

Interview – Diako Yazdani

Written by E-International Relations

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Diako Yazdani is a Kurdish Iranian filmmaker who is now a political refugee based in Paris, France. In his documentary film *Kojin* (2019), Yazdani tackles problems of homophobia in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, both at home and among a mostly Muslim society. The film follows Kojin, a 23-year old Kurdish homosexual (pictured above), to show what life feels like for members of the LGBT community in this region of Kurdistan. The film is no report on the politics of homosexuality; it provides no statistics or institutional perspective. Rather, Yazdani offers insights into the texture and emotions of daily experiences. Homosexuality becomes an opportunity to confront different viewpoints on what emancipation really means, the rights we claim for ourselves and those we are willing to recognise for others, and the burden of religion in a society in search of freedom.

Why did you choose to make a film about sexuality and homophobia when there are so many wars raging across Kurdish territories?

Is war more important than sexuality? The question itself is a problem. Who gets to decide what stories are most important to be told? Heterosexuals? Patriarchs? For the LGBT community, sexuality is not a side question, it is a matter of life or death. I grew up in the Kurdistan of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. That war is over, but another war goes on against the LGBT community. I don't want to condemn the people of Kurdistan for today's violence: the Kurdish people have survived multiple wars with extreme violence ranging from torture to chemical genocide. This film is not to judge the survivors. Yet that is not to say that we can overlook the violence we reproduce within Kurdish societies. This film tackles sexuality, a subject that is taboo though it should be central to any politics of liberation. How do we disrupt domination, the power to subjugate and control others, whether the other is Kurdish or homosexual? I want to impose this question because I think we are beating around the bush with politics: Kurdish politicians in Iraq have reduced politics to budget and corruption, but emancipation is much deeper and relates to the body. The real challenge is emancipation of the body. Violence continues to exist within. We can either blind ourselves, or do something to stop it.

This film shows the contradictions of a society that claims political freedom to the Kurdish people but denies sexual freedoms to non-heterosexual Kurdish individuals. Why did you choose sexuality to address the contradictions embedded in struggles for emancipation?

I don't think anyone says 'I'm against freedom' – even the Salafists defend the concept of freedom. It's just that they have their own definition of freedom. What is freedom? Nobody agrees on what freedom entails.

Since the creation of the modern nation-state, Kurds have been fragmented and repressed by states, whether in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, or Syria. The modern states operate with Kurds just like they operate with LGBT people. The film shows how everyone imposes their own understanding of what is permitted onto others, over and over again. Kurdish heterosexuals are repressed by the central government of a state, and they repeat the same mechanism of repression against LGBT individuals within their own society. Any Kurdish or homosexual person can live peacefully as long as they don't claim rights as Kurdish or homosexual. The problem arises when rights are to be respected. I think that if Kurds learn to respect LGBT emancipation, then emancipation can start for everyone. But if Kurds only

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want to repeat the same patriarchal model of the nation-state within their own society, then they are simply reproducing violent structures of domination. There is no way out. Or, as my mother proposes in the film, we may need to create a nation-state just for LGBTQI citizens [laughter].

The sources of suffering for the Kurdish and LGBTQI societies are the same because sexism, racism, and homophobia share the same roots. We cannot defend Kurdish emancipation while denying homosexual emancipation. Are we struggling to liberate just lands? Or the bodies that inhabit these lands? There can be no real solidarity among Kurdish peoples if we remain hostages to homophobia, if we are still controlling each other's bodies.

The film depicts a Kurdish society that punishes homosexuality, yet queer struggles have gained political vitality in other regions notably with the creation of The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA) in the PKK, which claims to protect queer bodies from fascist Islamic forces. How should we understand these contradictory dynamics?

Kurdistan is complex and diverse, there is not one Kurdish society. Let me give some historical context. Since the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement denied sovereignty to the Kurdish people, our territories were split across five newly created nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia. Today we are about 50 million Kurdish people fragmented in five regions controlled by different states. Every region has been heavily influenced by the dominant cultural politics of each state, oftentimes violently. This film tells a specific experience of Kurdistan: it takes place in the Kurdistan of Iraq, mostly in the intellectual capital of Sulaymaniyah, and engages my viewpoint as an Iranian Kurd who never joined or supported any political party.

First, the PKK is an exception, not the norm. The reality is that one cannot even defend women's rights in most of Kurdistan. Nationalism is seen as the main form of liberation. Komala, a communist political party created in 1942 in Iran's Kurdistan, started with a glimpse of a (Soviet) narrative for women's participation in the party, but it did not last. The only political party across Kurdistan that has truly focused on women's liberation for Kurdish liberation is the Kurdish Labor Party, or PKK (1978). The PKK started as armed resistance in the Qandil Mountains of central Kurdistan. All founders were men, except for Sakine Cansiz (1958–2013). She played a key role in bringing women's emancipation to the forefront of Kurdish emancipation (she was an important leader assassinated in 2013, in Paris). She influenced the PKK to create all-female combat units, and mixed units as well. When Syria's war broke in 2012, part of the PKK came down from the mountains to protect Syria's Kurdistan, the Rojava region (which means west in Kurdish), and created the TQILA unit in 2016 to resist ISIS. The PKK also has a small civil branch in Turkey, called the People's Democratic Party (HDP). This pro-women, pro-gay Kurdish party held meetings that included representatives from both Islamic and LGBT communities. In 2015, HDP became the first political party across the Muslim world to run an electoral campaign including LGBT rights in its agenda – this had never happened before from Morocco to Indonesia. But many Islamic Kurds did not vote for HDP because of its LGBT support. All of that to say that women's and LGBT emancipation is limited to a small region of Kurdistan in Rojava (and there is a lot of work to be done even there), the most independent region of Kurdistan, and a small influence through formal politics in Turkey (now Erdogan has jailed the HDP leadership).

Second, Kurds are known internationally for their progressive agendas, but the Kurdistan of Iraq carries the scar of decades of war. The long embargo had tragic consequences and recent American wars forced a brutal neoliberalism in. Iraq's Kurdistan has been the only 'free' region of Kurdistan for the last 30 years, with a local government run by local Kurds. But the local government is controlled by two Kurdish families that (corruptly) run the oil economy together with Western corporations. This oil corruption is denounced by only one political party, called Change. After the ravaging effects of war, neoliberalism rolled in transforming Iraq's Kurdistan into a big market – there are now Chanel, Dior, and Gucci stores...and even women's organisations follow neoliberal market dynamics. Iraq's Kurdistan was famous for its agriculture, but since 'liberation' there is no agriculture left. There are mosques instead, which are six times more numerous than schools and show the force of Islamic groups that are pushing towards sharia law.

Kurdish society is a Muslim society, and like the rest of the region it is prey to a trend of Islamisation since the end of the Cold War. The PKK is the only organised group resisting Islamisation in Kurdistan. The irony is that Western politicians have long considered the PKK a terrorist organisation (despite its progressive agenda with regards to

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gender, sexuality, and ecology) while they maintain great relations with the Kurdish politicians of Iraq (who embody violence, corruption, and intolerance). They take Kurdish oil, then look the other way when it comes to emancipation.

Many have warned about the dangers of pink-washing, notably as Israel uses sexual rights as a narrative to vilify Palestinians and justify its ongoing invasion of Palestine. How can we understand homophobia in Kurdistan without falling in the trap of portraying a backwards Islamic Tradition that is to be saved by Western secular modernity?

I do not see any difference between gays, Palestinians, Kurds, or women. Aren't racism and antisemitism and Islamophobia all the same? Oppression is oppression. Israel is raping the humanity of Palestinians and talks about LGBT rights? To overlook some forms of oppression and focus on others is a form of hypocrisy that perpetuates the power of dominants over dominated. Sometimes I see this logic operating even in progressive European contexts when people debate how much a penis entered a vagina to determine whether it was rape or when intellectuals spread Islamophobia against Muslim immigrants. They manipulate society spreading hate like Islamic leaders in the Middle East. My film is located in Kurdistan and therefore deals with the question of Islam. I know Muslims who are believers and say that their religion does not authorise homosexuality but prefer letting people live as they wish. I know other Muslims who are not believers but perpetuate hate speeches against homosexuality. Of course, Islam plays a great role in repressing homosexuality, but it would be an unhelpful oversimplification to blame it all on Islam.

Your film tackles the issue of immigration, and you are yourself exiled in Paris. Is immigration to countries in Europe or North America a route to safety for Kurdish people who are gender non-conforming?

To be a refugee is a form of handicap. The modern nation-state convinced us that a country is a body and that to be expelled from this body is violence. It is not easy make a new body with a new land. Of course, a refugee is free once in Europe, but there is racism and Western individualism and the subtle repression of a political system that excludes non-Westerners. Every day I understand a little more the subtleties of the language of this new society, and it makes me sad to learn subtle forms of violence. It is rarely overt; it comes with words, a look. As refugees, we are already fragile because of harshness endured in the past, because of the solitude that comes with exile. I personally grew up with raw violence, and that raw violence is gone – but now it continues in lighter versions. All my life I belonged to a minority – I still do in Paris. It is exhausting. Our vulnerabilities change, but they are still there.

Exile is not a solution; it helps to survive, to stay alive. The story of Kojin is the story of many. When a Kurdish homosexual arrives in Europe full of hope for Western LGBTQ rights, despair quickly sets in because of administrative and legal obstacles. Sadness gains a thousand colours. If I were a homosexual with dark skin I would have to work in construction, my life would be much more complicated than it is being a heterosexual with light skin who works in cinema. But being a refugee is hard and I don't wish it to anyone.

What advice could you share with scholars of gender and sexuality?

Two things: first, translate your work into oppressed languages. Most knowledge is produced and circulated in hegemonic languages, whether it is English, French, or Farsi. This knowledge rarely makes it into repressed, colonised languages. It is hard for people who live in Kurdistan and barely speak Farsi to access information that circulates globally in English. How can people in Kurdistan participate in global debates on sexuality if the debates are not translated into Kurdish? Only educated people who can learn hegemonic languages can properly engage with global debates ... and as elites talk to themselves, the gap widens. Second, facilitate scholarships for people forgotten in the peripheries of world politics. Give them ideas, not money, let them think for themselves and bring knowledge back home and choose how to adapt it to their own realities. That way they can go study and bring back ideas, adapt them to their own realities back home. By peripheries I don't mean Tehran or the oil elites of Iraq's Kurdistan – those at the centre can always find a way. I mean the people from the peripheries of international relations, like young Kurdish women who do not have the 'right' economics, do not speak the 'right' language and do not have the 'right' religion.

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