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Abbas Khider ed. by David N. Coury and Karolin Machtans
(review)

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Abbas Khider.

Edited by David N. Coury and Karolin Machtans. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Brussels, New York, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2021. X + 228 pages. \$70.10 paperback or eBook.

Since the 2015 “summer of migration,” German Studies scholars’ and instructors’ interest in and engagement with 20th- and 21st-century refugee literature has only grown, with syllabi and recent publication lists attesting to the status of prolific, multi-award winning Iraqi-German writer Abbas Khider as the field’s paradigmatic 21st-century refugee-author. Khider is not only widely praised for his unique combination of narrative experimentation, wide-ranging intertextuality, and laconic style in his literary explorations of the experiences of refugees and exiles in Europe and/or North Africa, but—as a former political prisoner of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist Iraq—he also brings first-hand experience of the push factors, perilous journeys, and alienation he depicts. The publication of his best-selling 2016 refugee revenge fantasy novel, *Ohrfeige*, and his subsequent receipt of the final Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 2017 cemented Khider’s position in Germany’s contemporary literary scene. *Abbas Khider*, the 2021 English-language collection edited by U.S.-based Germanists David N. Coury and Karolin Machtans within the Peter Lang *Contemporary German Writers and Filmmakers* (CGWF) series (and the first edited volume dedicated exclusively to Khider’s works), is a further significant milestone in the ongoing domestic canonization process of this minoritized German-language author and confirms his position as a fixture in Anglophone German Studies and beyond.

Conceived in 2018 as a venue for diverse Anglophone research on Khider’s body of work that would build on and expand the hitherto mostly German-language Khider scholarship, Coury and Machtans’s landmark edited volume provides the most up-to-date scholarly analysis of Khider’s œuvre in English to date. The book, which offers material to suit both novices and Khider specialists, begins with an undergraduate-friendly editors’ introduction, which includes a survey of Khider’s literary output since 2008 and a summary of the Federal Republic’s 2015 response to the Syrian human-rights crisis. The eight core chapters, penned by nine scholars at various career stages and based in North America and Europe, offer diverse perspectives on Khider’s first five German-language prose works. One notes however a marked clustering around his three best-known novels, echoing a broader trend in Khider scholarship: the aforementioned *Ohrfeige* (2016) and his debut novel, *Der falsche Inder* (2008) (translated by Pare [2019] and McLaughlin [2013] respectively), alongside *Die Orangen des Präsidenten* (2011), which is as yet untranslated into English. (Khider’s sixth prose work, *Palast der Miserablen* [2020], published while the edited volume was being assembled, is perforce only acknowledged in the introduction. Khider has since also published the celebrated novel *Der Erinnerungsfälscher* [2022].) Anglophone readers are catered to throughout with in-text English translations, albeit with inconsistent citation of German sources. In keeping with the CGWF series format, editor Machtans’s interview with the author, in which Khider discusses his identity and influences, is presented in Coury’s parallel translation. However, this volume lacks the original piece of previously unpublished writing by its subject, pledged by the series editors on the CGWF website and included in preceding volumes.

Khider’s media status as a refugee-writer looms large in the volume, and many of the volume’s contributors judiciously acknowledge and reject the prevailing and

potentially problematic tendency to read his works, and those of other minoritized writers, primarily autobiographically and/or ethnographically, as representative of a (constructed) socio-cultural community. The volume's single-author approach also counteracts this by drawing attention instead to how certain themes are expressed aesthetically across his œuvre. Most contributors read two or more of Khider's texts alongside one another and this contrasts with the more conventional comparative approach in Khider scholarship more generally: reading individual novels by Khider in conversation with refugee (crisis) novels by other (non-minoritized) German authors.

A first group of resonant core chapters by Katherine Anderson, Beate Baumann and Corinne Puglisi, Markus Hallensleben, and Carolin Müller explore and build on now-established themes in Khider and refugee literature scholarship, i.e., trauma, testimony, and ethnic and linguistic identity. Baumann and Puglisi, for instance, in the volume's penultimate and most comprehensive contribution, observe how Khider's use of a distancing "foreign" language (German) to convey traumatic experience manifests in his signature laconic tone. Of note too is Anderson's lyrical contribution entitled "Productive Ruptures." Anderson combines established trauma theory with a plea for greater attention to Khider's "skill at synthesising [traumatic] experience with [narrative] form," (37) which manifests in Khider's continued experimentation with first-person narration. This group of chapters could also be read fruitfully in conjunction with works of refugee literature by other authors.

A second set of chapters is more innovative and/or tailored to Khider's work in terms of theme and aesthetics, making them more suited to Khider specialists. With its inclusion of an analysis of gender identity in *Ohrfeige*, Hallensleben's more densely written aforementioned chapter spans both groups. Jara Schmidt also focuses on gender identity in *Ohrfeige*, but does so from a Kristevian vantage point. This allows her to highlight Khider's previously under-researched use of subversive humor as an aesthetic strategy. Likewise, the volume's final chapter by editor Karolin Machtans deals with humor; she examines the more established topic of multilingual aesthetics in the less conventional genre of a satirical grammar book, Khider's *Deutsch für alle* (2019). The book also includes Warda El-Kaddouri's illuminating chapter on Islam in two of Khider's novels, marking a vital acknowledgment of the Muslim context for Khider's writing. On account of the publication date, Sabine Zimmermann's highly original eco-critical chapter entitled "Refuge and Refuse" unfortunately lacks an analysis of *Palast der Miserablen* (2020), whose protagonist grows up in a shanty town next to Baghdad's garbage dump. Sadly too, none of the core chapters in this volume (with its pandemic-affected publication date of 2021, it does not reference any Anglophone or German-language Khider scholarship published after 2018) deal with the now widely recognized aspect of German-language intertextuality in Khider's prose. For this, see instead Sarah Fortmann-Hijazi's section on *Der falsche Inder* in her 2019 monograph *Gehen um zu erinnern*, and Franziska Wolf's 2021 article, "The Figure of the Exiled Writer in Comparison [. . .]" (*Transit* 13:1, 2021). Nonetheless, readers are privy to Khider's own statements on his influences thanks to editor Machtans's 2019 interview with the same.

Focusing on the work of a non-Turkish Arab-German writer, this accessible Anglophone-oriented volume not only provides invaluable support to ongoing efforts to decolonize German literature (in translation) courses, but also offers a welcome

resource for those wishing to diversify undergraduate courses in Comparative Literature and Refugee Literature. Nonetheless, one regrettable facet of the volume is its exclusive focus on Khider's German-language prose works with its concomitant exclusion of his considerable body of Arabic and German-language poetry published in German exile, which are neither addressed by any of the contributors nor included in the editors' list of "Works by Khider." See, for example, Khider's first Arabic poetry volumes (ما من وطن للملائكة [Notation for wasted time], Beirut 2002; [Angels have no homeland], Cairo 2004); his contributions to the bilingual (Arabic-German) poetry anthology *Rückkehr aus dem Krieg* (2008); his German-language poetry (see *Allmende* (vol. 85, 2010), as well as his Arabic-language volume of criticism (من أوراق الجريمة الثقافية في العراق) [Al-Khakiya: from papers of cultural crime in Iraq], Cologne 2005). Here, the medial and linguistic boundaries of the field of which the volume was born, German Studies, are in evidence. The current popularity of this talented writer within our evolving field may indeed be partially attributable to German Studies' tendency to focus on the medium in which he has been most prolific: the German-language novel. The flipside is our academic discipline's converse neglect of poetry, and an enduring disciplinary Eurocentrism and monolingualism, particularly so vis-à-vis Arab-German and Arabic-language cultural production in Germany (Nina Berman 2011; Lobna Fouad 2016; Yasemin Mohammad, "Germany," *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, 2017). These scholarly lacunae are also linked to what Rachael Gilmour ("Unmooring Literary Multilingualism Studies," *Journal of Literary Multilingualism* 1.1, 2023) has identified as a more general privileging of the novel within global publishing markets, and further compounded by the related fact that the only works by Khider thus far available in English translation, and which can also be read by the volume's Anglophone target audience, are two of his novels.

A welcome direction for future scholarship on Khider's cultural production would thus be to take an Arab(ic) turn, retracing Khider's (aesthetic) steps, returning to his literary origins as an Arabic-language poet in German exile, as well as to take greater consideration of the Iraqi contexts of his works that run parallel to the German ones. Such scholarship would complement the contributions on Khider's exophonic writing by Baumann/Puglisi and Machtans in this volume. Comparative Literature would likely hold more fertile ground for explorations of (English-language) translations of the above. Likewise, Refugee Studies might offer a ready home for such work: poetry, as one of three dominant genres of refugee literature, holds a special position within the latter discipline, alongside graphic narrative and verbatim theater (Anna Bernard, "Genres of Refugee Writing," *Refugee Imaginaries*, 2020). In the meantime, interested scholars may also wish to consult important early scholarship emerging from universities in the Arabic-speaking world not referenced in the volume, notably Tunisia-based scholar Mohamed Tabassi's article on Khider's portrayal of the ordinary Arab citizen under dictatorship prior to the Arab Spring, "[I]m Fegefeuer von Diktaturen" (brackets in original), *Germanistische Beiträge* 35, 2014, and Egypt-based translator and academic Lobna Fouad's 2016 analysis of Arabic-inflected intertextuality in Khider's first three novels ("Verflechtung und Entflechtung [. . .]," *Sprachen und Kulturen im Kontakt, Studia Translatorica* 7).

Reflecting in their introductory chapter upon developments in literary studies more broadly, Coury and Machtans acknowledge the growth in scholarship on "works by authors from the non-dominant culture" (11). Indeed, Julian Preece and Frank

Finlay's *CGFW* series has made significant contributions to this trend; all cultural practitioners selected for dedicated volumes so far (director Andreas Dresen, as well as writers Feridun Zaimoglu, Ilija Trojanow, Navid Kermani, and, meanwhile, Barbara Honigmann) can be said to have a "non-dominant" ethnic, religious, and/or citizenship background. However, I would add that writers do predominate, as does maleness of a certain vintage: other than the most recent addition to the series roll call, septuagenarian Barbara Honigmann, the landmark cultural change-makers highlighted by the series are all men born in the 1960s or 1970s. Further addressing the gender and medium imbalance in a series based around the organizing principle of the already-significant and acclaimed individual (genius) would simultaneously provide the much-needed teaching apparatus to support greater gender balance in (increasingly interdisciplinary) undergraduate Film courses. The diverse work of female German directors (such as Maren Ade, Aysun Bademsoy, Doris Dörrie, Nora Fingscheidt, Helke Misselwitz, or Ayşe Polat) cannot be included in today's undergraduate syllabi without the necessary teaching apparatus: assignable English-language introductions and, crucially, English subtitling.

Lastly, of course, scholarship does not merely react to the film and publishing industries and their associated honors. International scholarly attention can go beyond revisiting the (translated) *œuvre* of the already-acclaimed; it can also help shape its subject. By providing accessible scholarly framing of Khider's German-language prose for Anglophone readers, Coury and Machtans's fine volume facilitates the integration of Khider's already-translated works into various international curricula and scholarship, and may ultimately pave the way for further translations and new works as well as Khider's eventual recognition on the international prize circuit. Witness the nomination process for the Nobel Prize: Anyone at Full Professor rank is eligible to make a nomination. Professors, and series editors, use this power well.

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