

## “EINE ENTSCHEIDUNG FÜR DAS LEBEN”: THE COMIC MODE IN ABBAS KHIDER’S NOVELS

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### Abstract

The article addresses the structuring function and pivotal role of the comic in the writings of German-Iraqi author Abbas Khider, focusing primarily on his 2008 debut novel *Der falsche Inder* (*The Village Indian*) which as autopoetic fiction depicts in its cyclic narrative structure the horrible experiences of a young Iraqi man under a brutal dictatorial regime and tells of his equally disturbing experiences on his further escape route to his final destination in Germany. Seemingly, in an almost cynical contrast to this grim topicality, stands the novel’s general and cohesive humorous tone, its manifold comic elements and even its abundant physical comedy.

I argue, however, that actively employing a humorous mode of writing is firstly part and parcel of a literary survival strategy to partake in the healing process of past collective and personal traumata. Reading this novel as literature in the picaresque mode helps in understanding how this particular comic mode is furthermore used subversively by the author as a means to undermine established authoritative power structures as well as to revise “traditional” Western perceptions of the “refugee other” in an aesthetic act of resistance. Thus, Abbas Khider places himself not only in the Western humorous literary tradition but self-consciously expands its boundaries to include new modes of narration.

**Key words:** Abbas Khider, novel *Der falsche Inder*, German intercultural literature, humor, picaresque mode.

### Introduction

In March 2017, the prestigious Adalbert-von-Chamisso literary price honoring writers who “migrated” into the German language was awarded for the last time ever. Its recipient was German-Iraqi writer Abbas Khider. The jury emphatically recognized Khider as a language-sensitive observer of the desperation, distraction, anger and hope of young men who were forced to flee their homelands to find refuge in Europe. ... Hence, Abbas Khider addresses one of the most important and distressing contemporary problems with genuinely literary methods as he tells of the identity crisis and difficulties of integration of today’s refugees in a way that is drastic, tragic but often humorous (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

The “drastic” as well as the “tragic” has regularly been addressed in scholarly research on Khider, chiefly in connection with the obvious autopoetic elements, spatial (dis-)locations and territoriality, or coping with trauma. Considering his life story with its gloomy experiences and the resultant topics of his novels like flight,

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<sup>1</sup> When quoting from primary sources, the original German is cited, followed by an English translation. If there is an official English translation of a primary source, this is given. When citing from a secondary source, an English-language translation is provided. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

torture, violence, racism, loss of home, or the precarious circumstances of migrants in Western societies, it comes as no surprise that these issues prevail in his fiction as well as in his essays. “Humorous” as the third adjective of the jury’s appreciative trio is also regularly recognized by most critics as a basic feature of Khider’s writings; yet it has in itself up to now received mostly only marginal attention although it constitutes a fundamental thematic pivotal point and a significant structuring element within the Khiderian fictional universe which presents a broad range of differing facets of humor like puns, obscenities, sarcasm, irony, satire, parody, tragicomedy, grotesque, or slapstick.

Although at least partially to entertain his readers, humor in Khider’s novels is employed provocatively in order to defy any expectations the audience might have regarding the life of refugees and to undermine any attempts at victimization or even romanticization of migration. This humor, however, does not possess a sugarcoating or mitigating effect but constitutes a suitable reaction to absurd and depressing situations and helps to raise genuine empathy and understanding for the refugee’s predicament.

For Khider’s protagonists, humor in general becomes a literal means of survival and is consequently employed as an “exit strategy” from “misery” and a remedy to any hegemonial discourses attempting to engross the individual. Khider in his novels thus addresses issues otherwise perhaps too painful to address and at the same time brings down walls of silence in an aesthetic act of resistance to bridge the gap towards a healing process for past traumatic personal and historical events.

Focusing basically on Khider’s 2008 debut novel *Der falsche Inder* (in English *The Village Indian* in 2013, translated by Donal McLaughlin), I will argue that Khider achieves this by resorting to an overarching picaresque mode of comic narration that, according to Klaus Schenk, can generally be considered as a hallmark of intercultural literature (Schenk, 2017: 84). That Khider’s novels are (almost) picaresque novels (“Schelmenromane”) or have at least a picaresque narrator is recognized by various critics, e.g. Sigrid Löffler (Löffler, 2014: 200); Hans-Peter Kunisch (Kunisch, 2011: 117); Sarah Steidl (Steidl, 2017: 311); or Annika Jensen and Jutta Müller-Tamm (Jensen and Müller-Tamm, 2013: 322–23).

I will show how Khider, by making use of this specific humorous mode, appropriately promotes the subversion of any preconceived notions of life under a dictatorship and the life of a refugee. Finally, this is an attempt to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the disturbing experiences of displacement as well as of coming to terms with a traumatizing personal and historical past in an aesthetic process. To broaden the understanding of the role and function of the picaresque humor in *Der falsche Inder*, however, it seems indispensable to highlight some aspects of the writer’s biography, his place within contemporary German (intercultural) literature and his own approach towards humor and the comic.

### **Abbas Khider: Life, Language, and Literature**

Abbas Khider was born in Baghdad in 1973 at a time when Iraq was already under strict Ba’athist dictatorial rule. As a young man, Khider started to distribute prohibited books and came into contact with Iraqi dissident groups. At the age of 19 he was arrested for activities against the regime of Saddam Hussein and sentenced to two years in a detention center where he had to endure brutal torture. This

experience fueled his autobiographic essay “Switzerland: Kingdom Beyond the Sun” (Khider, 2012) but it became also the backdrop for his novels where this traumatizing experience resurfaces again and again. Released from the dungeons in 1996, he fled his native Iraq and started a yearlong odyssey through several countries in the Near East and North Africa where he lived as an illegal alien and kept his head above water with odd jobs on the side. In 2000, Khider came via Libya, Turkey, Greece and Italy to Germany. Although he initially intended to seek refuge in Sweden, he was arrested on a train ride through Germany and required to seek asylum there. He studied literature and philosophy in Munich and Potsdam and became a German citizen in 2007. Khider now lives and writes in Berlin.

Khider started out writing poetry and essays and published his first novel *Der falsche Inder* in 2008 which tells of the fate of Rasul Hamid, a refugee from Iraq. In a playful, self-referential and mis-en-abyme structure, Rasul’s life story is inserted into a frame story wherein an unnamed Arab narrator finds on a train ride from Berlin to Munich a manuscript, titled *Memories*, written by Rasul. At the novel’s close, the train traveler discovers that the story he just read, is actually his own. The eight chapters of the manuscript cyclically tell and retell the same story in ever new attempts, frequently differing dictions (grotesque, fairy tale etc.), and under always new foci (the wonder, the curse etc.) – it is the story of a young Iraqi man who is imprisoned and tortured under Saddam Hussein’s reign of terror, who flees and lives as a refugee in the Near East, North Africa, and Europe until he finally arrives in Germany.

For the unnamed finder of the manuscript as well as for Rasul the novel in its entirety but also in its single chapters is a hermeneutic process of understanding their own life stories, of making sense of their worlds. However, this hermeneutic experiment with cyclicity as a narrative strategy that adds and highlights always new facets forces also the reader to critically assemble and correct Rasul’s life-story while simultaneously laying bare the workings of memory as well as of writing and fictional/biographical discourse itself. Annika Jensen and Jutta Müller-Tamm in their reading of the novel as autofictional writing point out that it offers not only a twofold reading – either “fictional as a novel or factual as an autobiography” (Jensen and Müller-Tamm, 2013: 322) – but that this indistinguishability between the author’s and his character’s similar life-story is deliberately and consequently inscribed in the text’s diegetic structure. *Der falsche Inder* oscillates between the genres of novel, autobiography, fairy tale, or even short story; thus – in a ludic approach to an ultimately unobtainable autobiographic authenticity – Khider is dissolving generic borders and limitations towards an open narrative discourse.

To date Abbas Khider has published three more novels. In 2010 *Die Orangen des Präsidenten* (*The President’s Oranges*); in 2012 *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* (*Letter to the Eggplant Republic*); and in 2016 *Ohrfeige* (in English *A Slap in the Face* in 2018 translated by Simon Pare). Khider is the recipient of several renowned literary prizes, among them the Hilde-Domin-Prize for Literature in Exile (2013), the Nelly-Sachs-Prize (2013), and the afore-mentioned Chamisso-Prize (2017; previously in 2010 the Promotional Prize). He held a residency scholarship at the Villa Aurora in Pacific Palisades in 2011 and became writer-in-residence of the city of Mainz in 2017.

Though Khider writes poetry in Arabic, he deliberately made the choice for the German language in his novels. On the one hand he considers German to be more systematic than Arabic, as he told Annika Hillmann in an interview (Khider,

2013d: 14) but on the other, as he explained to Michael Kohlstadt, German allows him to distance himself from his past traumatic experiences since this linguistic otherness effectively reduces his dismal and gloomy feelings (Khider, 2013e). It is finally becoming a form of aesthetic alienation. Katherine Anderson in her study on the use of foreign language writing as a copying mechanism for trauma rightly states that Khider “could reframe his identity with [the foreign] language and at the same time he was enabled to cope with his traumata by means of creative writing and the use of language games” (Anderson, 2017: 96).

Yet, his attitude towards the German language is very sensual and certainly very comic, too. In an interview at the Leipzig Book Fair in 2016, Khider was reminded by Ernst Grandits that he once compared German to a beautiful woman, waiting eagerly to be conquered. Asked how far he has progressed since then in this arduous conquest, Khider responded:

*I used to describe the German language this way. Right now the situation has changed. I'll give you a very comic example regarding my relation with German and Arabic. Something you'd call a "ménage à trois" in sexual terms. Two men, one woman, or vice versa make love. Right now I've got the feeling of going to bed with the German and Arabic language; but – and this is a cliché – I've the feeling that German for me is very dominant, permanently making rules and regulations and when I try something new with German I've got to tie the German language to the bed and show her some positions with Arabic but when I release her ... she is adaptive, making again new rules and regulations but they are mine and right now it's absolutely exciting; I definitely have the impression of a linguistic integration and when the readers read my book [i.e. *Ohrfeige*], there's probably some sort of group sex (Khider, 2016).*

The migration into another language is described by Khider with sensual and sexual metaphors of dominance and submission in a scene of physical humor, showing the difficulties of finding a new artistic voice, but it hints also to the violence involved.

All of Khider's four novels are – to differing degrees – imbued by his life story and subscribe thus to a certain degree of realism; they are set in Iraq, in the liminal space between the countries on his escape route, and in Germany. The novels portrait the manifold difficulties of life as an asylum-seeker in Germany as one of society's outsiders par excellence, who encounters racism, a brutal police force, a non-caring bureaucracy of almost Kafkaesque dimensions and the netherworld of crooks, human traffickers and illegal work.

The novels are written in an authentic, realistic style with a precise, laconic voice that shuns every notion of arbitrariness as they thematically center on torture, the precarious existence as a refugee, loss of home and self, exile, questions of identity and the struggle for individuality. That Khider's novels are not pure realism, however, is stated by Moritz Schramm, who detects in the literature after postmodernism a resurgent desire towards new forms of realism. For him, Khider's novels conform to this new realism only on a superficial level and places them accordingly somewhere in-between postmodernism and realism. Schramm interprets Khider's realism as an ironic realism “that by its distancing from its objects allows

for a critical examination of reality” (Schramm, 2016: 72). This, however, is not only achieved by ironic distancing but also by the novel’s humorous tone and picaresque mode that equally support the distance from reality by helping the reader to take a critical stance.

It seems quite plausible to read all of his four novels as thematically interlocking and mirroring each other and each one highlighting another aspect of the story of an exemplary refugee. *Der falsche Inder* provides a general “plot overview”. *Orangen für den Präsidenten* as a prequel goes back to depict the unbearable personal and political situation in Iraq that motivates the flight. *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* tells of the story of the refugee en route. *Ohrfeige* finally is portraying the refugee’s tough situation in the land of exile. Yet, all of Khider’s novels not only tell of the refugee’s life on the lam, but at the same time all their protagonists possess an urge to express themselves artistically. Partially adventure novel and bildungsroman, they could also be read as “künstlerroman”, reflecting on the role of the artist as an outsider in differing societies. For Corina Stan on a more metaphorical level:

*a migrant is always a writer. Not necessarily a published author but someone who, as a survival tactic, must learn to decipher the signs on one’s environment (faces, walls, texts) and communication with others (graffiti, diaries, shared stories)* (Stan, 2018: 296).

Consequently, humor thus would become a special form of encrypted communication, only conceivable to the initiated. Hanna Maria Hofmann in her spatial reading of Khider’s novel uses the verbatim expression of the “survival artist” to denote a more adequate and differentiated description of the refugee’s individual living conditions, “whereas this refugee’s art of survival turns out to be a constant attempt in rendering his own experiences and memories artistically, preserving them in writing(s)” (Hofmann, 2017: 98). Here, however the role of the artist is to be understood on a narrower, non-metaphorical level.

## **Khider and Intercultural German Literature**

At a cursory glance, Khider (through his life-story) and his novels (through their ostensible authenticity) seem to conform to the (implied) paternalistic anticipations that a Western literary public might possess regarding stories written by migrants and refugees in order to find there authentic, exemplary voices telling of victimization, torture, and exile, combined with a certain thrill of exoticism and adventures. This voyeuristic search for authenticity, however, would finally reduce the author and his characters basically to the stereotypical roles of “male, Arabic, refugee”. It would also allow reading his novels only as a sort of documentary reportage with no specific aesthetic qualities whatsoever. Khider, however, cleverly succeeds to subvert these expectations and avoids the pitfalls of the so-called “Betroffenheitsliteratur” (“literature of dismay” or “victim literature”), one of the many terms once used to label intercultural German literature, but which furthermore also possesses the negative connotations of a cliché-ridden and apparently emotional writing style. As Khider explained in the interview with

Kohlstadt: “Ich mag Betroffenheitsliteratur nicht. Auf Deutsch konnte ich Distanz zu den Geschehnissen aufbauen.” – “I don’t like victim literature. German allowed me to keep my distance to these incidents” (Khider, 2013e). Avoiding these pitfalls of victimization and stigmatization is achieved by Khider’s distancing “formal aestheticism” (Schramm, 2016: 77), but especially by employing a comic mode as an oppositional counter-narrative that in its unexpectedness thwarts effectively the audience’s expectations. Thereby, the choice of German as a language of aesthetic, artistic expression is only a matter of pure accident and arbitrariness; if Abbas Khider had managed to get through to Sweden then he would have written his novels most likely in Swedish.

The writings of Khider (and, of course, those of other contemporary voices within German intercultural literature) transcend the notion of “German literature” insofar as it is then a transnational literature which is not limited to the confines of being a mere “national literature” in all its constructedness, an issue which is discussed in all its aspects in a recent book-length study by Stuart Taberner (Taberner, 2017). The fact that Khider belongs on the one hand to Iraqi, on the other to German literature, is pointed out by Stan (Stan, 2018: 286–88).

It is the thematic and aesthetic heterogeneity of a complex literature that brings in its dynamic character not only until recently neglected geographical, political, social, and cultural regions to the forefront but also presents new modes, grammars, metaphors, and traditions of narration. For Thomas Hardtke, Johannes Klein, and Charlton Payton the refugee presents a special literary counter-character that challenges established categories of thought in literary studies that can serve as a counter-model and a significant narrative correlate to a strain of contemporary literature in the globalized age inhabited by poised cosmopolitans emphatically affirming their metropolitan, transcultural life style (Hardtke, Klein, and Payton, 2016: 19).

In a cognizant recourse to canonized classics of German-language literature like Gottfried Benn, Rainer Maria Rilke, or Heinrich Heine, Khider in *Der falsche Inder* re-contextualizes them and adds new dimensions of meanings. Jensen and Müller-Tamm assign an important function to these intertextual references:

*The appropriation of the canonical authors and their intercultural reinterpretation is simultaneously combined with the legitimizing entitlement as a German author and the assertion of an intercultural authorship. ... For Khider, the autofictional form means an exit out of the “authenticity trap”, i.e. the tendency to regard the texts of the so-called “literature of migration” first and foremost as documents of cultural otherness while denying them the affiliation with high-quality literature (Jensen and Müller-Tamm, 2013: 327).*

These writings are literary works of art with an extraordinary aesthetic dimension and quality in their own right and are not to be read as actual comments on an extra-literary topicality, nor do they possess only the exotic “otherness”. Khider is able to give the previously marginalized, subaltern figures of the “foreigner/migrant/asylum-seeker” as the paradigmatic “socially invisible”, to borrow Axel Honneth’s term, in German literature and society a voice of their own, and at the same time reverses the stereotypical image of the either doltish or untrustworthy “Oriental” sidekick of old, like the notorious Haji Halef Omar in Karl May’s adventure novels to name but one of many examples. It is rather a self-

conscious narrative voice that tells of the complexity of the world to challenge normative orders.

In their diversity these novels can help bridging a communicative gap between different societies, cultures, languages, or cultures for that matter, and present an alternative to commonly held perceptions of the “other” in the public (and all too often populist) domain.

Since the debate about migration and refugees had become mixed with the debate about terrorism its result is frequently only a one-sided, ideologically charged, xeno- and Islamophobic perception which is summarized in catch phrases like “refugee crisis”, “incompatibility of Islam and Western values”, or Samuel Huntington’s controversial term of the “clash of civilizations”; it is fueled by images of terrorism, (civil) war, and mass migration and resulting in heated debates within the EU member states on immigration, integration and fear of infiltration. The attacks of 9/11, the violent protests against the Mohammed caricatures, or the murderous attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* contributed largely to the negative, undifferentiated stereotypical perception of an easily agitated and chronically humorless but all the more violent Arab and Muslim world, which finally resulted in the transfer of this imagery even to its single, individual representatives. This fear of the potentially dangerous and hostile “other” and its demonization is addressed directly in *Der falsche Inder* when Rasul describes his encounter with an older lady on a plane:

*Es begann mit dem 11. September 2001. Den in Europa lebenden Arabern verging nach diesem Tag das Lachen. Die Medien sprachen über nichts anderes als die Bösen aus Arabien. In dieser heißen Zeit flog ich für ein paar Tage von München nach Berlin. Die alte Dame auf dem Nebensitz ... lächelte mich an: „Sind Sie Inder?“ Ebenfalls lächelnd antwortete ich: „Nein, ich komme aus dem Irak.“ Das Lächeln auf ihren Lippen erstarrte und verwandelte sich in eine angstverzerrte Grimasse. Dann wandte sie hastig ihren Blick von mir ab. Die gesamte restliche Flugzeit klebte sie farb- und tonlos neben mir im Sitz. Es schien als hätte sie gerade den Leibhaftigen gesehen (Khider, 2013a: 22).*

It all began on 11 September 2001. From that day, Arabs in Europe lost their smile. The media spoke of nothing but the ‘Evil from Arabia’. At that tense time, I flew from Munich to Berlin for a few days. An old lady next to me ... smiled at me. ‘Indian?’ ‘No,’ I replied with a smile, ‘Iraqi.’ The smile on her lips froze, turned into a grimace distorted by fear and she quickly averted her eyes. For the rest of the flight, she sat glued – pale and silent – to her seat. You’d have thought she’d seen the Devil (Khider, 2013b: 16–17).

To encounter these unsettling fears and open prejudices, Khider’s novels help to establish a more differentiated image and finally give proof of humor under difficult circumstances and in troubled times.

## Khider on Humor

Khider frequently commented on the role and function of humor within the scope of his writings. In an interview in 2017, he was confronted by Hilde Stadler with the apparent dichotomy between the drastic topics of torture, escape, and migration in his novels and his obviously humorous writing style. Asked if humor was his personal attempt to cope with past horrors, Khider started by placing himself within the tradition of writers in exile. Some, so Khider, who depicted in their works all the bitterness of their experiences from prisons, concentration camps, or exile, later committed suicide. Others, however, made the same experiences but chose to resort to humor, irony, or slapstick as a genuine strategy to deal with personal fate, and thus reached a ripe old age. Khider states that “die Art wie man schreibt ist eine Lebensentscheidung. Und in dem zweiten Fall ist es *eine Entscheidung für das Leben*” (my emphasis) – “the way of writing is an attitude towards life, and consequently it is *a decision for life*” (Khider, 2017). Thus, humor for Khider becomes a strategy for survival. In a humorous turn he continues to contemplate on the cathartic role of humor for his audience:

*Deswegen versuche ich immer, über ernsthafte Themen zu schreiben, über bittere Wirklichkeiten, über Folter usw., aber ich versuche dabei nie, die Leser zu foltern. Ich will meine Leser nicht foltern! Stattdessen will ich das alles anders rüberbringen, will ich teilweise sogar unterhalten: Ich will, dass sie etwas mitnehmen können aus meiner Büchern und später vielleicht darüber nachdenken. Ich will nicht, dass sie beim Lesen meiner Bücher diese ganze Grausamkeit, die ich erleben musste, zu 100 Prozent spüren. Das ist meine Art und Weise, wie ich Literatur mache: Das macht es für mich einfacher und ich glaube, das macht es auch für meine Leser einfacher (Khider, 2017).*

Therefore, I always attempt to write about serious issues, about bitter realities, about torture, and so on, but I try to never torture my readers. I don't want to torture my readers! Instead, I'll want to get all this across differently, want even to entertain: I want them to get something out of my books and later perhaps contemplate on it. I don't want them to completely feel all this cruelty I had to endure. It is my way of writing literature. That makes it easier for me and, I guess, also for my readers.

Consequently, humor and laughter possess not only life-affirming qualities but serve as a distancing and protective measure for author and reader alike when facing sorrow and pain. Hubert Spiegel sees in this Khider's optimistic belief that humans command over humor even under the most dire and atrocious circumstances (Spiegel 2017: 8).

In *Die Orangen des Präsidenten*, Khider applies his theory into practice. The novel opens with a contemplation on different forms of laughter. Khider presents the congenial neologism “Trauerlachen” (“sorrow laughter”): “Ich erfand eine neue, melancholische Art des Lachens. Man könnte es als ‘Trauerlachen’ bezeichnen. Diese Entdeckung machte ich, als mich das Regime packte und in Ketten warf.“ (Khider, 2013c: 7; “I invented a new, melancholy form of laughter. It might be called ‘sorrow laughter’. I discovered this the moment the regime seized and chained me”).



The novel drastically confronts readers with the torture chambers of Saddam's reign of terror, but it is under torture the novel's narrator, Mahdi Muhsin, bursts out in almost unending fits of laughter, completely confusing and unsettling his tormentors and his fellow prisoners. For them, these physical outbursts are actually as unexplainable as they are for Mahdi himself. Later, in a refugee camp in the desert, Mahdi starts to write down his life story, trying to find out what actually caused these strange, ribald outbursts:

*Das Beste wird sein, mir ein Heft und einen Stift zu besorgen und in die Vergangenheit zurückzukehren. Vielleicht gelingt es mir ja sogar auf diese Weise, endlich das Geheimnis meines Lachens zu ergründen* (Khider, 2013c: 10).

*It would be best to get me a notebook and a pen and to return into the past. Perhaps I can thus fathom the secret of my laughter* (my translation).

Hence, the novel as a whole becomes an attempt to get to the enigmatic sources of Mahdi's bewildering laughter, a hermeneutic process of understanding and interpreting.

It is, however, exactly this laughter (as well as his abundant narrative abilities and creativity) that saves the narrator's life and his mental equilibrium in the dungeons and signals the reversal of power structures: "Das Lachen machte mich unempfindlich gegenüber dem Schmerz, gegenüber der Angst und gegenüber der Verzweiflung" (Khider, 2013c: 8) – "Laughter rendered me insensible to pain, to fear and to desperation". Laughter becomes the protective space his tormentors cannot penetrate, even less understand, simultaneously exposing them as the banal and ridiculous persons they actually are (Löffler, 2014: 199). One of the sadistic torturers possesses a striking, yet caricatured and distorted resemblance with Charlie Chaplin; the discovery of this unintentional mock-Chaplin is a moment of epiphany for Mahdi, causing his subsequent convulsive laughter. This private code of ridicule remains incomprehensible to the guards and his fellow inmates and is simultaneously his only means to make sense out of the situation he is pressed in.

Anton C. Zijderveld in his landmark study on laughter elucidates that those situations cause laughter (or also crying) where humans do not have meaningful reactions at their hands and thus cannot command any other adequate response. A situation of existential significance brings about tension and conflict that erupt in cathartic laughter (Zijderveld, 1976: 54).

Although, admittedly not without its entertaining qualities for the reader – and maybe also attempting to not torture his audience by softening the blow of an all too harsh, cruel and unbearable reality – humor for Khider is definitely not just harmless fun but produces, reproduces, mirrors, communicates, and transcends certain problematic subjective and sociocultural situations. It compels the reader – after maybe an initial good laugh, smirk, or smile – to arrive at a new view of the always ambiguous social realities. Humor seen here in its aesthetic and ludic potential can serve as a means to exercise social and cultural critique since it requires the necessary revision of values and norms. Yet, humor can potentially also function in a process of mutual learning.

## **Humor, Unreliable Narration and Ironic Distancing in *Der falsche Inder***

The romanticized “Occidental” public imagination of an original and authentic Arab literary tradition is most likely shaped by an alleged importance of storytelling and fairy tales. This is prominently exemplified in the stories of *The Arabian Nights*, which in reverse influenced Western literature since Romanticism at the latest. It is, however, a somewhat distorted view since “fairy tales and folk tales were for the Arab cultural elite ... until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘sub-literature’” (Walther, 2004: 22), restricted to the oral culture of illiterates. Only since the revival of Arab literature during the *nahda*-period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this literary field could position itself as an important element until today. Mustafa Al-Slaiman pointed out the significance of this narrative tradition for contemporary German-Arab literature but consequently also addresses the inherent problematic issue of a fossilization of stereotypes about Arabic culture by the almost exclusive dedication of some writers to the fairy tale style:

*Since the West still commands a very exotic Arabian-Night-like imagination over the Arab world, the authors regard writing fairy tales as a dormant chance. Too frequently, however, they solidify with their ‘new’ fairy tales the Western clichés* (Al-Slaiman, 2000: 237–238).

In *Der falsche Inder*, Khider by means of a comic mode manages to transcend this cliché-ridden image of a fanciful storyteller performing on an exotic Oriental bazaar. In the seventh cyclic repetition of his life story, Rasul, the narrator, in a cheeky reversal of causalities, fatalistically identifies himself with a raven, a “Unglücksvogel, ... Unheilsbringer für die Menschheit” (Khider, 2013a: 123) – “a bird of bad ill, a bringer of bad luck” (Khider, 2013b: 124). Being this raven-like jinx and personified misfortune of almost mythological, roc-size dimensions, Rasul leaves a trail of destruction on his odyssey, mixing his tragic personal story with that of historic disasters set in 1999, like the Jordan bread rebellion, the devastating effects of Western embargo politics on Libya, the so-called “Bulgarian nurses affair”, catastrophic earthquakes in Turkey and Greece, and in a final ironic twist, the introduction of tuition fees at German universities. This “fairy-tale-chapter” ends with the narrator’s confession to have told “ein echtes arabisches Märchen, die tausendundzweite Nacht” (Khider, 2013a: 131) – “a real Arabian tale. Arabian Night Number 1002” (Khider, 2013b: 133).

Combining the tragic personal and historical events with a fairy-tale-like mode of comic narration enables readers and narrator alike to distance themselves from the nightmarish realities of history. The historical, social and cultural circumstances are being criticized; reality thus becomes personalized and explainable since the storyteller is culprit and scapegoat at the very same time. It ironically revises any notions of the function of fairy-tale narration in the Arabic tradition and ridicules the romanticized search for an authentic and folkloristic literary expression. Furthermore, in its ludic quality it playfully undermines the notion of Arabic fatalism. By means of ironic humor the reader has gained new insights and is thus enabled to take a critical stance towards previously held beliefs, i.e. a cyclical learning process helps to enlarge mutual global knowledge.

To be this raven-like, animalistic self-ascribed jinx means, however reluctantly, to be an outsider in society who is trapped in one conflict after another and who is subject to asymmetric power structures. To be this jinx means that the narrator does not and cannot act independently or autonomously but is determined by obscure powerful political, social, and historical forces beyond his control. To be a jinx also means that the readers encounter a narrator who is ironically disguised in the mask of the Arabic storyteller, thus finally revealing himself as an unreliable narrator.

Already in the second rerun of his story, focusing on the role of the artist under a dictatorship, Rasul willingly admits to his narrative unreliability, a quality, however, that as a protective mechanism also helps him survive in a hostile environment:

*Ich kann viele Dinge schnell vergessen. Das ist eine Fähigkeit, ich nenne sie die ‚Gnade‘. Ihretwegen bin ich noch da. Kaum auszudenken, wenn ich mich an alles genau erinnere. ... Dazu kommt noch eine andere Fähigkeit, eine andere Gnade: Wenn doch einmal etwas Fürchterliches am Rand meines Gedächtnisses kleben bleibt, kann ich es ganz und gar verschönern. ... Der Preis für diese Gnade ist aber sehr hoch. ... Meinen Geschichten fehlt auch das, was Geschichten zu Geschichten macht: Raum, Zeit und Handlung. ... auch die Zeiten mischen sich oft in meinem Kopf, und am Ende kann ich das Jahr nur ungefähr schätzen. Und damit nicht genug, auch die Geschlossenheit der Handlungen und ihre Chronologie fallen völlig weg, und von den wahren Geschichten bleiben manchmal nur ungeordnete und diffuse Erzählfetzen übrig (Khider, 2013a: 25–26).*

*I can quickly forget many things. An ability I consider a blessing. It is thanks to this I'm still around. I can't imagine what it would be like if I had total recall. ... I have another ability, another blessing – if something terrible does manage to stick to the edge of my memory, I can embellish it completely and utterly. ... But the price I pay for this blessing is very high. ... My stories also lack what makes stories stories – time, place and action. ... In my memory, different points in time get mixed up until, in the end, I can roughly guess at which year it was. Unity of action and its chronology cease to exist too. Sometimes only disorderly, vague scraps of narrative are all that remain of true stories (Khider, 2013b: 20).*

Warda El-Kaddouri points out that the novel's narrative form mirrors the fluidity of Rasul's identity since the process of writing itself (and the ensuing permanent loss of his writings) is connected with the different forms of loss typical for the refugee's life (El-Kaddouri, 2017: 41). Here, however, the novel's ambiguous narrator, displays an almost Vonnegutian quality of non-linear, fragmented and dry, black-humor narration and aestheticizes his troubled memories in a comic and ironic mode. It is not his overt intention to willingly lie or to deceive his readers but – being consciously aware of the unreliable nature and constructedness of every memory – rather to repress and creatively re-work a painful past. Unreliable narration is, of course, also a hallmark of picaresque literature.

## Remarks on the Picaresque

The picaresque novel with its protagonist, the roguish pícaro, originally stems from a Baroque tradition in Spanish literature, which supposedly had its antecedent in the Arabic *maqāmāt*, subversive short trickster tales that were a very popular parodistic genre in the Islamic world since the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, narrating the adventures of an outcast who aspires to prosper in life (Walther, 2004: 223).

Although a longstanding tradition within world literature, there is until today neither a clear-cut definition of what constitutes a “picaresque novel” nor an exact clarification of the term “picaresque” itself, so that it remains a rather open literary category. There exists a multitude of differing theoretical approaches, ranging from a historical limitation of this term to a certain and narrow literary epoch within Spanish Baroque literature to existentialist discussions of its generic implications, or even re-interpretations as the “neo-picaresque”, or the reemergence of the picaresque in postmodernist and postcolonial writings etc.

While William F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard in their classic 1935-study, for example, identified seven characteristics of the picaresque novel (Holman, 1972), Claudio Guillén identified a set of eight characteristics of the picaresque “myth” in his generic approach (Guillén, 1971) that was followed by Ulrich Wick’s more flexible theory of also eight distinct elements, used not so much to identify a picaresque novel but rather to identify the picaresque *in* a novel (Wick, 1974). This gave rise to a tendency in literary criticism to view the “picaresque” as a *mode* of fiction rather than a specific genre, a distinction I will follow here. Also, for simplicities sake I will forego here lengthy theoretical discussions but rather base the following loosely on the distinctions made by Thrall and Hibbard, although not all of these criteria must apply to turn a story into a picaresque narrative: first person (autobiographic) narrative; demotic voice of a (not always) realistic tale of a not always reliable narrator; elements of satire or parody; outsider protagonist of low birth and class getting by with wit; loosely connected episodic structure; little or no character development; protagonist involved in or near illegal activities.

### The Picaresque Mode in *Der falsche Inder*

The picaresque humor is not a humor of sheer joy or happy laughter but results much more from desperation and borders on gloom on the one side and on hope on the other. In the case of Khider, this specific picaresque humor takes on the form of “Trauerlachen” (“sorrow laughter”). Since the world the pícaro lives in is experienced as a physical and spiritual waste land, it comes as no surprise that in Khider’s novels it is not only a metaphorical but rather often quite literally the desert as the exemplary void his protagonists find themselves in. Only storytelling and narrating one’s own life story can present a possible escape strategy from this vast, paradoxical emptiness. Specifically, it is humor that attempts to confront and to overcome the “horror vacui” of a life dominated by persecution, loss, and exile. The imagery of the “Leere des Exils” (Khider, 2013a: 73) – “emptiness of exile” (Khider, 2013b: 69) – that is drastically described during the fifth rerun of Rasul’s story, entitled “Save Me from Emptiness”, for example, can thus be countered and rejected in an aesthetic process; but this process – and this is indeed well-supported

by the novel's cyclical narrative structure itself – is never absolute or finished but permanently ongoing.

The pícaro is trapped in conflicting, asymmetric power structures and lives through a time of historical crisis. Indeed, the historical canvas that is the backdrop of *Der falsche Inder* – beginning with the foundation of the city of Baghdad in 762 as “Madinat al-Salam ... Stadt des Friedens [die] keinen Frieden mehr [erlebt]” (Khider, 2013a: 13) – “Madinat al Salam ... city of peace [that] has never known peace” (Khider, 2013b: 7) and fast-forwarding to the many wars in the Middle East to the US invasion in 2003 during Rasul's lifetime – clearly is a ceaseless stream of critical times and its protagonist is entangled in forces beyond his control. The picaresque mode, however, forms a subversive “counter-narrative” from below to these historical facts that are experienced by its subjects as an absurd “non-sensical” world full of imminent life-threatening dangers to physical and mental health which they have somehow to overcome.

On his odyssey through this bizarre and violent world, Rasul as pícaro is constantly in a liminal status wherein he moves fluidly between territorial and social barriers; to get along, he quite literally needs to become a “survival artist” who despite all setbacks always makes a “decision for life”. To save his physical and mental equilibrium on his perilous journey he has to rely on his wits and his shrewdness as well as on his humor. Rasul thus becomes the voice of the oppressed subalterns and also the critic of the prevailing social norms of his native Iraqi as well as his “host” societies.

In its very structure and style the picaresque mode is implicitly directed against existing genres or writing styles (e.g. romances), thus undermining the audiences' expectations. In *Der falsche Inder* the picaresque mode is essentially directed against the maudlin antics and affectations of “Betroffenheitsliteratur” (“victim literature”). By employing the comic picaresque mode, Khider manages to subvert any paternalistic expectations the audience might have regarding the life story of an Iraqi refugee and can reject thus any appropriation and victimization. The picaresque mode enables him to keep his distance without being in-authentic since the realistic core of the novel (the personal and historical circumstances) remains still intact but now he presents this reality in a fragmented and multi-perspective way.

In *Ohrfeige*, it is actually its protagonist's gynecomastia, the resultant fear of getting raped during military service, and the enormous psychological distress that causes him to flee from his native Iraq. Nonetheless, this story can never become his official narrative with the German authorities since it would not grant him the status of a recognized asylum-seeker. This endocrine disorder is for Khider a stand-in, exemplary for the endless diversity of reasons for fleeing one's home country that might be hard to understand for those not affected or lacking empathy. Thus, Khider manages to create a counter-narrative to widespread populist images of refugees as “economic migrants” or an equally popular one-sided victimization. Similarly, Rasul in *Der falsche Inder* is not a poor, woeful, and helpless refugee from war, driven by poverty and violence, finding shelter in a generous European country but rather turns out to be very often an impish trickster figure and an inventive, creative survival artist – a pícaro.

One of the hallmarks of the picaresque is its idiosyncratic narrative form as it is (usually) a first-person narration in the form of a fictitious autobiography told retrospectively and arranged episodically, centering on some adventures in the

pícaro's life. *Der falsche Inder* presents a multiplicity of competing first person episodic accounts of Rasul's life story since in ever new cycles the narrator attempts to convey sense from his life story and pieces together the fragmented self to a new holistic existence that can at least aesthetically distance itself from the traumatic past by writing down his experiences. For Jensen and Müller-Tamm the picaresque narration fulfills a further important function in that it constitutes not only this humorous distancing device but clearly marks the text for the reader as fictional. In its "doubled communicative situation the reader can complement and revise his own knowledge as well as apply his own evaluative criteria to the picaresque narrator's account to reflect on the difference between narrator and author" (Jensen and Müller-Tamm, 2013: 322–323).

In order to reflect and reconstruct, in every cycle the narrator shifts the focus on different aspects of his self – the writer, the refugee, the "graffiti artist", the unfulfilled lover, the mischievous assembler of writing material, the searcher for God, or the fairy-tale jinx. Every time in every new cycle, Rasul is adding new elements or shifting the focus of the basic, underlying storyline. Featuring a carnevalesque polyphony of conflicting selves, this testing of different roles or wearing of different masks becomes the necessary art of disguise to survive in an all too dangerous world. These fragmentations of the narrator and congruously the pícaro-protagonist, however, are not playful postmodernism (or just a desperate cry over the confusing complexities of life): the donning of different masks in the repetitive process of re-telling the story again and again serves as a self-reflexive process of self-discovery in search of identity as well as a subversive strategy to question the authority of the respective majority society portrayed. Yet, none of the masks seems to fit perfectly, which demonstrates the impossibility of bringing Rasul's different experiences together to extract *one* true story from his narrative, almost forcing the narrator to desperately resort to witty hyperbole and comic self-stylization as e.g. the raven-like jinx. Humor and comic elements result from this incompatibility and become the appropriate coping strategy for the narrative conflict and for encountering a world full of absurdities.

For the pícaro's world is such an absurd place, a *mundus inversus*, inhabited by a protagonist who is usually of low birth, an orphan, or otherwise an outsider in society. In order to function properly as a critique of social norms and of the intrinsic deceptiveness of the world, the view from "below" is needed. The adjective "falsch" – "false" – from the novel's German title already hints at this since due to the dark complexion of his skin Rasul is thought by many to be an Indian or at least of Indian descent. In being this "false Indian", Taberner recognizes in him an exemplary "cipher for otherness" (Taberner, 2017: 57). Indeed, Rasul in his many roles can be regarded as a stand-in for the global/transnational (refugee) other, as the marginalized outsider that is constantly thrown in an identity crisis. Rasul's biological heritage remains enigmatic, his physical appearance differs from that of others, his complexion being too dark in some, too light in other countries, his social and economic status is extremely low, in his native society he is a political opponent, in his host countries he is the ostracized refugee, and finally he is also an artist struggling with the difficulties of writing under a dictatorship. All varieties of text production imaginable, including the ensuing loss of the writings, are being acted out, from graffiti to love poetry; all sorts of writing materials are being used by Rasul to satisfy his manic lust for writing, from brick walls to stolen scraps of paper.

Yet, the thing most feared by Saddam's dictatorship is the written word as it undermines the once established order of terror and oppression. *Der falsche Inder* describes the fundamentally dangerous, even life-threatening character of writing and literature under a totalitarian system. Rasul's literary attempts start in his early youth where he anonymously smears provocative graffiti full of gross, vulgar humor on the walls of the school building: "'Der Schuldirektor ist ein Arschloch'. 'Der Literaturlehrer vögelt die Putzfrau der Schule'. 'Der Imam ist schwul'. Oder: 'Der Präsident fickt alle'." (Khider, 2013a: 58) – "'The head teacher's an arsehole.' 'The literature teacher's fucking the cleaner.' 'The imam is gay.' 'The president is fucking everyone.'" (Khider, 2013b: 53). For these writings the regime randomly incarcerates several uninvolved young men who are never to be seen again. And finally, for a similar act, Rasul is thrown into jail. While developing into a compulsive writer and poet, Rasul is in constant danger. Writing itself has to turn from its rather private nature of introspection and creative expression into a clandestine operation that challenges the powers that be. As Schramm notices, a similar "tension between private self-assurance and a political-societal function which can be interpreted as a revolt against established forms of authority and power" characterizes also the writings of the author Khider (Schramm, 2016: 73).

It is not easy for the pícaro to survive by always being honest – to satisfy his dire writing needs Rasul has to steal paper and writing material that is otherwise not available for him. But also the world outside the Iraqi dictatorship proves to be an extreme and frightening place since Rasul's life becomes that of a refugee on the lam. His route to a safe haven presents the absurd picaresque world with its *bellum omnia contra omnes*. Dropping out of conventional life and their social environment, refugees like Rasul with their illegal status and in their liminal position have to move about dark, hidden pathways to arcane places where they are forced to put themselves in the hands of criminals and human traffickers, or have to travel with dodgy companions. Dangerous situations abound in stories that depict these outcasts' fate. In the very places from which the refugees actually expect protection and which they consider to be a sanctuary, they receive mistreatment, hostility, and violence. Rasul, like other Khiderian protagonists, gets humiliated and beaten up on an almost regular basis in scenes of ribald, gross physical humor. During his stay in Greece, Rasul gets a severe beating from a Greek police officer in a men's restroom:

*Mir kam das alles absurd vor, und ich konnte mir keinen Reim darauf machen. Ein blonder Polizist brachte mich in meine Zelle zurück. Dort saß ich nun, fertig mit der Welt und maßlos enttäuscht und traurig. Ich konnte nicht glauben, dass man auch in Europa grundlos von der Polizei getreten und geschlagen wurde. Das hätte ich mir nie vorstellen können. Was für eine böse Überraschung!* (Khider, 2013a: 20).

*How absurd! I couldn't make any sense of it! A blonde policeman brought me back to my cell. I sat there, fed up with the world, hugely disappointed and sad. I couldn't believe that in Europe too the police kicked and beat people for no reason. I could never have imagined it A horrible surprise!* (Khider, 2013b: 14).

Only later he learns that he was mixed up with a doppelgänger, a Pakistani drug dealer, who is his spitting image. Being again the "false Indian" causes Rasul

serious troubles. Also in an alleged safe haven like Europe it is an absurd, topsy-turvy world, also European authorities maltreat innocent charges. Sarah Steidl in her spatial reading of the novel sees here, in the almost unnoticed border waste land between Greece and Turkey, a “peculiar border policy that mocks the asylum seekers, degrades the protection seekers and renders them a plaything in a net of police and human traffickers” (Steidl, 2017: 313). So Rasul has to learn the hard way about the brutal machinations of the world and European refugee policy in particular with its haphazard rules that he cannot grasp, control or influence.

The picaresque novel is to a large degree also a story of initiation where the protagonist has to set out on a quest. Only by going through a hard learning process the pícaro can attempt to achieve self-determination like in Rasul’s encounter with the Greek authorities. After an initial moment of shock, the readers can marvel at Rasul’s innocent naivety from an ironic distance and discover that humor and terror can sometimes go hand in hand; through encountering physical humor they get finally sensitized for the racist brutality refugees are confronted with. It is one of many exemplary scenes of physical and psychic abuse which for Taberner on a more general level eventually “suggest the complete failure of the cosmopolitan ideal of a shared humanity” (Taberner, 2017: 57).

The physical side of picaresque humor is also exemplified in the narrator’s coarse imagery, e.g. when he describes his writer’s block with “Schreibdurchfall” and “Schreibverstopfung” (Khider, 2013a: 52) – “writing diarrhoea” and “writing constipation” (Khider, 2013b: 46) – as bodily malfunctions, or also in the somewhat salacious taxonomy of female anatomy according to their nationality as belonging either to oriental “Kuh Schönheiten” or to the German type of “Ziegenschönheiten” (Khider, 2013a: 53) – “cow beauty” and “goat beauty” (Khider, 2013b: 47). In the third chapter, “Priestertöchter” (“Priests’ Daughters”), Carola Hilmes acknowledges that the narrator refers to “the topos of ‘the poet’s muses’ and exaggerates this towards the erotic and grotesque” (Hilmes, 2017: 140) since his recurring, voyeuristic erotic dreams, set in a mock-antique temple environment and populated with bare breasted priestesses and muses, fuel his desire to write that can only be satisfied by writing on stolen scraps of paper.

The pícaro’s story reveals social ambiguities and society’s cynical mechanisms and is at the same time the story of a “survivor” who, despite all setbacks, relies on his smartness to finally *decide for life*. In its heuristic function it is a perspective from below that subversively aims at a satirical critique of society at large and uses therefore – to make its point – a picaresque sense of humor. This humor serves as a reversal of power structures and the superior positions of the majority society, laying bare its moral double standards. It is, of course, not a humor of pure cheerfulness or playful mirth but rather one of desperation, of “sorrow laughter”, bordering on depression and hope, depicting the world in its societal critique even sarcastically as an absurd “waste land”. Humor thus becomes part in the painful process of healing past traumata – personal and historical.

## Conclusion

The particular appeal of Khider’s novel lies in telling a realistic story with comic elements and humor. The effect of this combination is, however, not



a sugarcoating of harsh realities but rather contributes to an intensification and critical analysis. Humor creates the necessary distance from the events for author, narrator, and reader alike to transpose them on a more general level and to detect new meanings. In using humor, and especially the picaresque mode of the comic, Khider is able to negotiate social and cultural conflicts, prejudices, resentments, and “otherness”. The comic serves as an antidote to fatalism and allows for a reduction of suffering to a tolerable level, to finally make this deliberate decision for life. It is one of the many ways in which contemporary German-language literature approaches and negotiates the issue of deterritorialization, migration, transition, flight and its causes, and the relationship between cultures.

For the readers, this means not only to confront their stereotypical perceptions and to critically review them but to encounter a unique and humorous voice in German literature that sovereignly uses a humorous serenity to help in bridging the gaps between cultures. And tongue in cheek one might add that we, the readers did not get tortured by the author, can decide for life, too.

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