

## New Perspectives on Imagology

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# New Perspectives on Imagology

*Edited by*

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# Immigration and Imagology, or Nationalisms Abandoned

*Manfred Beller*

## Abstract

This article applies imagology to “migration literature”—a genre that is described as a “peripheral phenomenon” in the 2007 handbook *Imagology*, but that requires more thorough attention due to the increasing number of significant writings by immigrant authors. Focusing on works by Rafik Schami, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Amara Lakhous, Igiaba Scego, Hatice Akyün, Yoko Tawada, and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and considering theoretical observations by Edward Said, Salman Rushdie, and Homi Bhabha, this article analyses how most texts prefer arguments and metaphors of everyday life to the traditional images and stereotypes of nationalistic discourse. It concludes by distinguishing two perspectives central to most of them: that of an “in-between” and/or a “Third Space.”

## Keywords

imagology – nationalism/s – migration literature – identity – Third Space

Traditionally, the study of imagology deals mainly with research on images, prejudices, and stereotypes between European nations. In 2007 the handbook *Imagology*, edited by Joep Leerssen and myself, included an article titled “Migration Literature,” referring to it as a “peripheral phenomenon” (Beller and Leerssen 2007, 365–371). In more recent times, however, due to an increasing number of significant personal writings by immigrant authors, the perspectives of that literary genre have greatly expanded and require a more intensified study into its motifs.

Edward Said realized in his *Reflections on Exile* (1984) that exile “is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” adding, perhaps with regard to his own privileged

professorship at Columbia University: “Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees” (Said 2001, 173). Said thus connects “place” with national identity arriving at the central argument of this article: “Nationalism affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs” (ibid., 176).

Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay, became a refugee with his family in Karachi, before being exiled to England. In 1987 Rushdie argued that the migrant loses three essential living conditions: “You no longer belong to a place; you no longer belong to a language; you no longer belong to any kind of broad community” (Rushdie 2001, 77).

The Syrian-German poet Rafik Schami, arriving in Germany in 1971, describes his experiences in *Damals dort und heute hier*: “As long as he continues to remain a foreigner his surroundings will consider him a menace—they want to smooth out all his rough edges. [... My home is] where my wife, my son, and my childhood live, in Syria and Germany. My heart is a swallow” (Schami 1998, 28, 69).<sup>1</sup> The reference to his heart as a migratory bird is a lovely poetic image.

The real despair of exiles is more plausible in the character of Houria portrayed by the Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun in *Hospitalité française*: “Her voice becomes furious when she speaks. [...] Neither French nor Algerian. She seeks after a country where she could plant her roots. [...] No, better to be left without a fatherland. Do they exist, people without a fatherland?” (1984, 94, 96)<sup>2</sup> Ben Jelloun relates to the *in-between* of so many migrants’ fates mostly as a negative experience that can be expressed by a *neither-nor*. However, there are moments when this precarious *in-between* situation can take on a more positive solution expressed as an *as-well-as*.

The Turkish-German journalist Hatice Akyün, a second-generation immigrant of Anatolian descent, subtitled her autobiographical sketches *Leben in zwei Welten* (2007). In this book, she recounts her father’s life, a first-generation immigrant who discovered, while living in Germany, a yearning for his native Turkey; yet when on vacation in his homeland he became overwhelmed by desire to return to Germany. Hatice Akyün herself refers to both countries as “my parallel world” (2007, 30).<sup>3</sup>

1 All translations are my own unless stated otherwise. Original: “Die Umwelt sieht in ihm, solange der Fremde fremd bleibt, eine Bedrohung, sie möchte seine Ecken und Kanten rundschieben. [... Meine Heimat ist] wo meine Frau, mein Sohn und meine Kindheit leben, in Syrien und Deutschland. Mein Herz ist eine Schwalbe.”

2 “Quand elle parle, de la colère passe dans sa voix. [...] Ni française, ni algérienne. Elle cherche une terre où planter ses racines. [...] Non, autant être apatride. Ça existe, les apatrides?”

3 “Meine Parallelwelt.”

Ben Jelloun devotes a separate chapter to “The Myth of Return” (1984, 133–144),<sup>4</sup> the desire and firm intention to return home that accompanies all migrants for the rest of their lives. They rapidly lose the culture of their homeland without gaining familiarity with the culture of their destination. He analyses the difference between the majority of natives and the minority of foreigners: “Like it or not, the difference is what defines identity. But taken to extremes, these social differences can prove fatal to communication, creating the ghetto” (ibid., 88).<sup>5</sup>

This negative identity attributed to the young strangers is not the identity that they have left behind; it is a fictitious identity ascribed to them by the host country. The loss of their original identity is the most important theme in several of Ben Jelloun’s novels—for example, in *Partir*. The young Moroccan Azel is looking from Tangier to the Spanish coast:

Leave the country. That was an obsession, a kind of folly which afflicted him day and night. How to get away, how to put an end to the humiliation? To leave this land that no longer wants its children, to turn your back upon this beautiful country and return one day, proud and perhaps rich, leave to save your skin, even if it means losing it.

BEN JELLOUN 2006, 23<sup>6</sup>

The wealthy Spaniard Miguel, in search of a male prostitute, rescues Azel from difficulty by taking him off to Spain and offering him a luxurious life. The price Azel pays is an abyss of despair and shame. Prostitution is the predominant metaphor for loss of identity in Ben Jelloun’s description and analysis of the young migrant’s destiny. In *Partir* it is the allegorical figure of the old African Moha who sums up the author’s grim opinion on the problem of migration:

So you want to run away, leave, flee the country, go to the Europeans, but they are not waiting for you [...], you believe there is work, comfort, beauty and grace, but my poor friends, there is sadness, loneliness, grayness, there is also money, but not for those who come without an

4 “Le mythe du retour.”

5 “Qu’on le veuille ou non, la différence est ce qui définit l’identité. Mais poussé à l’extrême, la différence dans une société c’est la mort de la communication, le ghetto.”

6 “Quitter le pays. C’était une obsession, une sorte de folie qui le travaillait jour et nuit. Comment s’en sortir, comment en finir avec l’humiliation? Partir, quitter cette terre qui ne veut plus de ses enfants, tourner le dos à un pays si beau et revenir un jour, fier et peut-être riche, partir pour sauver sa peau, même en risquant de la perdre.”

invitation. Well, you know what I'm talking about, how many guys left and drowned?

BEN JELLOUN 2006, 146<sup>7</sup>

Coincidentally, the year that *Partir* was published, 2006, is the same year the Algerian-Italian writer Amara Lakhous sets his story *Contesa per un maialino italianissimo a San Salvario* in (published in 2014). The book tells the story of the Nigerian Joseph and his little domestic pig. When the piggy Dino is discovered in a mosque in the district of San Salvario a terrible scandal arises among the Muslim community. The story is narrated by an Italian character named Enzo Laganà, who was born in Turin to Calabrian parents. Lakhous infuses the Italian North-South disparity with the current problems of the African and mostly Islamic wave of immigrants. The satirical crime thriller is flavoured with the common prejudices toward the *Meridionali*, the *Mafiosi*, and the Muslims of North Africa. (Enzo's friend, the Moroccan Samir from Tangier, a somewhat clandestine but talented musician living in Italy, is reminiscent of the Moroccan Azel in Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir*.)

In his earlier novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* ([2011] 2014) Lakhous invents a small culturally mixed community of Arabs, Pakistanis, and others who live together in a block of rented flats in the centre of Rome. He characterizes the different groups of people, developing the conflict between racism and tolerance. However, his social criticism and observations of tribal and national types give rise to entertaining caricatures.<sup>8</sup>

Igiaba Scego's novel *Adua* (2015) tells a different story concerning immigration. It deals with the traumatic experiences of a Somalian girl who arrived in Italy as an orphan immigrant during the time of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–1936. Her father Zoppe, who worked as an interpreter for imperial Italy, is later arrested by the Somalis as a traitor. His seventeen-year-old daughter Adua gets involved with Italian film producers who pay for her flight to Europe and then, on her arrival in Rome, exploit her as an actress

7 "Alors ainsi vous voulez déguerpir, partir, quitter le pays, aller chez les Européens, mais ils ne vous attendent pas [...], vous croyez que là-bas il y a du travail, du confort, de la beauté et de la grâce, mais mes pauvres amis, il y a de la tristesse, de la solitude, de la grisaille, il y a aussi de l'argent, mais pas pour ceux qui viennent sans être invités. Bon, vous savez de quoi je parle, combien de gars sont partis et se sont noyés?"

8 Schwarz Lausten (2010, 93–111) calls Lakhous's *Scontro di civiltà* an "excellent crime comedy" (ibid., 106) and quotes the author: "We don't live in a country, but in a language. The Italian language is my new home" (ibid., 111) (Original: "Non abitiamo un paese ma una lingua. La lingua italiana è la mia nuova dimora"). Cf. Moll (2010, 233–242).



in pornographic films. In two central chapters, Scego describes the deception, brute violation, and sexual humiliation of the young African dreaming of a career as an actress (cf. Scego 2015, 114–124, 130–140). It is interesting to note that this story was written shortly before the Me Too campaign started in 2017.

Scego reveals in the “Epilogo” that some years later, Adua accompanies the illegal African Ahmed to Termini station in Rome, where a human trafficker affirms the prejudice that all migrants’ problems are resolved in Germany: “Suffice it to say that in Italy you are treated badly and they leave you in Germany. The Germans care about human rights, after the Holocaust they are good people” (2015, 168).<sup>9</sup>

On the surface Scego does not seem to mention any stereotype or imagological concept, yet in the last chapter on the Piazza dei Cinquecento she presents us with a symbolic image of Adua’s existential problem. Adua has covered her head with a turban wrapped together with a blue shawl, the only keepsake of her father. A gull then attacks and tears the blue turban from her head. “It was the sign of my slavery and of my former shame, this turban. It was the yoke I had chosen to redeem myself” (ibid., 172–173).<sup>10</sup> This represents the shackle of her identity; in losing it she is free to start a new life.

In *The Satanic Verses* (1988) Salman Rushdie writes of the tragic consequences of the loss of identity through migration and assimilation. His own experience when he returned to Bombay, where the Indians were astonished at the manner in which he pronounced Hindustani, is symbolized by the smashed mirror (cf. Rushdie 1988, 58). Already in 1982 Rushdie had formulated the distancing effect of migration in time and space:

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. [...] But I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place of his past, of his being “elsewhere.”

RUSHDIE 1991, 12

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9 “Basta dire che in Italia ti trattano male et ti lasciano in Germania. Ci tengono ai diritti umani i tedeschi, dopo l’Olocausto fanno i buoni.”

10 “Era il segno della mia schiavitù e delle mie antiche vergogne, quel turbante. Era il giogo che avevo scelto per redimermi.”

Rafik Schami emphasizes different speeds of time from one country to the next:

The losses of a man in exile are enormous. You lose the most important and valuable condition of all human cultures, a sense of belonging, to a place and its inhabitants. But above all the exiled man loses the simultaneous passing of time with his or her relatives. In the moment one leaves their own people, one also leaves their time.

SCHAMI 1998<sup>11</sup>

There are also other aspects connected with the experiences of exile. The Turkish-German journalist Hatice Akyün was just three years old when she arrived together with her parents from a rural village in Anatolia at the industrial town of Duisburg on the Rhine. She freed herself not only from the paternal constraints of her family but also from the concepts of ethnic and national identity: "My parents had only *one* identity, they knew only *one* world when they came to Germany. They knew exactly where they belonged, to Turkey. [...] They spoke [only] one language, their Turkish native tongue" (Akyün 2007, 183).<sup>12</sup> In her perception of herself, Akyün asserts a double identity: "To be honest, I don't feel myself to be in any kind of dilemma, nor would I change anything. I consider my life a great richness, because I have two different lives depending on whether I'm staying with my Turkish family or if I'm in Berlin" (ibid., 181).<sup>13</sup> She smooths over any eventual reflections or sentiments that could be hidden in such self-assertive statements: "For me, the question of identity has nothing to do with a certain place, but rather with a life situation" (ibid., 185).<sup>14</sup>

The emancipation of Scego or Akyün is motivated by their move to the big capitals, Rome or Berlin. It's worth observing that most migrant intellectuals

11 "Die Verluste eines Menschen im Exil sind enorm. Man verliert die wichtigste und teuerste Voraussetzung aller menschlichen Kulturen, die Zugehörigkeit zu einem Ort und dessen Bewohnern. Vor allem aber verliert der Mensch im Exil die Gleichzeitigkeit des Zeitganges mit seinen Angehörigen. In dem Augenblick, in dem man seine Angehörigen verläßt, verläßt man auch ihre Zeit."

12 "Meine Eltern hatten nur *eine* Identität, kannten nur *eine* Welt, als sie nach Deutschland kamen. Sie wußten genau, wohin sie gehörten, in die Türkei. [...] Sie sprachen [nur] eine Sprache, ihre türkische Muttersprache."

13 "Ehrlich gesagt, fühle ich mich weder in einem Dilemma, noch möchte ich etwas ändern. Ich betrachte mein Leben als großen Reichtum, denn ich habe gleich zwei davon, je nachdem, ob ich mich gerade bei meiner türkischen Familie aufhalte oder in Berlin."

14 "Für mich hat die Frage nach der Identität nichts mit einem bestimmten Ort zu tun, sondern mit einer Lebenssituation."

prefer the big cities as places of residence. As early as in *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha ended the chapter “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of Modern Nation” with the statement:

I have suggested that the people emerge in the finitude of the nation, marking the liminality of cultural identity, producing the double-edged discourse of social territories and temporalities, then in the West, and increasingly elsewhere. It is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out.

BHABHA 1994, 169–170

The modern city erodes nationalistic blinkers. The increasing number of minorities transform cities into clusters of different ethnicities, nations, and religions.

This is why Salman Rushdie chose London as the centre of his epic novel *The Satanic Verses*. In his *Interviews* he pointed out the function of the metropolis for migrant or exiled writers: “The idea of the great metropolis as it has developed in the twentieth century is a location for migrants. [...] The migrant as invented self connects with the novel’s wider exploration of the city as invented space” (Rushdie 2001, 77, 95).

Ben Jelloun states in the conclusion to *Hospitalité française* (1984) that the motivation behind his decision to live in Paris and take part in the French cultural and literary scene was to criticize the racism of the French toward the immigrants of former French colonies. In order to do this fluency of the French language was crucial (cf. Ben Jelloun 1984, 157).

Migrant writers such as the German-writing Yoko Tawada with origins in Japan, Emine Sevgi Özdamar with origins in Turkey, and Rafik Schami with origins in Syria have used language as a tool to facilitate their integration into their second homeland. The postnational character of immigration literature is reflected in the status of the postmigration and linguistic métissage.<sup>15</sup>

In her book *Talisman* Yoko Tawada compares her pleasure of listening to the sound of other languages to that of a composer listening to birds singing in the forest. Language gains a kind of bodily structure when speaking with another tongue. Writing business letters during her first office job, she called the typewriter a “Sprachmutter,” playfully reversing the German word “Muttersprache” (Tawada 1996, 12).

15 See Myriam Geiser’s chapter on “Immigration und ‘Weltliteratur’: Plurikulturelle Literaturen in transnationaler Perspektive” (2015, 317–597).

Emine Sevgi Özdamar found another way of accessing the German language through mixing Turkish words and expressions in her autobiographical novels *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei, hat zwei Türen, aus einer kam ich rein, aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992) and *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (1998) (cf. Beller 2006, 213–221; Di Bella 2014, 153–166). She also denotes the bodily perception of the new language and describes the process of integration in her second homeland as a gradual approach to the German language: “In the fifth year I observed that the entries in my diary became half Turkish, half German—before they were purely Turkish. After the sixth or seventh year I made only German entries. That is how it is, one is here, completely here” (in Saalfeld 1998, 181).<sup>16</sup>

Rafik Schami, who tells his German stories in an Arabian manner, declares: “I found a new homeland in Germany and in the German language. Therefore, I decided to write my stories directly in German” (1998, 96).<sup>17</sup>

In the poems, novels, and tales of the immigrant writers, words like “home” and “language” occur frequently but words like “nation” or “people” appear seldom. They prefer to tell stories or to describe their everyday life, conditions, social problems, and sentiments. Nationalist arguments are a matter for political, journalistic, and critical essays. Sandra Vlasta, in a recent study on immigration literature, uses a thematic approach when studying *themes* and *motifs*: “Themes are [larger units of] language, translation, identity and the search for identity, the new homeland, periphery, and centre. Within these themes, several motifs will be identified and analysed, for instance the motif of the tongue, cooking, eating, arrival, and the climate” (Vlasta 2016, 44). Almost all immigrant writers discussed here favour arguments and metaphors of everyday life and essential problems over traditional images and stereotypes of any nationalist discourse.

Returning once more to Rushdie’s *Notes on Writing and the Nation* (1997):

7. [...] Nationalism is that “revolt against history” which seeks to close what cannot any longer be closed. To fence in what should be frontierless. Good writing assumes a frontierless nation.

16 “Im fünften Jahr habe ich bemerkt, daß meine Tagebucheintragungen halb türkisch, halb deutsch wurden—vorher waren sie rein türkisch. Nach dem sechsten, siebten Jahre habe ich nur noch rein deutsche Notizen gemacht, Das ist so, hier ist man, ganz hier.”

17 “Ich fand in Deutschland und in der deutschen Sprache eine neue Heimat. So beschloß ich, meine Geschichten direkt auf deutsch zu schreiben.” For a similar description of the German language as a new home, see Boubia (1996, 120).

8. [...] The intellectual uprooted against his will rejects the narrow enclosures that have rejected him. There is a great loss, and much yearning, in such rootlessness. But there is also gain. The frontierless nation is not a fantasy.

RUSHDIE 2002, 67

What conclusions can we draw from this? Nations continue to exist, though the unlimited public readership in our globalized world renders them more and more obsolete. Nationalism persists as an instrument of power in the hands of conscienceless politicians; however, the experiences of immigrant writers represent a frontierless world in the midst of settled populations.

Thus the literary image of immigrants has two perspectives. One answers to the *in-between*: between the nation, culture, and religion of provenience and the nation, culture, and way of life of destination (where the migrant arrives). The immigrants bring with them their original culture and behaviour of the country that they left, the physical and psychical baggage. However, living in another country and perceived as a stranger, they fall into an abyss, feeling rejected by the new country. This is the negative aspect, to be and to remain *in-between*. To express it in a formula: they are no longer *A* and not yet *B*. This is a common situation described by immigrants, who often create a hybrid language by mingling their mother tongue with the new language in a somehow hybrid manner (cf. Adelson 2006, 37–40).

The second perspective is the creation of a new literary status in its own right. By this means immigrants can develop new perspicacity, values, and lifestyles. They no longer cling to their original culture nor to the culture of their new homeland, refuting both the ethnic “ghetto” and complete assimilation. This perspective makes demands on this deliberately positive act—based on the works they are creating and their economic success, art, music, and poetry can be used to represent a new kind of cultural reality. From this perspective, hybridity could be seen as a positive value and as a fully accepted literary form.

The creation of a “Third Space” as an artistic vision has been discussed in exemplary novels, highlighting “the inherent physical and mental dangers for those who move within them” (Bach 2010, 19–20). However, when examining the literary works of the immigrant writers quoted above, we must also consider Homi Bhabha’s statement that “the very concepts of homogeneous national cultures [...] or ‘organic’ ethnic communities [...] are in a profound process of redefinition” (1994, 5). In this context and in accordance with the above formula  $A \succ \langle B$  I would encourage a utopian cosmopolitan culture in-between, *C*, whereby the immigrant authors achieve a new identity through their literary works.

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