



Berlinale 2022 review: Sonne (Kurdwin Ayub)

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“Sonne is a promising start for Ayub, who creates an engaging coming-of-age drama with lived-in dialogue and a fine central performance, and leaves the audience with enough food for thought and R.E.M.’s biggest hit stuck in their heads.”



Being torn between cultures is a problem many Muslim girls face when living in the West. A strict religious upbringing and the expectations of a community at home, the temptations of rebelliousness outside it. *Sonne*, the debut feature of Kurdwin Ayub after her 2016 documentary *Paradise! Paradise!*, focuses on the struggle of a young Kurdish woman to find her identity in a world that, at least for her as a woman, has two faces. Mixing handheld video with smartphone footage to create a realistic image of youth culture today, *Sonne* succeeds in showing that coming of age for a girl in a Muslim community is just that little bit harder, although it ends on a somewhat unresolved note. Winning performances and focused direction netted *Sonne* the prize for Best First Feature at this year’s Berlinale, a boost in the career of a young female director who knows what she is talking about, having been torn between cultures herself.

Yesmin (Melina Benli) is a typical Viennese teenager. She goofs around with her friends, lives on social media, wears makeup. She wears a headscarf too. For shits and giggles, to stick with youth slang, she and her friends Nati (Maya Wopienka) and Bella (Law Wallner) record a music video, singing R.E.M.’s *Losing My Religion* (a bit on the nose as a song choice for the film perhaps) dressed in full burqa. When Nati puts the video up on YouTube and it blows up, Yesmin and her friends suddenly become minor celebrities in the Muslim community. Her conservative mother thinks it a disgrace, but her progressive father is proud of his girl. Soon he drives the three around from social gathering to social gathering, as the girls become a popular act at weddings and the like. But where Bella and Nati, who go without headscarves and less strongly identify with their Kurdish background and Muslim religion, use their newfound fame to hook up with boys and, in the case of Nati, try to become the Diana Ross of these Kurdish Supremes, Yesmin starts to drift away from them, as well as from her culture and religion, as she tries to figure out who she wants to be in her dualistic world.

Strong directorial choices mark Ayub’s debut. The restlessness of the camerawork is indicative of the increasing turmoil inside Yesmin’s head; the inclusion of TikTok videos immerses the audience in the depicted youth culture; and the use of diegetic music to create a sense of culture – all give *Sonne* an air of being an authentic snapshot of the kind of life it tries to document. Ayub fled Iraq for Vienna in 1991, and there is a sense that *Sonne* is perhaps not autobiographical, but that there might be similarities between her own story and that of her protagonist. Yesmin’s increasing discomfort with her heritage is rendered

exceptionally well by Benli, making her debut; soulful eyes and irritated frowns tell her story even without the realistic dialogue given to her by Ayub's screenplay. 

Ayub does a nice juxtaposition of Yesmin's social media endeavours and those of her brother Kerim (Kerim Dogan). He skips school and hangs with the wrong crowd, and it shows in the juvenile videos that feature him, and which ultimately get him in trouble. Yet his mother still dotes on him, subtly highlighting how girls within these traditional family structures often have to work harder and do better to get the same kind of TLC. Yesmin's father is a bit of an odd duck in this regard, but one gets the sense that he uses chauffeuring the girls around as an excuse to get away from his wife. Similarly, the hypocrisy of traditional role patterns is slyly highlighted in a heated discussion between Yesmin and the new boyfriends of Nati and Bella, who have no problem with the outgoing ways of the two girls but berate Yesmin for doing the music video in a headscarf.

Not every angle is successful, with a third-act flight to Iraq by Yesmin's friends insufficiently founded, and a heart-to-heart conversation with her mother a too feeble insight into the trauma of her migration from Kurdish Iraq. The open-ended nature of *Sonne* also leaves the audience a bit puzzled, as a dramatic shift in Yesmin's behavior is given too little time to stick the landing. Still, as a debut *Sonne* is a promising start for Ayub, who creates an engaging coming-of-age drama with lived-in dialogue and a fine central performance, and leaves the audience with enough food for thought and R.E.M.'s biggest hit stuck in their heads.

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