A LITERARY DIALOGUE OF CULTURES:
ARAB AUTHORS IN GERMANY

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1. Introduction

Debates on the integration of Muslim migrants into European societies have hardly appreciated the importance of the literary production of those migrants, among them many of Arab origin. This is particularly astonishing given that much of this literature is produced in the languages of the European host countries. Debates usually focus on practical measures like learning the language of the host country as an important part of the integration and assimilation of migrants (Steinbach 2005). Since the assassination of the Dutch director Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004 at latest, it has become evident that such steps towards integration alone are insufficient and overlook the cultural characteristics the migrants have introduced to their host countries. Some of these elements are caused by personal characteristics, socialisation and experience and can influence the attitudes and the behaviour of migrants.

I would like to examine the importance of these cultural characteristics by discussing the literary works of migrants of Arab origin who live and work in Germany. The discussion will look at how distinctive features of Arab culture are manifested in the issues these authors write about and in the style they use in their works. I will use as examples two novels by the Palestinian writers Halima Alaiyan (Alaiyan 2003) and Salim Alafenisch (Alafenisch 1989). This analysis will be supported by the authors’ answers in my interview with them in 2004.

The social and legal status of women in Arab societies has been subject of recent discussions both in Europe and in the Arab world. Therefore, the analysis of the two novels will focus on their depiction of Arab women. This approach is to be understood as complementary to their fictional and entertaining character. This study cannot make a judgement on whether and to what extent this literature has contributed to the integration of migrants in European countries. However, it is the first step into more detailed studies, which allow us to compare minority
literature in different European countries, to understand its relationship with the European majority literature and to identify its wider social significance (Luhmann 1997).

2. The development of German literature by Arab authors in Germany

The history of German literature by Arab authors is to a large part linked with the immigration of ‘guest-workers’ (gastarbeiter) to Germany after World War II. Although West Germany did not conceive itself as a classical immigration country like the United States, waves of migrants have entered the country since the 1960s. The first generation of Arab immigrants stemmed from the working- and middle-class. Working-class migrants came primarily from North Africa looking for better job opportunities, while middle-class migrants were constituted of students from all Arab countries, pursuing their higher education in Germany. Many Arab migrants decided to settle down in Germany and to live there with their families (Chiellino 2000). Among those who decided to stay in Germany and the generations that followed were also some writers. Very often, they would pursue their professional careers and write as well, moving in their literature between their original Arab culture and their new German cultural environment (Schmidt-Fink 2002).

The literature by Arab authors as part of so-called minority literature attempts to find its place in the German literary scene. By the 1980s, minority literature had increased to such an extent that observers attempted to locate the present and future role of such literature and to identify its distinctive features in terms of issues covered and styles employed (Khalil 1991). Therefore, a meeting was convened in Bad Homburg in 1985 at which both German and migrant authors participated together for the first time. As part of the proceedings of the meeting four issues were covered: the motivation for writing, writing in a foreign language, the role and importance of migrant literature and the reaction of the Germans to this type of literature (Ackermann/Weinrich 1986). Resulting from this and later follow-up events, this literary genre has been labelled as ‘guest-worker’, ‘migration’, ‘migrant’, ‘minority’, and recently, ‘crossing-boundaries’ literature (Rösch 1992). German authors of Arab origin consider their literature as being a ‘bridge between different nations’ (Senocak 1986: 65–70) or a “specifically German minority literature” (Schami 1986: 55).