

Understanding Refugees' Ethnic Identity and Re-construction Of Identity Through “The Village Indian”

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Abstract

Many refugees lost their homeland and identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a result they attempt to recreate their identity so that this study primarily focused on the Refugee's identity according to the refugee perspective, is based on Abbas Khider's autobiographical fictional novel, "The Village Indian," which serves as the primary source. In the novel, Khider attempts to portray himself through the eyes of migrant Rasul Hamid, with his point of view focused on the value of personal identity, which is the central theme of this study and is described. Although he is from Iraq, he has a different appearance from his fellow Iraqis due to his ethnicity; as a result, he faced discrimination and harassment in his hometown of Bagdad, and his ethnicity compelled him to flee to Germany. However, he attempted to build his identity. So, Rasul's experience as a refugee is analyzed, described, and focused on his efforts to find a new identity, as well as the types of problems he faced in his home town and another country due to his ethnic identity or different appearance. The identity construction theory is used to carry out this research.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Refugee Re-construction of Identity, Racism

Introduction

The autobiographical novel "Der falsche Inder" (in English, "The Village Indian") by Abbas Khider is used as the primary source for this study. In 1973, he was born in Bagdad. He was arrested when he was 19 years old for his involvement in political activities against Saddam Hussein's regime. From 1993 to 1995, he was imprisoned by the Iraqi police. Following his release, he fled to Jordan and Lebanon as an illegal migrant. Finally, he filed an asylum application in 2000 and was granted asylum in Germany in 2007. He settled in Germany as an Iranian-German writer. Khider is a well-known author who has studied German philosophy and literature. He received the Adalbert-von-Chamisso-Preis, which was awarded between 1985 and 2017. Even though German is not his native language, he writes in it. (May-Chu, 2020). He fled Germany during the war and wanted to share his experiences as an author about what he learned about the Iraq war and what he fought against under the influence of both Arab and German culture, but he could not say it in Arabic. However, German language gave him the opportunity, and it is now his second language. According to Abbas Khider, the German language has a long literary tradition (Ammar, 2014). In his novel, one side is focused on the story of forced migration in the twenty-first century. In contrast, the other side tells the story of the challenges and general assumptions about identity formation from the perspective of a refugee (Reitz, 2021). The novel's title's significance denotes the Refugee's identity, Rasul Hamid. Although he came from origins in Iraq, he appeared to his teachers as an Amitabh Bachan or an Indian due to his skin colour. When he was flying from Munich to Berlin, he met an elderly lady. She questioned him. Are you from India? Rasul answered no, then her facial expression changed, and she averted her gaze from him (Khider, *Der falsche Inder*, 2011). As a result, the title of Abbas Khider's novel, "Der falsche Inder," was chosen.

Review of Literature

"Der falsche Inder" is a novel that alternates between autobiography and fiction. This novel tells not only the story of Rasul Hamid but also the story of Abbas Khider. He was 19 years old when he was arrested in Bagdad in 1991 for disseminating anti-Saddam Hussein flyers. He was expelled from Iraq in 1996. He was on the run for four years before arriving in Germany in 2000. However, his arrival there was anything but simple: he had to work for a year in a homeless shelter to earn enough money for a German course. All of these experiences are recounted by Khider in his novel (Höll, 2016). This story begins with him riding on a train to Munich when he notices a brown envelope beside him. The title in Arabic script was on the draft: "Memories". He debated whether to open the strange envelope, but in the end, he did. There is a written manuscript in the envelope, and Khider has begun to read it. It was written by

Rasul Hamid, who was born in Bagdad. As a young adult, he is imprisoned by the government for a year before fleeing to Europe. His journey takes him through Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Turkey, and Greece, but it ends in Germany, where he studies and lives as an accepted refugee. Although he was born in Iraq, he did not appear to be an Iraqi to many, who assumed he was from India. Because of his skin colour, he is constantly entangled in issues related to his identity; because of his identity, he is easily identified. Rasul Hamid had several brothers and two sisters and had lived through many wars that shaped the country. However, he soon discovers his passion for writing poetry, which beautiful women usually embellish. Rasul spent much time of his life as a writer that he has "from the beginning" criticized on the walls. He generally looks for a paper on which he can write wherever he goes. As he has written, he also has the unfortunate tendency to give up and lose (McLaughlin, 2022).

Refugees' colour identity becomes a problem for themselves in their home country

The Refugee's skin colour Identity creates problems not only in his home country but also abroad. However, this is also an essential part of a person's identity and a part of the integumentary system; it is also the most significant region of the body in terms of human identity and identification. In physiological terms, it has a significant role in forming the physical barrier or border between our internal organs and the outside world (Gowland & Thompson, 2013). However, in Rasul's case, the problem he encountered in his hometown was discovered to be due to his colour. Rasul Hamid said that, based on his experience, when he lived in Bagdad, his neighbours, classmates, and Arabic teachers called him "Indian" or "Amitabh Bachan" because his skin colour was so different from that of other Iraqis. "Die Jungen meines Viertels riefen mich »Indianer«, weil ich aussah wie die Indianer in amerikanischen Cowboy-Filmen. In der Mittelschule nannten mich die Arabischlehrerin und meine Mitschüler den »Inder« oder »Amitabh Bachchan«, nach einem bekannten indischen Schauspieler, dem ich tatsächlich ein bisschen ähnlich sehe: ein langer, dünner, brauner Kerl" (Khider, 2011). Rasul's case also fits the concept of Erikson's Identity. He claims that identity is often defined as a person's perception of their identity, expressed through their distinct characteristics, qualities, associations, and social duties. Additionally, despite considerable changes in circumstances, one's perception of one's identity remains constant throughout time.

Erikson also said that when a person is a youngster, their caretakers have the most influence on them, and the seeds of identity are planted. However, when people pass from childhood to adolescence, they begin to wonder who they are and where they fit in the world. Adolescents set

out to discover their perceptions of themselves by experimenting with various roles and behaviours. (Yilmaz, 2022). The same thing happens with the refugee Rasul. He then inquired with his father about his mother, who she was, and who the child was when his classmates and Arabic teacher called him Amitabh Bachchan or Indian due to his skin colour. His father then explained to him about his mother: she is a Gypsy, which is why he does not look like his brother. „Die Jungen meines Viertels riefen mich »Indianer«, weil ich aussah wie die Indianer in amerikanischen Cowboy-Filmen. In der Mittelschule nannten mich die Arabischlehrerin und meine Mitschüler den »Inder« oder »Amitabh Bachchan«, nach einem bekannten indischen Schauspieler, dem ich tatsächlich ein bisschen ähnlich sehe: ein langer, dünner, brauner Kerl. Mein Vater war der Einzige, der eine völlig andere Erklärung für mein Aussehen parat hatte. Er behauptete etwas ganz Aufregendes. Eines Tages, ich muss ungefähr fünfzehn gewesen sein, nahm er mich beiseite: »Mein Sohn!«, sagte er, deine richtige Mutter ist eine Zigeunerin. Deswegen siehst du auch nicht so aus wie deine Brüder aus“ (Khider, 2011).

However, from Erikson's viewpoint, identity gives a person a feeling of continuity inside the self and in interactions with others (also known as "self-sameness") as well as a framework to distinguish the self from others (also known as "specialness"), enabling the person to function independently from others (Tija , 2016). However, in the case of the fugitive "Rasul," there was no sameness, self-awareness, or continuity because he was always under suspicion because of his primary colour, as described in the autobiographical novel. When he travelled by bus to his hometown of Baghdad, the ticket seller looked at Rasul as a foreigner and tried to communicate with him in English, but Rasul replied in southern Iraqi slang. The Iraqis then stared at him on the bus, and he was handed over to the police, who asked him many questions, and he had to answer them all to prove he was of Iraqi origin. Once he had answered all the questions correctly, they permitted him to go his way. „In Bagdad sprachen mich mehrere Male die Fahrkartenverkäufer im Bus auf Englisch an. Dann lachte ich meistens und antwortete in südirakischer Umgangssprache, woraufhin sie mich verdutzt anstarrten, als wäre ich ein Geist. Dasselbe widerfuhr mir hin und wieder bei Polizeikontrollen. Jedes Mal musste ich lange Listen von Fragen beantworten, Fragen wie: Was isst ein Iraker gern? Welche Kinderlieder singen die Iraker? Nennen Sie einige Namen der bekannten irakischen Stämme! Erst wenn ich alles richtig beantwortet hatte und meine irakische Herkunft als erwiesen angesehen wurde, durfte ich wieder meiner Wege gehen“ (Khider, 2011). However, he felt this problem not only in Baghdad but also in Tripoli, Turkey. He went to a cafe where some Iraqis were. When he introduced himself, they got outraged, saying that he was not Iraqi because his looks did not suit Iraqis. When Rasul was in Tunisia, the women called him, "hey, handsome Indian. “ Ich hielt mich eine Weile in Tripolis auf, wo ich einige Iraker in einem Café an der Strandpromenade traf. Als

ich mich vorstellte, erwiderten sie empört: »Du willst uns wohl für dumm verkaufen? Du bist kein Iraker! Dein Aussehen passt nicht und deine Art zu reden auch nicht!« Als ich dann später nach Tunesien kam, war das ganz anders. In der Hauptstadt merkte ich vom ersten Tag an, dass mir die Frauen folgten wie Fliegen dem Marmeladenbrot. Im Zentrum, in der Bourguiba-Straße, schauten mir eine Menge Mädels kokett nach und riefen sich ungeniert zu: »Hey, schaut euch diesen hübschen Inder an!«, deshalb dachte ich bald an eine große Reise Richtung Europa dachte (Khider, 2011). Therefore, he thought about fleeing to Europe.

Refugees' ethnic identity becomes a problem for themselves abroad

From Rasul's perspective, he got into more trouble because of his appearance; when he arrived in Athen, he was arrested and imprisoned for a few days as long as his migrant status was not released. However, the police officers blocked his way when he left the restroom and started violently punching him. Rasul, the Refugee, was unaware of what was going on. "Als ich den Toilettenraum wieder verlassen wollte, versperrte er mir den Weg und begann, voller Wut auf mich einzudreschen. Ich begriff nicht, was los war" (Khider, 2011). Rasul also encountered a situation where the officiant believed him to be an Iraqi. Because of his Indian appearance, they thought he was either an Indian or a Pakistani trying to be an Iraqi to get asylum. Kind of a con artist, considering that, at the time, only Iraqis were eligible to seek refuge in Germany due to the tyranny that ruled their country. However, many foreign nationals, including those from Pakistan or India, cannot request temporary asylum in those nations. "Die Beamten glaubten mir einfach nicht, dass ich ein Iraker sei. Sie hielten mich für einen Inder oder Pakistaner, der sich als Iraker ausgab, um sich eine Asylberechtigung zu erschleichen. Sozusagen ein Betrüger. Die Iraker hatten damals wegen der Diktatur in ihrer Heimat in Deutschland das Recht auf Asyl. Viele Bürger anderer Staaten aber nicht, wie zum Beispiel Inder oder Pakistaner" (Khider, Der falsche Inder, 2011). Here it can be seen that the refugees, who came from India or Pakistan, are also identified based on their skin colour, like Rasul, according to Rasul's experience or perspective.

Facing a problem while constructing a new Identity

As a writer, Rasul had a right to write his own work without any restriction or problem, but he wrote all of his literary works with a symbolic alphabet composed of Latin and Arabic letters, patterns, and numbers. He wanted no one else to be able to decipher this newly developed alphabet. Because if the encrypted alphabet is decrypted during the Saddam regime, he will be killed. Now it can be seen that he was afraid of the hierarchy System, which always had stood in way of his identity construction. So that's why he also used the same technique while fleeing to Arab countries. Through his writing technique he also survived under the Police control "In

Bagdad, wo ich geboren und aufgewachsen bin, musste ich alles verbergen. Unter Saddams Herrschaft konnte ein einziges Wort Grund genug sein, das Leben zu verlieren. Deswegen schrieb ich alle möglichen Dinge mit Symbolen auf. Ich entwickelte ein eigenes Alphabet, aus lateinischen und arabischen Buchstaben, Mustern und Zahlen, was außer mir kein Mensch entschlüsseln konnte. Dieselbe Technik habe ich später, während meiner Flucht in den arabischen Ländern, angewandt, um die Polizeikontrollen zu überleben,” (Khider, 2011). But the problem followed him and stood always in the way of Rasul's writing habit and outside of school and university, reading and writing were regarded as criminal acts “Wir alle waren zu Fantasiekreaturen mutiert. Oder wie hätte es sonst sein können, dass ein Staat das Lesen und Schreiben außerhalb von Schulen und Universitäten in kriminelle Handlungen verwandelte” (Khider, 2011, pp. 28-29). and as a result, Rasul's father also wanted to destroy his written books „mein Vater es für angebracht hielt, meine Bücher und alles, was ich bisher geschrieben hatte, zu vernichten“(P-28). Rasul claims that his father is also a conservative who wishes to destroy all of his written manuscripts that he has been working on for a long time. "Mein Vater hatte also paradoxerweise nur die erlaubten Bücher vernichtet, die sich in meinem Zimmer ergeben hatten" (Khider, 2011, pp. 28-30). That was the biggest obstacle and challenge that kept him from recovering his identity, but he did not give up on his writing habit, through which he wanted to change the world. Even while in the host country of Germany (Munich), he remained focused on his writing, as Refugee Rasul mentioned, although the place was only changed for reading and writing. “Seit meinem Aufenthalt in München haben sich auch meine Lese- und Schreibgewohnheiten verändert. Oft sitze ich in einem Café in der Stadt, um meine Entwürfe zu überarbeiten (Khider, 2011, p. 33).

Reconstruct one's own identity as a writer by Refugee

According to the protagonist's Rasul perspective, when he was very young, a literary critic named Sadiq came to them and he was attracted to Sadiq's books. He started to read the first book, which he had never before read in school. In the book, the poem was written by Rasul Gamzato. When he's finished reading it, and collected the it. “Es war die Bibliothek meines Schwangers Sadiq. Ich war damals noch sehr jung. Sadiq war Dozent für Literatur an der Universität Bagdad, Literaturkritiker und ein wahrhaftiger Bücherwurm. Das erste Buch, das ich nicht für die Schule las, hatte er mir empfohlen und ausgeliehen. Es war eine Übersetzung aus dem Russischen: Ausgewählte Gedichte von Rasul Gamzatov. Nachdem ich es gelesen hatte, packte mich sofort der Vogel, der Büchervogel. Ich las wie besessen. Hauptsächlich Lyrik. Und eines Tages kam ich auf die Idee, selbst Gedichte zu schreiben“ (Khider, 2011).

Rasul also stated that there had never been any writers in his family, but he decided to write his poem. „In meiner Familie gab es keinen Schriftsteller“ (Khider, 2011). Here, it can be seen

how he attempts to re-establish his identity as a writer. According to the theoretical foundations of identity construction, identity is created or changed based on interactional, situational, socio-historical, and cultural situations (Taylor, 2015). Bakhtin (1981) also said, in terms of Identity construction, that understanding of identities occurs through literate practises like reading, writing, talking, listening, and other types of engagement with multimodal texts that affect one's identity building because of their dialogic nature (Seban & Tavşanlı, 2015). So it can be seen how Rasul wanted to create his own identity as a writer. He started to read the stories and tried to write poems and stories in large quantities. However, he did neither know how to write or think more. First and foremost, writing has always had something to do with his inner life, which compelled him to do so. However, at first, he wrote in his own words what he thought and tried to give shape to his feelings through his writing. "Deswegen hieß mein erstes Gedicht: »Seufzen«. Und so kam ich zum Schreiben. Damals verfasste ich Gedichte in rauen Mengen. Später fing ich an, Geschichten zu lesen und zu schreiben. Ich bin eine echte Schreibmaschine geworden. Aber über die Frage, wieso ich schreibe, habe ich lange Zeit nicht nachgedacht. Erst vor Kurzem: Das Schreiben hatte immer etwas mit meinem Innenleben zu tun, das mich unaufhörlich dazu zwang. Dabei haben sich drei Phasen ergeben, die mir jedoch gar nicht bewusst waren. Am Anfang schrieb ich und dachte, durch dieses Schreiben könne ich meine Gefühle in Worte fassen" (Khider, 2011). According to his perspective, he saw himself as a revolutionary, attempting to change the world through his penchant for writing. He claimed that the world could only be changed with a pencil. "In der zweiten Phase glaubte ich, mit dem Schreiben die Welt verändern zu können. Genau wie ein Revolutionär, aber eben nicht mit der Waffe, sondern mit dem Bleistift" (Khider, 2011).

Further Discussion:

This research investigates and analyses the terms of refugees' struggle for their own identity, not only in their home country but also in host countries. They lost their identity during war and violence, and they also face discrimination in their homeland and abroad due to their ethnic identity, particularly their skin colour, most of the time, they are forced to flee due to violence, war, or the fear of rape. However, they are sometimes pushed to flee due to their ethnic identity because they have totally different appearances compared to other natives refugees and are faced with racism. This factor shows the push factor of migration, and because of it, they do not give up their lives or journeys; they are still fighting to find and reconstruct their identities. This novel also reflects on the current ephemeral situation of refugees' identities through the refugees' perspectives and experiences worldwide. According to the media (like the BBC and Al Jazeera), a similar situation exists in Southeast Asia's "Myanmar," where the Rohingya Muslim refugees are not only being exploited and raped by the army and traffickers but also undergoing

ethnic cleansing of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims. They are still struggling to establish their own positive identity in society.

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