

Blast wave

Ωστικό κύμα (Ostiko kyma)

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Set in 2012, *Ostiko kyma* (*Blast wave*) by Nikos Davvetas (2016) traces the repercussions of a terrorist attack on the London Underground, with the aftershocks extending to Athens and profoundly altering Despoina's life. Central to the narrative is the story of a mother losing her son in the attack. The exploration of such a deep trauma constitutes a meditation on violence and grief. Reading the novel from a political point of view is inevitable, especially when, due to a plot twist, the victim is eventually proven to have been a member of the group responsible for the attack following his conversion to Islam. Struck, metaphorically, by a second blast wave, Despoina is transformed from the victim's mother to the mother of the perpetrator.

While the central event of the novel is fictional, references to actual terrorist attacks that struck Western urban centres at the beginning of the new millennium, such as New York (2001) and London (2005), evoke the socio-political conditions of a period marked by terrorism and pervasive insecurity. Among the questions the novel poses are what happens when extreme violence intrudes into a banal life and the everyday, and what motivates a young person to convert to religious extremism. The reader is also encountering a moral dilemma when the distinction between the victim and the perpetrator collapses, and the son's participation in anti-Western terrorist violence is revealed: can the terrorist be equally mourned as the victim?

11 June 2012: London is struck by two consecutive bomb explosions during an ordinary working day at one of the busiest Underground stations on the Central line. The resulting blast wave transforms part of the city into a "war zone" (12), leaving 38 people dead and 254 seriously injured. In Athens, television channels interrupt their regular programme for "breaking news". The broadcaster announces the "suicide attack" and comments on the "manifesto issued by the alleged perpetrators" (17–18), which frames the "act of terrorism" as "righteous violence" directed against the "infidels" (18), highlighting the clash between two traditionally opposing worldviews: the Christian West and the Muslim East. Despoina tries in vain to contact her son, who is studying in London. She subsequently travels to London to collect what remains of her 19-year-old child. Owing to an unforeseen delay in the "repatriation of the body" (50), she returns to Athens while her ex-husband manages the painful formalities.

Two weeks later: Despoina grieves her son's death, withdrawing from the routines of everyday life. Her health steadily declines. Photographs of her son and his childhood toys fail to alleviate her sense of loss. The remains of his body are contained in a small metal box. Even religious faith offers no solace: "Where was He when 38 people were transformed into black smoke and particles of ash?" (68).

One month later: Far from Athens, she joins her sister in the province where they spent their

holidays as children, seeking for a way to mourn with decency. Her grief is compounded by the memory of another terrorist attack in the centre of Athens, and by empathy for another woman who is now a “fellow sufferer” (90). She wonders, “What deranged criminal had planted a bomb in the middle of the day, in the heart of the capital?” (93). Within days, she will discover that her own son was involved in a similar act. Here, Davvetas makes a direct allusion to the mother of 20-year-old Thanos Axarlian, who was accidentally killed during a terrorist attack in central Athens in July 1992 targeting the Minister of Finance. This real case grounds fictional grief in the Greek collective memory of terrorism, a deeply wrenching subject.

While Despoina is immersed in memories of her son’s upbringing, his portrait and short life –he was 19 at the time of his death– are vividly regenerated. The reader follows all the ramifications of his development from a chubby baby to a rebellious teenager, the ups and downs of a young person’s quest for his identity and self-determination. His life is the inverse reflection of the life of Amin Hahouaz, also known as Mireille Mergeux, a 19-year-old woman whom the police have identified as a potential suspect. Mireille escaped poverty and violence in her North African village, arriving in Spain as an undocumented child refugee. None of the people who contributed to her upbringing and education in Spain could predict her radical transformation and religious turn upon arriving at Heathrow as an Erasmus student: “As she left the airport, Mireille followed a different God, or rather, rediscovered her own” (125).

Upon learning that her son was involved with the group that supported the bombers, prepared to cover them in the event of failure, rather than being a victim, Despoina struggles to comprehend the reality. The revelation that her son is now a terrorist is a shocking thought, one that reduces her to speechlessness: “No words rose from her mouth any longer; they had all died with him, torn apart by the explosion” (149). Her grief is now haunted by nightmares of the bloodshed her son has caused.

Nine months later: In the novel’s final scene, Despoina is pregnant, suggesting a search for redemption for her son through the prospect of a new life, or perhaps a form of denial that seeks to replace one child with another. Could she have predicted or suspected her son’s conversion and radicalisation? Were there any warning signs that she failed to recognise? His changed appearance, “the beard, the shaven head, the black scarf with its fringes falling over the shoulders” (15), or his ironic remark when she orders a sandwich with ham: “I can see you’ve got the instincts of a cannibal. How can you eat pork?” (27), become retrospectively significant. Ultimately, it seems that reality has defied her imagination.

The stereotypical notions that equate terrorists with Arab people are spread throughout the novel. This perspective reflects the Islamophobic sentiments that emerged in parts of the world following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Despoina’s sister encourages her to continue living as before; for her, pursuing “a normal life” (56) is in itself “an act of resistance” (57) against terrorism that threatens to “destroy civilisation, our achievements, our values, the organisation of our society” (57), thereby implying the perceived superiority of Western society. Even Despoina, who is portrayed as a democratic person and an activist supporting the rights of Kurds, Palestinians and undocumented refugees, ironically adopts a racist language expressing her anti-Arab sentiments. Davvetas creates an open-ended narrative that invites readers’ diverse interpretations and raises moral dilemmas. His work is a valuable contribution to contemporary European literature on terrorism.

LANGUAGE: Greek/Ελληνικά

This title was not censored before publishing