

OVERCOMING OTHERNESS. CONSIDERATIONS ON INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS IN KARIN GÜNDISCH'S NOVELS

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Abstract: Immigration, cultural identity, integration, tolerance and the ability to adapt to a new environment are issues that often come up in today's global society. The paper focuses on the way in which cultural otherness is perceived by children and teenagers. The article is based on the analysis of Karin Gündisch's novels. The awarded author from a migrant background offers an insight into the above mentioned problems. Gündisch's characters are mostly East-Europeans or South-East-Europeans who try to make a living in developed countries of the Western World. The author portrays entire families, children, parents and grandparents. Thus we can discuss the different stages of integration and the different attitudes towards it. How does the comfort of "home" influence identity? How can you rediscover yourself abroad? Does cultural diversity increase prejudice? What does the idea of a "Paradise abroad" involve? These are some of the aspects, the article is trying to explore.

Keywords: otherness, integration, childhood, Paradise, cultural identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Defining a "new homeland" depends on the factor of choice, i.e. whether you left the country of

your own free will, or as a refugee, in which case the new homeland is an exile solution.

In an article published 2004, Bernd Witte defines "homeland" as nothing but a memory which takes on a utopian character (Vögeli 2004: 1). Following this line of thought the notion of homeland comes up in a desperate attempt to preserve the memory alive, a constant struggle to remember. Thus, immigrants need to maintain the idea of "home" as a space to identify themselves with. The "new homeland" has the same purpose, that of shaping one's identity.

For Salman Rushdie, to migrate means "to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible, or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul." He adds, however, that "the migrant is not simply transformed by [this] act; he [or she] transforms his new world [as well]" (Rushdie, 1992: 210). It is this reciprocal influence that Gündisch focuses upon in her novels. As lessons of integration, friendship and adventure, her stories capture the pride and joy of adjusting to the new homeland without denying one's roots.

The idea of "otherness" involves something strange or unknown. For Corinna Albrecht (2003: 234), the word "foreign" carries four different

connotations:

- coming from a different country or region; of different origin;
- belonging to or concerning someone else;
- unknown, unfamiliar, unusual, different, new, uncommon;
- weird, unsuitable.

In the last case, the expectations and requirements of society are not fulfilled.

Thus, being different triggers doubt and fear. For Karl Kaser (2003: 48), however, the term does not carry negative connotations: “foreign” is not necessarily negative; it can be appealing, attractive, fascinating.

Georg Hansen (1986: 18-19) captures the way in which minorities are being treated in school and identifies three behavioural types: segregation – as a way of protecting what is familiar, assimilation – as the desire of the outcast to adapt and integrate, and finally, partial assimilation – as integration without losing one’s cultural identity.

II. CONTENT

Germany has known an influx of immigrants ever since the 1970s. Back then these were mostly Italian or Oriental guest workers. Guest workers often have to cope with hostile attitudes, e.g. the vociferously asked question whether their presence in the country should be accepted as “a necessary evil” (as work force on the labour market) or prohibited.

A. Literature and Migration

Nazli Hodaie, an immigrant from a different region of the world (Iran), currently working as a lecturer at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, identifies in literature two different

perceptions of immigrants – which she refers to as “syndromes”. Thus, the “culturalising syndrome” reduces migrants to only a few character traits or behaviour patterns considered to be representative for the country of origin, e.g. a headscarf. This is similar to what Kymlicka calls “a feel good celebration of ethnocultural diversity” (Kymlicka, 2012: 4). However, as Burchard and Cram point out, by drawing “on typical markers of culture, such as food, music and traditional clothes, [...] adaptations of the respective culture are oppressed” (Burchard/Cram, 2013:15) or neglected, which might lead to an even stronger split in the intercultural relations. The “oasis-syndrome” perceives the immigrant as an exception from the rule, someone who distinguishes him/herself from his/her countrymen and is integrated into the new society (Hodaie, 2010: 11).

Hodaie makes a clear distinction between authors with a migration background and those who write about migration from the perspective of the native population. Among the main topics are the cultural conflicts between the old and new homeland, or the search for an identity. In spite of the common themes, the images of “self” and “other” differ widely and highlight stereotypes and prejudices. Novels such as *Selim und Susanne (Selim and Susanne)* by Ursula Kirchberg, or Paul Maar’s *Neben mir ist noch Platz (The Seat Next to Me Is Free)*¹, confirm Hodaie’s thesis. They plead for tolerance and cohabitation but, as Hodaie points out, their immigrants are always quiet and poor. Ingrid Kötter’s *Die Kopftuchklasse (The Headscarf-Class)* focuses on the life of Hati and her family. Hati is a leader, she is class president and well respected. And yet, two other foreign classmates, who can’t speak German, are always isolated in the back of the classroom – an obvious case of the oasis syndrome (with one exception to

the rule). Ghazi Abdel-Qadir's² *Coco und Laila (Coco and Laila)* avoids clichés, though: the Egyptian Laila is judged according to her human qualities. At the end of the story she is perfectly integrated, yet not assimilated; but in this case, the immigrant family – made up exclusively of daughter and father – is not poor and enjoys modern living conditions.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, there was a massive migration to Germany of the so called Transylvanian Saxons and of the Swabs from the Banat region of Romania. Some fled the communist regime, others wanted to reunite with their extended families. Since Herta Müller – an immigrant into Germany from the Banat region of Romania – was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, there is a new interest in the habits and fate of the Romanian-Germans. In the same way, Karin Gündisch – also a Romanian immigrant into Germany – has been focusing on the integration of new migrants ever since her arrival in the country. For Romanian-Germans, the experience of migration is somewhat different: they were an ethnic minority in their native country as well; in Germany, they understand the language, they are similar in appearance, cultural traits are similar but, compared to the local population, they have different habits, a different background with specific influences, and one may even notice a different accent their speech, a perceivably different vocabulary.

B. *Karin Gündisch's Novels.*
Children's Perspectives on Otherness

Karin Gündisch was born in Cislădie, Romania. She left the country in the 1980s and settled down in Germany. She has become a household name as a writer of books for children and adolescents. In

2002, she was awarded the Mildred L. Batchelder Award for *Das Paradies liegt in Amerika* (translated as *How I Became an American*), as the best children's book in a foreign language translated into English. Her perspective on migration is that of an insider.

In an interview given in 2011, Gündisch associates "homeland with childhood", a childhood spent in Transylvania, not by choice, but because she happened to be born there. As far as Germany is concerned, Gündisch speaks of "air-roots" that bind her with it (Rosescu, 2011: 1). The German language space is essential for the development of her creative work.

Gündisch's fiction is significant on several different levels. Gündisch's experience as a teacher offers her the proper skills and language to address and actually reach children and adolescents. A literary text may influence the children's attitude towards life. Their imagination has the power to overcome stereotypes and clichés. Gündisch's sentences are clear and her texts can therefore easily be used to teach German as a foreign language. Furthermore *Weit, hinter den Wäldern (Far, Behind the Woods)* offers a valuable history lesson; it provides an insight into the Transylvanian post-war society, forced labour in Russia and nationalisation of land. All in all, Gündisch's stories focus on family, friendship and childhood adventures. We can go so far as to read a pedagogical purpose into her texts. When asked about the pedagogical aim of her stories, though, Karin Gündisch does not overestimate her influence: "I represent a point of view, a certain morality that young readers might pick up on" (Sonnleitner, 2003: 1). Gündisch's own migration background facilitates the cross-cultural experience.

Ortfried Schäffter (1991: 5-15) identifies four forms of perceiving otherness:

- against the backdrop of one's own existence, as something fascinating, appealing, but dangerous (ambivalence);

- as a clear opposite (conflict);

- as a complement (enrichment);

- as complementary (a borderline experience).

The last case refers to simultaneous, parallel structures, which do not admit understanding or assimilation, as they are conceivable in the first three cases. It is a perspective that reveals one's personal limits.

Usually people experience foreign cultures directly, by travelling abroad or by meeting foreigners in one's own country, or indirectly. The latter is the case of students who read or learn about them during their classes, in a restricted time frame and environment. Getting to know foreign cultures through literary texts can be accepted as such, as a simple reading activity, or, in the best case, it is motivational and challenges the young reader to reconsider what he thought he knew, by assessing and assimilating things. Immigrant children represent a high percentage of the total school enrolment. Therefore, in a high-migration country such as Germany, and in an era in which ethnocentrism is no longer tolerable, Gündisch's texts come in handy. Scholars point out that "children's literature has transcended linguistic and cultural borders [ever] since books and magazines specifically intended for young readers were first produced on a significant scale [...]" (O'Sullivan, 2005: 1).

How I Became an American tells the story of a German family from Transylvania who decides to leave Austria-Hungary heading for America. At the dawn of the 20th century, the industrial revolution urges the family to escape the poverty in their

country. In search of the American dream, they leave the grandparents behind. The ironic overtones of the dialogues between grandmother and children point to their different perceptions. The old lady makes fun of the young generation's illusions of a better and easier life in "Paradise"³; she believes it can only be reached through death, and definitely not in faraway places. For the children and grandchildren, it is the land of all possibilities.

The family is of German descent, but has taken over elements from the Romanian environment. Thus, the father, the head of the family, is addressed with the Romanian term "Tata" (Gündisch, 2000: 17). When they reach New York Harbor, they abruptly change status: from "European emigrants" they turn into American immigrants (Gündisch, 2000: 100), so that "Johann" becomes "Johnny".

The book reads easily, as it is told from the perspective of the family's young son, Johann. And yet, that does not make it less valuable or authentic from a historical point of view: we are given a detailed description of the journey from Austria-Hungary, through Germany, to the United States. The long voyage takes lives: Johann's sister, Eliss, dies due to the hardships of the voyage, as the former farm labourers and weavers become migrating gypsies (Gündisch, 2000: 87).

Lilli findet einen Zwilling centres around two girls, Ludmilla and Amelie. It is a perfect reflection of the many facets of foreignness and otherness. The friendship between Lilli, a Russian-German immigrant, and Milli, who has just moved over from Bavaria, serves as a perfect plot to unveil differences between large traditional and modern families, e.g. specific eating habits. The text bears reference to Gündisch's own experience as an immigrant. The author dedicates it to her daughter Ingrid, who, just

like Ludmilla, at first sat alone in her desk. Lilli lives with her big family, whereas Amelie lives alone with her mother. Amelie does not reject Ludmilla for her otherness; on the contrary, she enjoys it. They have fun learning each other's name: "Ludmilla – Lilla – Lilli [...] Amelie – Milla – Milli" (Gündisch, 2007: 32). They see beyond the differences; what brings them together is their status as foreigners to the rest of the class. The lightness in the girls' relationship, the innocence of their youth, leaves no room for prejudices⁴. The girls' friendship leads to solidarity and integration. A warm fur hat carries symbolism and functions as a sign of integration. Winters in Germany are by far not as cold as those in Russia. The fur hat – so dear to the grandmother – stigmatizes the granddaughter. The moment Lilli decides to act against her grandmother's advice and not wear the fur hat, she is ready to accept and adjust to the new environment. The two generations react differently. The young ones are open to new experiences, while the elderly, in this case the grandmother, still value old treasures. (Gündisch in Lazarescu, 2010: 287). Mariana Lazarescu (2010: 290) describes the story as a "reversed integration", since it is the German girl, Amelie, who finds in Lilli's family a second home. Gündisch focuses neither on similarities nor on differences between cultures. Through Milli's visits at Lilli's home and her feeling at home there, the two worlds interfere, they intermingle. To Lazarescu, Gündisch's greatest achievement is that she clears the way for intercultural dialogue, which is based on "reciprocal penetration of contacts and borders" (Burchard/Cram, 2012: 8).

Im Land der Schokolade und Bananen (In the Country of Chocolate and Bananas) and *How I Became an American* are particularly important for the present research, as they present the migration

patterns of Romanian-Germans at the beginning and the end of the 20th century, thus creating a complete social framework.

Im Land der Schokolade und Bananen has enjoyed huge success. The subtitle, *Two children come to a foreign country*, summarises the main idea of the novel, pointing to the main characters – the two children. We later find out that the novel actually tells the story of an entire family that moved from Romania to Germany and to the way in which its members perceive the new environment and get used to it. A few lines later, the novel reveals itself as "the story of many late emigrants and the story of children from Romania, Poland and the Soviet Union in your class" (Gündisch, 1990: 5). In other words the novel is meant to be read by German students, in order to raise their awareness to the new realities in German schools. Naming the target reader is an important factor and clearly denotes the educational purpose of the literary text. On the other hand, by generalizing the story, as a common experience for many East-European emigrants, the writer endows it with a historical character. Moreover, by giving the children names, Ingrid and her brother, Uwe, Gündisch approaches the reader and creates a relationship between the characters and the young readers.

Being of German descent, but having lived for generations in Romania, the family in the novel knows what it feels like to be different. They have been "the others" and a sort of foreigners back home, an ethnic minority surrounded by Romanians. Once arrived in Germany, the children recognize the same circumstances. In Romania, people were surprised how well Ingrid spoke Romanian. In Germany, they are amazed at how good a foreigner's German can be (Gündisch, 1990: 13). Like all immigrants asking for

citizenship, they have to pass a language test. Even as a child, Ingrid perceives the difference between her and her German relatives back in Romania and the Germans in “the land of chocolate and bananas” (Gündisch, 1990: 7), thus pointing to a different aspect of otherness. As a child, though, Ingrid soon also takes on the typical German accent and starts “singing” while she speaks (Gündisch, 1990: 27). At first, the teacher points out the difficulties she faces when teaching a class with immigrant children. Afterwards, she is impressed by Uwe’s flawless control paper.

In their everyday lives, Ingrid and Uwe keep count of the new vocabulary they are confronted with. The children’s German sounds out-dated, antiquated. Back home, they used words like “stramm”, “pischte”, “Fernseher”, or “Servus”, here children their age use “toll”, “pinkelt”, “Glotze” and “Tschüs” (Gündisch, 1990: 95-96) for “cool”, “peed”, “TV” and “bye”. And corn is no longer “Kukuruz”, it is “Mais” (Gündisch, 1990: 72). Ingrid and Uwe first come in contact with street jargon and are surprised to hear invectives.

The children, used to communist Romania, perceive Germany as a huge “store”, due to the large number of commercials on TV. Many things are new and unexpected for them: the escalator offers them an exciting experience, as does opening a bank account. The better living conditions in Germany do not culminate for Ingrid and Uwe in the limitless access to delicacies, but in the cat toilets.

By comparison, in the children’s reactions to several circumstances, we find subtle allusions to living conditions in the communist regime. Thus, when dealing with state officials, Ingrid and Uwe are stunned to see that no bribe is requested. At the same time, they recognize the disadvantage of living in a democratic republic. When their old neighbour dies,

he receives a third class funeral: the siblings come to the conclusion that the equality principle does not apply here. Thus, the children get a hint regarding the importance of financial power. Later, they also witness a demonstration and they understand that, in a democracy, people are free to express their sorrow and discontent. At school they are free to choose the religion class they want to attend.

Through the eyes of Ingrid and Uwe, the readers get an insight into the German administration, bureaucracy, educational system, and they have a term of comparison for the living conditions in communist Romania, as well as those in the post-revolutionary years.

The novel seems realistic. Gündisch is neither empathetic nor indifferent; the meetings of Romanian-Germans in the new homeland stand to testify that. Some of the immigrants proudly talk about their plans to visit Romania and the family left back home, braggingly, in a Mercedes. The children judge this attitude and call them “posers” who want to show off their success in the “Promised land” (Gündisch, 1990: 106). Gündisch’s irony can also be sensed in *Lilli findet einen Zwilling*. “The true Germans were correct” (Gündisch, 2007: 85) is meant to point out the misrepresentations Germans outside the German borders might have and their “exaggerated appreciation for everything that is German” (Lazarescu, 2010: 290).

The issue of memory, as an important element in making the transition between the old and the new homeland, is also under discussion at the immigrants’ meeting. Like the scholars quoted at the beginning of this paper, Ingrid and Uwe come to believe that the image of a perfect homeland is just an illusion. Emigrants shape a homeland in their memory, but “in their memory many things are better and more

beautiful than they really were” (Gündisch, 1990: 109). Michael Neumeyer associates homeland with “familiarity and certainty, emotional security and satisfying social relationships” (Neumeyer, 1992: 127). Due to the dissatisfaction with the present, the old homeland becomes desirable. In contrast with the unknown, unsafe future, the homeland turns into “a longing for a better life” (Neumeyer, 1992: 88) and is therefore almost always an image of the past. When Salman Rushdie talks about his “India of the mind”, he sums up the “exiles’ or emigrants’ or expatriates’ [general] urge to look back” (Rushdie, 1992: 10). Just like in Rushdie’s case, Uwe and Ingrid notice a distortion in their countrymen’s perception of the old homeland, an imaginary concept made up of memories.

III. CONCLUSION

Karin Gündisch’s novels offer a portrayal of social issues, indirectly exploring the process of immigration through a critical lens. With *How I Became an American* and *Im Land der Schokolade und Bananen*, Karin Gündisch covers an entire century in the migration process of an ethnic minority and goes beyond the obvious, illustrating all the different aspects of foreignness mentioned in the introduction. She makes her children-characters speak and uncover conflicts and clashes, but unlike grown-ups, these children find ways to overcome them. The author succeeds in challenging her young readers’ way of thinking, allowing them to grasp the whole picture.

ENDNOTES

- [1] All translations from German into English, of titles and quotations, are my own, except *How I Became an American*, which is the title of the original

translation.

- [2] The writer of Palestinian descent brings a touch of the Orient to German children’s and youth literature. With his numerous narratives, Qadir has become part of contemporary German literature.
- [3] The idea of “paradise” is recurrent in Gündisch’s novels. In *Lilli findet einen Zwilling*, the grandmother wins a contest on the most beautiful German word: she proposes “paradise”. Her choice is interesting, since we are not told whether she relates it to the past or the future; we conclude, however, that the elderly associate “paradise” with the idea of home.
- [4] The grandmother is reluctant when it comes to the friendship between her granddaughter and the Turk Cem. This is because she is not used to intercultural relations. The plurality of possible lifestyles is unknown to her.

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