianism, hostility toward women, and domestic violence.

Many young Turks of this generation resolved the dilemma by radically individuating. They wanted to be neither Turks nor German, but only themselves. Occasionally in this generation, but more markedly in the third and fourth generations, re-ethnicization occurred.

Crucial were experiences of economic exclusion, social discrimination, and pressure to conform culturally. “Who are we that we allow it to be dictated to us how handle headscarves?” a thoroughly secularized young Turk once asked me.

Origins were rediscovered. This generation redefined the stigma associated with the existence of the foreigner; its member consciously embraced their existence as “German foreigners.”

The new self-confidence of the third generation is the common background for the development of various subcultures and protest cultures. A secular movement can be found in the counter-culture of the *Kanak attack*—and is expressed in the attitude that it is “cool” to be a foreigner.

A religious movement expresses itself in the headscarf movement and intensified religiosity. A third, culturally oriented movement has the effect that young foreigners emphasize their ethnic otherness. To that end, they resort to cultural elements that are often taken out of context—like the headscarf and honor.

The mixture of a marginal social position in the immigrant districts and the awareness of being different can produce a powerful brew.

Under these conditions, an ethnic underclass forms. In this context, the resort to honor is not only problematic because it is eminently suited for marking the boundary to the social majority, but also because it suggests access to women as a means of marking differences between social groups.

We have honor; the others do not—this can be deduced from “our” women. The rage with German society as a whole is then quickly directed at women who elude the associated expectations—by rising up and getting out.

The relative success of these young women in school and professionally confronts their brothers with the fact that under some circumstances the marginal position is not actually as hopeless as it is said to be. When the women then go so far as to become “like Germans,” that is betrayal.

The Madness, the Rage

The group to which “honor” refers for these young people is, beside the family and the gang, now also the entire group of “German foreigners.”

All this still does not explain the murder of a young woman, but it shows the context in which a group of brothers can work itself into honor madness. Unlike the village honor killings, the initiative seems to come less from the patriarchs. The weight of the generations has shifted.

This only has to do with Islam in that the latter is used as a set piece by these juveniles: Thus, the head scarf and the battle cry “effing Jesus” are used to set themselves off from the social majority. These two things have nothing

to do with Islam.

However, the fact that Islam is often brought in as a symbol presents an opportunity: Unlike the ethnic discourse, Islam offers bridges to the social majority.

Islam could conceivably provide access to the youths; it could communicate to them that Islam is incompatible with force, or that Jesus is considered one of the most important prophets of Islam and that the Abrahamic religions have a common foundation of values.

We will only come to grips with the phenomenon if we pull the Islamic communities into the boat.

Source of the original German text: Werner Schiffauer, "Schlachtfeld Frau," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 25, 2005. Available online at:

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/deutsche-auslaender-schlachtfeld-frau-1.804443>

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Recommended Citation: Werner Schiffauer, "Battleground Woman" (2005), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-114>> [July 15, 2025].