

INTERCULTURAL NARRATIVE IN RAFIK SCHAMI'S STORY *THE FUNERAL FEAST*

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Abstract

In an era of globalization, which is portrayed by migration, exchange, and communication between people of different cultures and languages, the world is becoming a global town in which intercultural competence is indispensable. It helps to prevent cultural conflicts and create harmonious coexistence between people from different cultural backgrounds. Due to its intercultural potential, intercultural narration therefore appears to be important for intercultural learning and furthermore for the acquisition of intercultural competence. This Paper will deal with one of such narrative by Rafik Schami, a Syrian-German Author. The Story "Der Leichenschmaus" translated in English as "The funeral feast" compares life in Syria with life in Germany through short, intercultural interactions and experiences of culture shock. In this amusing story, the narrator tells the readers, which German words he first encountered: "Raureif (Frost) and "Ausverkauf"(Clearance). And finally: "Leichenschmaus". Rafik Schami is a gifted storyteller who is often characterized by his sharp, often amusingly ironic view of interpersonal and intercultural intricacies. Readers had to smile when wonderfully absurd explanations are used to explain facts. This text is analyzed in the context of teaching German as a foreign language, which enable the development of certain attitudes, such as respect for others, tolerance and international understanding, openness in thought and action, above all the ability to empathize, to transcend one's own views and the willingness to change perspectives.

Keywords: *intercultural literature, interculturality, encounters with strangers, and intercultural competence.*

Introduction

With the rapid and accelerating emergence of multicultural societies, it is important to diagnose the possibility of a systematic and careful conciliation between culture and languages within an interdisciplinary approach. This approach aims at shedding light on student's attitudes towards major aspects of the target culture in foreign language classrooms. Studying literary texts in the classroom fosters intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence among foreign language learners. Intercultural narratives play a vital role in teaching foreign languages as they bridge language learning with cultural understanding, creating a deeper, more comprehensive learning experience. With this student experience the worldviews and lifestyles of native speakers, which is critical for using language in authentic, real-life situations. Learning through intercultural narratives fosters empathy by allowing students to see the world from another person's perspective. This encourages respect for diversity and helps build global citizens who appreciate

cultural differences. Through stories and shorter narratives, learners can also grasp colloquial language, idiomatic expressions, and informal speech, which are often overlooked in traditional language textbooks.

The intercultural narrative approach offers new insights into intercultural experiences, communication, and cultural challenges. In addition to knowledge about the country of the target language-in this context German linguistic competencies and communicative skills may help the reader/ students reconstruct perceptions of the world by raising awareness of cultural differences, similarities and the inseparability of language and culture. Such narratives often highlight societal issues, historical contexts, and differing worldviews, prompting learners to analyze and interpret meaning at a deeper level.

The Objective of this paper is to show the importance of intercultural literature in promoting intercultural communicative skills. To achieve this goal, I focused on Rafik Schami's story "Der Leichenschmaus" translated as 'The Funeral Feast' from his anthology "*Eine deutsche*

Leidenschaft namens Nudelsalat" (A German passion called–Noodle salad).

Rafik Schami, a Syrian-German author, is known for his narrative techniques, highlights the absurdities of life and contradictions in society. He became (and remains to this day) one of the leading writers of the Migrants literature movement of the 1960s and 1970s, authoring short stories, poems, and children's stories in German. Schami's breakthrough came with his novel <Erzähler der Nacht>, published in 1989. Many of Schami's works, including his novels, thematize life in Syria during the mid-twentieth century, which is why they provide an opportunity for the analysis of cultural bridge-building in literary form. His writings have the potential to promote general skills and intercultural skills, particularly, a platform for dialogue between people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Storyline and Interpretation

The funeral feast. Or "why Josef lived in Arabic and died in German" by Rafik Schami is the story from the anthology with the amusing title "A German passion called Noodle Salad" published in 2011. This anthology contains twenty stories. The stories deal with different themes. The first two stories are on the topic of "memories", followed by stories that deal with "encounters with strangers".

In this story the narrator has migrated from Syria to Germany and find this new country foreign to him and led to a major misunderstanding. He arrived with these German words: "I love you", "yes" that he has picked up from the tourists in his home country.

*"The first few weeks and months in a foreign country burn themselves into the Immigrant's memory, similar to a person's childhood experiences."*¹

In the beginning of the story, one finds the narrator waking up in Heidelberg students hostel and marveling at the landscape, which was covered in icing. He has never seen such a beautiful view in Syria, but only in postcards, which he thought were manipulated to convey a nice picture. He narrated in an amusing way how difficult is to leave the house for work despite the icy cold weather (minus nineteen degrees)but people are fascinated by the

beauty of this landscape that they no longer pay attention to the freezing cold. On the way he met a lean, bearded man, playing chess in the early morning, against himself, expression of bitter loneliness. The loneliness of a man playing chess alone also has a serious tone. He explained to that leaned man, how Arabs lose interest in their work early in the morning. That man said "Hoarfrost" and checkmated his invisible opponent. "Hoarfrost" was the first word narrator learnt in Heidelberg, fascinated by this word, believing it to be a nice gesture by the authorities to make the surroundings more attractive.

That same day, he learned his second German word on a walk: on the window of a large carpet store, the word "Ausverkauf" ²was emblazoned in large red letters. That was the first of these strange prefixes he had to learn:

"aus-, an-, ein-, ent-, auf-, zer-, ver-, i.e. ausgehen, eingehen, begehen, vergehen, entgegen, zugehen, durchgehen, vorbeigehen, hervorgehen, herangehen, zergehen, aufgehen".³

The Arabs invent countless synonyms for every word, which hardly anyone can remember, and the Germans squeeze every word until there is nothing left.

In the later part of the story the narrator introduced the main character in this story, called Josef. The funeral feast is strongly associated with Joseph, his story, his life, and death. He learned the word from him. He was the first Arab he met in Heidelberg.

Josef was ten years older than narrator and had come to Germany from Damascus in 1955. He belonged to the generation of foreigners who were greeted at the airport by their German hosts like exotic astronauts. However, nobody was waiting for Josef and he wandered around Frankfurt Airport for a long time before he found the exit and the way to Frankfurt Central Station to take the train to Heidelberg.

However, Josef was welcomed by a professor and his family. He was to live with them for the first few weeks (he later called it acclimatizing) until his papers were obtained from his hometown. The narrator describes Josef's

² Can be translated as: Sale

³ Can be translated as: < on-, in-, off-, on-, off-, off-, i.e. go out, go in, commit, perish, escape, go to, go through, pass by, come out, approach, go away, go up".>

¹Schami, 25

experiences like how he was shocked, when the head of the family suggested to go to the nearby cemetery. Joseph was horrified to arrive at the family's home on a day of mourning. He offered his condolences, but the father of the family reassured him:

*"It wasn't a funeral, they just wanted to go for a nice walk."*⁴

The host was quite surprised that Josef suddenly went completely white in the face. He suspected that the heavy cream cake had not gone down well with his guest and offered him a rest on the sofa. The host was only reassured when he returned from his walk and saw his guest alive and kicking.

For every Arab, a cemetery is a place of horror since birth, which fills them with fear even when it is mentioned in passing. A week after Josef's arrival, his host's mother died: Josef had never seen the old woman, but it was natural for him to attend the funeral. The professor patiently tried to explain the process to him.

Josef was a Christian, and the funeral ritual in the chapel and at the grave was familiar to him. Only the word funeral feast unsettled him. He went to his room and looked it up in his dictionary. He found several entries for *schmausen*: to eat with pleasure (dialect), which was wrong, but Josef did not know that at the time. Below that was: to eat noisily or with relish. He found the word *Leiche* (pl. corpses) translated correctly.

Then he thought *"indigenous people who take a piece of the corpse of a relative in order to incorporate it into their bodies"*.⁵

Josef thought that professor might have picked up strange rites from some ethnic group, as he had spent long time in Africa. *"The dead relative is present and absent at the same time,"*⁶ philosophized Josef, while he tried to bring the corpse into some kind of sensible relationship with the feast. The best thing to do, he thought, was to tell the professor that he was a vegetarian and would unfortunately have to miss this ritual. But even that was impossible, as he had been dining with his family the whole time, who ate meat every day. So, he decided to invoke Arab tradition and custom, which did not allow him

to eat his dead relatives under any circumstances whatsoever. But things turned out quite differently.

They went from the cemetery to an elegant restaurant and sat down at a long table, ate together, laughed, talked, and drank. Only Joseph, the Syrian, sat quietly and marveled. The professor also recounted episodes from his childhood with his mother, who had always stolen bread and vegetables during the Second World War and stuffed them under the baby carriage.

Josef thought the way Arabs and Germans mourns also differs: *"Was that a funeral?"* . *"Or did the mourning for the mother drive all the guests out of their minds?"*⁷ Like Aunt Selma, narrator's relative who wanted to be buried at the funeral of her husband who died young. She clung to the coffin and screamed: *"Bury me with him. He took my heart with him"*.⁸ Josef soon forgot about the funeral feast and later became a successful engineer. After a few years, the narrator met Josef accidentally at the train station and was invited to Josef's house in Hamburg.

His large bungalow in the suburbs was completely unremarkable from the outside. But as soon as one entered and closed the door, one entered as called by narrator a concentrated Arab world. He has never seen so much Orientalism in such a small space in this country. The walls were not wallpapered but covered with the finest colorful wooden panels that he had had made in Morocco. *"The tables and chairs came from Egypt, and the cushions, tablecloths and curtains were made of the finest damask."*⁹The lamps, in turn, came from a traditional glass-blowing workshop in Aleppo. Joseph returned with coffee and had changed his clothes, was now a distinguished Syrian Saudi Arab-Moroccan farmer, wearing a *thawb*¹⁰ made of black silk, a red scarf over his shoulders and yellow beak shoes. *"If we're not allowed to go home, we'll just bring them to us."* Narrator amused to see Josef living like a wealthy Arab.

"As experienced nomads, the Arabs knew that prosperity can only be short-lived. They saw civilizations rise and fall on their eternal wanderings and therefore

⁷Schami, 25

⁸Schami, 26

⁹Schami 26

¹⁰ The *thawb* is considered a daily essential dress for for the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.

⁴Schami, 26

⁵Schami, 26

⁶Schami, 26

developed a sense of the moment. The Germans work as if they would live forever. No, life is short, let's live and enjoy it the Arab way,"¹¹ Joseph said and drove him back to the station.

Three years later, a letter arrived from Hamburg, stating Joseph had died. The funeral, which the narrator really wanted to attend, went to Hamburg.

His brother-in-law gave a beautiful speech in the church, in which he mentioned a wish of the deceased that he had put down on paper on his deathbed. He had lived as an Arab and wanted to die as a German. And he had addressed all the guests who were to attend his funeral:

"Dearly beloved, please do not hide your faces behind a mask of mourning, my most fervent wish is that you celebrate and laugh, eat well and listen to music. That would be the most beautiful accompaniment for me on the way to my Creator. Because I don't know if the Lord of the Worlds has enough angels to accompany all the millions of people and animals who die every day. I don't want to die in Arabic. We Arabs mourn the dead with weeping and loud sobs. No, Arabs don't know how to die. That's probably a deficiency in our culture. I would rather die in German. Germans often don't know how to live, but they know very well how to die."

The relatives and friends of the deceased celebrated and brought his family back to life in a way. They drive away the pain that tries to crush their hearts. Joseph has even put together music and planned the menu with his favorite Chef before he died.

And at the end of the story, it eventually turned out to be an exhilarating feast. The neighbor at the table, a Bavarian, slurred in narrator's ear: *"That was a beautiful Corpse."*¹²

Conclusion

The narrator tells the readers/ students the way Arabs and Germans live and mourns also differs. The confrontation of people belonging to various cultures leads the reader/ students to learn the culture of the other, the change of perspective and intercultural competence. The design of the text is varied, the narrative tone ranges from amusingly

ironic to deeply sad and imaginative as well as serious. This is followed by amusing reflections on the formation of words in the German language. The German "cemetery culture" also alienates the narrator. He is making fun of German grammar rules, like separable verbs which are numerous and varies. A loving bridge between the Orient and Occident is being reflected in this story and Schami tries to hold up a mirror to diverse cultures in an ironic and humorous way. And one or the other will recognize themselves in the stories. Schami instrumentalizes his prose, intertextual references, and his own public and literary persona to connect himself to a certain lineage of discourse on the Orient and its Western reception. German as foreign language students have adapted this text, who come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, or religions. This text allows students to seize opportunities that diversity offers and learn how to interact in a global, diverse, and challenging world. Moreover, this story focuses on skills like empathy and flexibility. Empathy helps us understand others and see the world from their perspective, and to be sensitive to one's needs. Flexibility focuses on knowing how to behave in changing environments, dealing with a wide range of social situations and adapting appropriate behaviors. This story provided students with a more enjoyable and relatable way to practice language skills as Schami's distinctive narrative style of incorporating humor, wit and playful irony, makes the learning process more impactful and memorable.

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¹¹Schami, 27: Letter read by Josef's brother-in-law.

¹²Schami, 27