



Ali Fathollah-Nejad, Feridun Zaimoglu
You've got to swing your hips!
A conversation with Feridun Zaimoglu

German author Feridun Zaimoglu, pioneer of the "Kanak" school of fiction (the migrant underworld described in the vernacular of its young male protagonists), has begun narrating from the Muslim woman's perspective. In his latest novel *Leyla*, a Turkish woman tells about her life in Germany; while in a new work for theatre entitled *Schwarze Jungfrauen (Black Virgins)*, young Muslim women talk openly about sex. In March 2007, Zaimoglu ruffled feathers when he gave up his place at an official conference on Muslims in Germany in protest at the non-attendance of young ordinary Muslims and criticized feminist former-Muslims for demonizing young Muslim women. With characteristic verve, he explained to Ali Fathollah-Nejad why the discourse in Germany operates double values when it comes to the questions of multiculturalism and integration.

Ali Fathollah-Nejad: Following your work as a reader, there's one shift in your writing I find particularly interesting. One daily paper said of *Kanak Sprak*¹ that there's an "incredibly hard beat" behind it. Reading your new stories — and also your new novel *Leyla* — this beat has become a melody. What led to this change in your "writer's dance"?



Photo: Melanie Grande

Feridun Zaimoglu: I really enjoy writing from different perspectives. It wasn't just *Kanak Sprak*, but also *Abschaum*² that made my name. I slipped into the role of a suburban gangster. At the time I used to wear my hair a bit longer and for a few years I only made appearances in a suit. Anyone who saw me always thought "What a joke! He reckons he's writing about the life of a junkie, the life of a gangster. But that's his *own* life!" So, I really like taking on different roles. With every book I write I look at how I can do justice to the person. In *Leyla* I just felt like telling the story of an ordinary woman who ends up in Germany. And then I almost couldn't help making the book quieter. And that's when I'd like to think that I discovered the right narrative tone.

AF-N: You read from *Leyla* and people ask you "Is that how things really are?" In a way you're a kind of cultural mediator, you explain to many Germans aspects of foreign cultures that they don't really understand, or at least you provide a way into those cultures.³ That clearly entails a massive responsibility. How do you find that?

FZ: Responsibility! Responsibility? Either you can take pleasure in the whole thing, or you can sit there with buttocks clenched. Open the book, read, get excited, and then come the questions. Cultural mediation? Yeah, well, if what I write has this added value in some way, then great. But that's not an intention of mine. It's all about telling stories. But "cultural mediator", "cultural broker",

good God! I got labelled "the Malcolm X of the Turks", "the Rudi Dutschke of the immigrant Germans", and then some people got cross when I said "German, enough said!" They don't know what goddamn time it is! They don't know that this whole ethnic thing gets made into the object of political conflicts. This whole ethnic crap gets on my nerves. And then people look at me if I say "German"! I know that over ninety per cent are thinking "You look like what you look like. With your name? Mate, with *your* face? No one but you is gonna believe that!" I couldn't care less about that. What's the one thing that matters? The way I see myself! I'm not dependent on other people's opinions, but I am a sucker for the limelight. I love being on stage and vanishing into these roles instead of pushing my own boring life to the forefront of what I do. And that's when things start buzzing...

AF-N: *Kanak Sprak* performed an important function at the time. You were seen on numerous TV debates on racism with long hair and a smart beard. You were very political, very subversive and radical in your opinions. What triggered this shift towards being a writer who devotes himself to classical themes, rather than the kind of underworld themes that you started out from?

FZ: Have I really changed? I think it *is* a political act to tell the story of those women who — and I don't want to draw representative figures here — didn't appear in those public debates, or even in the political discussions. When I was writing *Kanak Sprak*, I said that I wanted to make visible those people who don't get a chance to speak. My heroes and heroines are not middle-class. That's because what I find exciting — what seethes, ferments, grows wild — I don't see in Germany in the middle class, in the bourgeois. I find the world of the *unsophisticated* — sometimes negative as it is, but even so, alive — in the world of the white trash and in the ethnoproletariat. I don't want to write about middle-class people; I don't get this discreet, decadent charm that the bourgeoisie are supposed to have. And nothing's changed there. It would be a great shame if at 41 I were still playing the neighbourhood radical, fist clenched, yelling "Kanak Attack"⁴. I don't think I've started to behave myself. I think it's more that I'm not making it so easy for myself anymore.

AF-N: Do you think that other people in Germany have a responsibility to write as radically as you have done?

FZ: But of course. How vain, how stupid, how *ignorant* it would be for me to say: "That's what I wrote then and because I wrote it, that's that." The reason I'm so positive is that there really are a great deal of radical approaches, because there are loads of people out there, in the cultural sphere as well, who really are pretty smart and are pushing the envelope. I haven't de-radicalized! Some people will be surprised to hear that.

AF-N: You did have a pioneering role. Looking back, there's been a wave Germans with a foreign background in the cultural scene who have tried to push their way into the public eye — the film director Fatih Akin being a prominent example. What do you think of this movement?

FZ: Shake, rattle and roll! I think a lot of it, I really do. There are a whole lot of great talents out there, great people. Something's caught fire. And I think it's going to get pretty intense over the next few years, because the fights over allocations and the rat race for jobs and training vacancies are getting fiercer, and because even schools and universities are geared towards selection according to historical and cultural criteria. Who gets the big prizes and who gets excluded? These mechanisms persist. Well, one of these days it's going to

be "Wakey wakey!" The state is retreating from the cultural and social sectors and private individuals can't fill the void, and that means social conflicts in the future. There's a time bomb ticking away there.

AF-N: Doesn't it make you sad that this discourse still exists? Nothing's changed at all!

FZ: Absolutely right.

AF-N: What needs to be done in order to make this discourse crumble away, to change it — especially from the immigrant point of view?

FZ: I'm not an immigrant, I'm German! That's the first step. You can start by choosing the right terms. It's like slam poetry — who's at the mike, who isn't! It's still a struggle for cultural hegemony. That's not going to go away in ten years — not in 20, 30 or 40 years. But Germany is changing. Some people smile at me as if to say "Hey look, the Kanak guy's written the leader in *Die Zeit*.⁵ These idiots don't know what they're talking about! With all due respect, they haven't got a clue. They haven't understood the rules of cultural hegemony, because that's a tough job, a hardcore job.

AF-N: Do you mean that radicalism is needed to change the discourse?

FZ: Radicalism bound by dogma is doomed to failure. It's a kind of minority within a minority within a minority.

AF-N: So what about a progressive radicalism, one you used in *Kanak Sprach* by letting people speak, or by trying to speak on behalf of those who have no voice in the German public sphere?

FZ: Something many people may find intolerable is that there's no uniform line. You've got to swing your hips! Opportunism is another thing. There are lots of people in politics who are opportunists. They're the kind of party bores who have nothing better to do at parties than sit around and jabber. Then there are people who are on the dance floor. They're moving their hips. It's that simple. Either be in the thick of it, or stuff yourself with crisps on the sidelines and say "What a dull party!" It's not the party that's dull, it's them. There's a big difference. That's how it is in politics.

AF-N: You just mentioned your article in *Die Zeit*. I'd like to move on to the situation in the media. There was all the fuss about the Rütli School.⁶ I think you've contributed a great deal to the debate through your publications, but I still have the feeling that in the media in general there's a certain atmosphere of inertia. I get the feeling that not a lot is changing. What's your view?

FZ: I've given hundreds of readings in schools, mostly in *Hauptschulen* and in youth clubs. So these experiences are the basis for my views. One thing is that the three-tier school system is also subdivided according to ethnicity. There are the failures — who aren't failures at all; dammit, I very nearly ended up in a special school. It's true — I was *that* close to landing up there! Your typical Turk is generally seen as a PISA⁷ failure and a playground yobbo. That stereotype exists. There's a male problem going on, a problem with boys. This crap about male honour. If what that amounts to is some nasty coward who goes and shoots his sister, what do we do with him? There's no straightforward answer to that. It's different from case to case. You've got to look at it carefully, talk to people. I'm not surprised — the notion of a dominant German

culture, a *Leitkultur*, the cartoon controversy, then Necla Kelek,⁸ Seyran Ates,⁹ and now there's open season on all male, Muslim, immigrant adolescents. That's why I say to people "Wakey wakey!" Did they think the class society no longer exists, or what? It still exists, and will continue to exist. And the ethnic factor is how the ruling class wants to look at it. It's as simple as that. And anyone who comes along with their neoliberal crap, who stops thinking politically and starts looking at things ethnically, is behaving just like the ruling classes — and that includes the media and its movers and shakers. They talk about school and then they lay into the teachers. Yes — but if you thought politically, you would look at what is being done in schools. What funding has been slashed? What's left in the pot? What's happening on a day-to-day basis? That's one thing. But the other thing is then also to say: "You know, guys, your honour, you can stick it up your immigrant arses. Your fucking male honour!" What *is* that? That is a *crime*. Those people are *criminals*. That's how it needs to be discussed. The rightwingers always step in and say "Hey, they come from a different cultural background." True, we mustn't trivialize things that come from this different cultural sphere either. That would be idiotic. But nor should people play the white man by coming along as a feminist activist and to a certain extent shooting down these kids, then talking about religion and making their ethnic background the topic of discussion. These people are the white man's little women. And these little women come and go and come and go. Here you might see the label "feminism", there it's "a particularly self-assured Green", or whatever all these opportunists are called. You look at all that, but you must never stop looking at it politically. The political viewpoint rocks!

AF-N: But politics is only possible through participation. Yet in our society there aren't that many people with a non-German background who take part in public discourse.

FZ: That's changing.

AF-N: But it can only be changed through education?

FZ: It can be changed above all by means of the German language. For the sake of the children's future we shouldn't moan about German being compulsory. That's yet another piece of ethno-nonsense. And then all these Turkish spokesmen come along, and these lefty liberals, all these jokers, and they tell us "Oh, but we can't ask that of the children." You twits! How much do you earn in a month? You've got it made. What is participation? Involvement starts from early childhood. When my parents couldn't go through my homework with me at primary school, what are we supposed to say about that? That's a built-in disadvantage right from the off. Yeah, so what? Did I cry? Did I hell! I fell for Petra at school and wanted to impress her. I wanted to stand out a bit by using classy German. You can't say "Oi, mate!" to a woman! So what sources of motivation do people have? Politics is all well and good, but when the political class ignores the human situation, it gets detached and loses touch with reality. You've always got to look at what's going on at the bottom!

AF-N: Is *Leyla in Wonderland* just a working title? Or is Germany a wonderland?

FZ: Yes. It really was the economic wonderland that my parents set out for: my father who worked with leather, my mother a cleaner. They kept drumming the basic principle into me: "Don't spit into the bowl you're eating from! Don't

put down the Germans, you arsehole!" And I thought "That's right! This is a nice country! It's great here!" What would have become of me if I hadn't come here? A Muslim farmer, or what? Great career! Why shouldn't people also say "Germany, my opportunity"? Does that sound emotional? Well it is! And that's the crucial point: feelings play a major role. We mustn't burn ourselves out — we can't run out of breath. I mustn't judge others by my own standards — nor do I. I haven't lost touch with reality. So I can tell one thing from another. I'm in great spirits. But it's really important to maintain one's energy. The rebellious aspect too. In the meantime every CDU bigwig has become a rebel. I'm ready any moment for Mrs Merkel to come out, for her to say "Oh yeah, I used to wear a biker jacket and hightail it through the neighbourhood." I don't mean it like *that*, of course. What I mean is: rebellion has a good aura about it. Later, you look in the mirror: you kept getting on the wrong end of the coppers' truncheons, but you were out there and did this and that. Maybe it wasn't that much of a success, but man, was it exciting! The middle-class conservatives come at it from their rightwing angle. All that stuff makes them sick! And nothing's changed about that. But they're more successful now too. And you know what — screw their villas! Good God. Amen to that.

¹ The title of Feridun Zaimoglu's notable debut, *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (*Kanak Sprak: 24 Notes of Discord from the Margin of Society*), Hamburg (Rotbuch), 1995.

² Feridun Zaimoglu: *Abschaum. Die wahre Geschichte von Ertan Ongun* (*Scum. The True Story of Ertan Ongun*), Hamburg (Rotbuch), 1997

³ Zaimoglu took part in the first sitting of the German "Islam conference" in September 2006, a "summit meeting" between the German state and representatives of Muslim organizations as well as "cultural Muslims" critical of Islam. Zaimoglu resigned from the second conference in May 2007 in protest at what he saw as the absence of second and third generation "neo-Muslims"; his seat, he argued, could be better occupied by a young Muslim, whom the conference was supposedly about. Zaimoglu's advocacy for young Muslims' religious freedom, especially that of young Muslim women, and his critique of what he saw as the conservatism of feminist criticism of Islam, was controversial yet met with widespread sympathy in the liberal press. For more on the German Islam Conference see: Claus Leggewie, "[Between national Church and religious supermarket](#)" in Eurozine.

⁴ Slogan of a radical immigrant movement.

⁵ See "Mein Deutschland" in *Die Zeit*, No.16, 12 April 2006, p.1, by Feridun Zaimoglu. In English, "My Germany" in *signandsight*.

⁶ The Rütli School is a *Hauptschule* (secondary modern) in Neukölln, Berlin. In 2006, the school's headteacher, unable to control the violence in her school, made an appeal for help to the Berlin Senate. This led to a debate about the school system in Germany, violence in schools and the integration of the children of immigrants.

⁷ Programme for International Student Assessment

⁸ Germany's foremost critic of the treatment of women in Islam, also present at the Islam conference.

⁹ A Turkish lawyer and women's rights activist, she gave up practising in 2006 following threats from legal opponents.

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