Arab German Writers: Here to Stay

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Dismissed just a decade earlier, the notion that contemporary Germany is a society of immigrants is now commonly accepted. With guest worker contracts in hand, the first significant waves of immigrants from Southern Europe, Turkey, Tunisia and Morocco began to arrive in the 1950s. As soon as the demands of the booming economy were met, these temporary workers were expected to go back to their homelands. Now, Germany is home to over 15 million people with migrant backgrounds, whose so-called integration has become a matter of political urgency. The rhetoric of Orientalism, unfortunately, continues to permeate the discourse about the challenges of a multicultural society. Galvanized by the events of 9/11, Islamophobia and the debates about Arab “clans,” big families, and particularly the headscarf, have undoubtedly shaped the means and modes of identity construction available to Arab German writers today. While the largest ethnic minority group in Germany, the Turks, continually receives much media and academic attention, Arab immigrants are either eclipsed by this group for the general study of minority “others,” or, worse, they are ignored altogether.

In the 1980s, the first Arab immigrant writings were being published in Germany, often by their own initiative. One such early initiator, Syrian-born Rafiq Schami, first came to Germany as a chemistry student in the 1970s. Co-founding the literary group “Südwind/Gastarbeiterliteratur“ (South Wind/Guest Workers’ Literature), Schami initially turned to producing critical texts endowed with an acute social consciousness and permeated by a sense of an outsider status. The self-ascribed term “guest workers’ literature” sought to capture the tension between the immigrants’ assertion of belonging to the German cultural scene, and the public’s continuous perception of them as only temporary elements of society.

Later, Schami directed his energy to more literary works. Himself a storyteller, storytellers as protagonists commonly dominate his body of work. Alongside storytelling, other Arab German writers have also resorted to diverse forms of literary techniques, including prose and poetry. Regardless of whether the authors consciously perceive themselves as cultural mediators, the decision to write in the German language, combined with the authors’ agility in navigating differing social milieus, inevitably tint their work with certain cultural hues. By analyzing a range of literary and critical works by contemporary Arab German writers, my project thus aspires to fill the theoretical gap in our understanding of Arab German identity’s fluidity and reflexivity by tracing how their work evolves and adapts itself to reflect the changing concerns of its time.

In order meet this goal, the research grant enabled me to travel to the Documentation Center and Migration Museum in Cologne. My research also benefitted significantly from a visit to the archives at Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, whose extensive newspaper holdings enriched the socio-historical contextualization aspect of my work. The Orient Division’s significant holdings of sources in German and Arabic also supplied me with conceptual tools for elucidating the Arab German authors’ writings within their broader contexts.

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