

## ***Kauthar***

Meike Ziervogel (2015)

Salt. Pp. 144. ISBN 978-1784630294. £8.99 softcover

This novel – or perhaps novella would be a better term – focalises the experience of a young British girl who becomes a Muslim and ends up activating explosives under her clothing in an attempt to blow up a US checkpoint in Baghdad. The author's previous work *Magda* featured another 'suicide' – that of the Goebbels family alongside Hitler in the Berlin bunker as seen through the eyes of Magda, Josef Goebbels' wife. If Ziervogel's German background helped provide a stimulus for that work, her period of Arabic study in London can be said to have supplied the same for *Kauthar*.

The sense of writing from the inside excited early journalistic admiration (Jane Garvey's piece on BBC Radio4's Woman's Hour), but reactive takes can be presumptuous and uncritical. True, *Kauthar*'s initial progress into faith and Islamic marriage to Iraqi doctor Rafiq has the ring of authenticity, even to the point of inciting readers' shock: who would believe a strange man could propose marriage to a woman wearing Muslim headdress in the street? *Kauthar* is however willing and soon negotiates a pathway of union with her respectful admirer via the Shi'ih practice of *zawaj muta* or temporary marriage, helped by the mediation of a friendly Syrian lady, Mrs Alim. Her rapid absorption in the daily prayers, with the stages of genuflection given in Arabic as well as some of the ritual verses, all suggest intimate knowledge. This is the territory of the 'Muslim' novel which frontloads for the uninitiated reader information on Islamic practice as well as the inner feelings that motivate the believer. It can also be found in novels by writers such as Leila Aboulela, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber and Robin Yassin-Kassab.

But there is another side to *Kauthar* – in fact another person called Lydia, whose introspective, obsessive personality we see developing from child into young

adulthood. Lydia isn't just the earlier, superseded self of Kauthar. The reader apprehends in student-Lydia's failed affair with a businessman the sinner-turned-believer paradigm with a supposedly Islamic inflexion in her drive to achieve purity and total God-centeredness through ritual and strict adherence to shari'a. They also detect the continuation of a behavioural trait that amounts to a schizophrenic division into self regarding self. This is shown at the beginning in Lydia's isolation from her playmates and absorption in her own simultaneous fear/desire to accomplish a perfect gymnastic pirouette. Her vertiginous disabling fears hint toward a strong self-destructive urge. When she is injured attempting to perform the act on a swing, she experiences a calm in which 'she is surrendering to the inevitable... That belongs to a world in which she is no longer present' (p.12).

Ziervogel attempts to establish a deeply disturbed mental pathology for Lydia/Kauthar that is only fully assembled late on in the novel with disclosure of her incestuous relationship with her father. In war-torn Baghdad, Kauthar's insistence that her husband consummate his second marriage to his cousin demonstrates an insistence on the letter of the law that entirely misconstrues his protective intent towards his widowed cousin, astonishes the surrounding Iraqis, and appears to confirm her disintegrating grasp of reality. But Kauthar's chance discovery of a body jacket studied with explosives and enlistment of it on a whim in a would-be suicide bombing undermines the credibility of the plot. Though Kauthar's attempt at self-sacrifice appears to have been prepared for, it slips easily into the accepted profile of Muslims (converts included) as prone to extremism and mental derangement.

The denouement raises other problems. Kauthar is Shi'ih not Sunni (the latter are nowadays much more given to employing the suicide weapon) and, tellingly, acts entirely alone having had no indoctrination in a suicide-bomber's creed. Media reporting of such acts is often foreshortened to focus the lone terrorist but in reality suicide bombers rarely act alone. Though perhaps conceivable on grounds of the female protagonist's distorted psychology, the ending is simplistic, sensationalised and unconvincing. Unrelieved focalisation on a central protagonist, spare achronological narrative and a drive toward a climax aspire to sustain intensity, but the insider-feel is ultimately deceptive. In the end Kauthar is a relatively conventional exercise in western terrorist writing.