

# *The Sociability of Narrative: Freedom, Vulnerability, and Mediation in the Intercultural Novel*

Özkan Ezli

In her introduction to intercultural literary studies, Michaela Holdenried states that one of the central challenges of German studies is to bring together, methodologically and theoretically, intercultural approaches as they are increasingly used in Germany and transcultural approaches in US American German studies. Holdenried even claims that this combined orientation, if done successfully, could play a leading role in the humanities and cultural studies more broadly.<sup>1</sup> The sociopolitical conditions for this are arguably more favorable than ever. For diversity and cultural variety in Germany and the United States can no longer be seen, even by the mainstream, as peripheral questions of economic cycles of attractiveness; nor are they dependent on particular aesthetic or political works by major figures such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Fatih Akin, or the political advertising power and presidency of a Barack Obama. Diversity in cultural and corporeal identity has instead become a paradigmatic social value, even if sometimes also an economic one, as reflected not least in the agendas of companies, universities, publishing programs, or recent casting practices in films and series of streaming services by private and public broadcasters. However, on the level of discursive

1. Holdenried, *Interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft*, 269.

self-representation and societal awareness, there are other signs worth noting as well. In 2022, for example, the gender-fluid, nonbinary author Kim de l'Horizon received the German Book Prize for their debut novel *Blutbuch* (*Blood Book*), and Özdamar, who was born in Turkey, was awarded two renowned literary prizes for her writing in German, the Georg Büchner Prize and the Mannheim Schiller Prize. In his laudatory speech for the latter, German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier described Germany as a country with “a migration background.”<sup>2</sup> Yet despite these shifts, successful recent novels such as *Ellbogen* (*Elbow*, 2017), *Ministerium der Träume* (*Ministry of Dreams*, 2021), and *Drei Kameradinnen* (*Sisters in Arms*, 2021) by a new generation of authors (Fatma Aydemir, Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, and Shida Bazyar, respectively) all address consequences of migration without stressing the joys of hybridity (Sarita Malik), the sovereignty of intercultural narrative (Norbert Mecklenburg), or the awareness of a transculturally evolving, complex culture within a majority society and its history (Leslie A. Adelson).<sup>3</sup> Instead of these effects, which in research in Germany, Britain, and the United States once heralded a literary paradigm shift—namely, the change from passive stories of suffering in the 1980s to agential stories in ensuing decades of actors whose identity politics could be understood as hybrid—experiences and perceptions of discrimination by contrast stand at the narrative center of recent novels. The first basic claim of this essay is that a new form of vulnerability in current novels has replaced the liberal impulse to break free from existing and ascribed victim constellations. If before it was a matter of shedding the burden of representation by breaking stereotypes to emerge as an individual and be seen as such, today, conversely, this burden is sought through a focus on discrimination. This new orientation has fundamentally changed the intercultural narrative situation, the structure of encounter between majority and minority. This essay's second basic claim is that this change, which involves the disappearance of a narrative figure of mediation, is due to an indirect and relieving function that narrative figures of mediation have long served in intercultural novels. What is needed now, this essay advances as a third core claim, is not an amalgamation of previous theories but deeper analyses and rereadings of narrative situations to understand, on the one hand, how individuals and groups have arrived at their current approach to situations, and, on the other, why positive feelings one might have associated with an agential politics of recognition and discursive

2. Steinmeier, “Grenzen überwinden.”

3. Malik, “Beyond ‘the Cinema of Duty’?”; Mecklenburg, *Das Mädchen aus der Fremde*; Adelson, *Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*.

self-representation have been replaced by negative ones. This essay turns to two narrative situations from the novels *Die Leidenschaft der Anderen* (*The Passion of Others*, 1983) by Aysel Özakin and *Drei Kameradinnen* (*Sisters in Arms*, 2021) by Shida Bazayr to elaborate these claims.

### *Narrative Situations between Mediacy and Rupture*

Drawn from Özakin's novel, the first situation involves dialogue in a train compartment in Germany in 1980.<sup>4</sup> An older German woman turns to the first-person female narrator and asks:

“Are you French?” The old woman smiles at me. I know this smile is for the French woman.

“No, I'm not French.” She doesn't ask any more. Because I have not satisfied her curiosity, her smile fades. I want to resist. I have to tell her that I am Turkish. . . .

“I am a Turk.” I said. The faces in the compartment turn towards me. Silence. . . .

I want them to know that I didn't come to their country to live off them, that I didn't learn what civilization is only here, that I'm not stupid, that I'm not dependent on a man, yes, that I even know French. . . . I want to enumerate all this to them to free myself from the image of a Turkish woman in their minds. At the same time, I find myself and this thought ridiculous.<sup>5</sup>

Forty years later the second narrative situation I will address puts us in a McDonald's somewhere in Germany. Here a first-person narrator named Kasih, who uses an authorial narrative approach as defined in Franz Stanzel's theory of narrative, relates an experience her best friend, Saya, had in the summer of 2020, when Saya's aunts from abroad were present.<sup>6</sup>

Arriving at McDonald's, the aunts sat down and Saya took the order with her father. A little later, she walked toward the table in the sunny corner of the dining area with a tray full of fries, Coke, and lots of ketchup. As Saya carried the tray, she still felt quite normal. But as she approached the table with the three ladies, it suddenly seemed to her as if she were entering a stage. The aunts were being stared at, both by the people at the neighboring tables and

4. Unless otherwise indicated, translations in this essay are mine.

5. Özakin, *Die Leidenschaft der Anderen*, 29.

6. According to Stanzel, the authorial narrative situation is ideal—typically characterized by a narrator who is “omniscient” and omnipresent. This narrative situation clearly distinguishes between narrators and characters in the fictional world. See Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative*, 16.

by those sitting further away. Saya handed out the bags of fries, was given kisses in return, and suddenly preferred to be somewhere else, preferred to be alone with her family and enjoy the aunts' visit without having to think about the people around them.<sup>7</sup>

A short time later the first-person authorial narrator recounts a party situation: "The moment she [Saya] said, 'Germany is a racist country,' I connected her experiences from the summer with all our other, previous hurts. . . . I knew Saya was right."<sup>8</sup>

Despite some obvious textual similarities, such as contrasting associations with ethnic signifiers or language groups and disquieting stares in both examples, the differences between the narrative situations in these two novels could not be greater on the level of identity politics and social form. In the first example, a sociocultural question remains undecided, part of an inner conflict. This is documented by the extremely stable first-person narrative perspective in Özakin's novel. In the narrative examples from Bazyar's novel, concern and identity are produced by the perspectives of others. Consternation is not limited to the character of Saya, for it affects both the first-person narrator and the authorial narrator. Different narrative perspectives become one through a shared concern. If social consternation is internally negotiated in Özakin's novel by the first-person narrator, Bazyar's narrative heightens social consternation beyond individual characters through the narrative production of social affect.

For the literary scholar Franz Stanzel, who remains influential for some branches of narrative theory in Germany, narratives are constituted by both surface and deep structures. Surface structures are populated by intermediary figures such as authorial, experiential, and first-person narrators and their narrative situations, whereas deep structures have the basic narrative function of mediocrity (*Durchschnittlichkeit*), which is fundamental for the "shaping of the subject matter" (*Durchformung des Stoffes*).<sup>9</sup> In our case the material concerns intercultural situations in the experience of discrimination. Referencing Kristin Morrison's essay on "differing points of view," Stanzel distinguishes between "speaker of the narrative words" and "knower of the narrative story." In keeping with this distinction, for Stanzel too, the narrative process first requires a "speaker of the narrative words," because to tell means to communicate something in words. At the same time, what is communicated in words also requires a "knower of the narrative story," who allows us to experience, per-

7. Bazyar, *Drei Kameradinnen*, 59.

8. Bazyar, *Drei Kameradinnen*, 67.

9. Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative*, 6.

ceive, and know what is going on in the fictional space.<sup>10</sup> Connecting these two levels requires a mediating figure as a threshold between speaking and knowing, that is to say, between surface structures and deep structures. Such figures mediate between knowledge from a realm of nonidentity (external perspective of authorial narrative situation) and knowledge from an experience of identity (internal perspective of first-person narrative situation). Mediating figure and threshold form the basis for there being a difference between Stanzel's first-person narrative situation and the authorial narrative situation in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

These remarks on surface and depth, knowledge and experience, speaking and knowing, and finally on mediacy correlate closely with Walter Benjamin and Albrecht Koschorke's respective reflections on the functions of the translator and the figure of the third. Benjamin writes about translation in his 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator":

Fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original. For sense in its poetic significance is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it. . . . Thus no case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning. . . . In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.<sup>12</sup>

If Benjamin's translator is a figure of mediation, and if both figure and text can make reference—as "fragments"—to a greater language as a connecting vessel, according to Koschorke, "the trade secret of societies lies hidden" in the figure of the third.<sup>13</sup> Benjamin's remarks on the translator coincide in a striking way with the function that Koschorke ascribes to the figure of the third, an ascription that, I contend, also applies to the mediating figures of intercultural narration until recently:

In the theory of difference, "effects of the third" always arise when intellectual operations no longer oscillate merely between two sides of a distinction, but the *distinction as such* becomes the object and the problem. The fact of

10. Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative*, 9. See also Morrison, "James's and Lubbock's Differing Points of View."

11. Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative*, 10.

12. Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," 78.

13. Koschorke, "Ein neues Paradigma der Kulturwissenschaften," 28.

differentiation is added to the respective differentiated variables like a third party that has no position of its own, but sets the positions on both sides of the differentiation in relation to each other by connecting and separating them at the same time: a third element that makes binary codings possible in the first place, while usually remaining hidden itself as a constituting mechanism.<sup>14</sup>

All three—Stanzel’s mediacy, Benjamin’s translator, and Koschorke’s figure of the mediating third—operate on a liminal threshold because they render visible distinctions between knowing and not knowing, between what is meant and how it is said, and finally between identity and nonidentity. This threshold function paradoxically creates connections through differentiations and enables positions as well as identifications for both characters and readers. I contend that this ultimately increases the sociability of a narrative situation involving intercultural encounter. How do the narrative situations of 1980 and 2020 compare in this respect?

What did the older German woman really mean about the “French woman” traveling with her on the train in 1980? Should this be read as a nice remark or a racist one? Is there a difference here between what is meant and the manner of meaning? The manner of meaning in the German woman’s fading smile clearly plays an important role in the first-person narrator’s descriptive observations. However, the literal phrasing that conjures a “French woman” also invokes an imaginary reference outside the situation of encounter. In the Federal Republic of the 1980s and also at the same time in Turkey, the French and especially French women had positive connotations, ranging from style, appearance, emancipation, and food to beautiful language.<sup>15</sup> The manner of meaning (surface speaking) that refers to what is meant here (depth knowledge) is the smile of the German woman who sees in Özakin’s first-person character a highly cultured and free woman before her. The first-person narrator seems to know about this connection between what is meant and the manner of meaning, because she thinks and knows that the smile of the German woman is meant for the French woman. But there is more to this exchange than meets the eye. For the first-person narrator’s inner monologue about civilization and being able to speak French not only reveals what motivated her to study French in her country of origin but also repeats in a differentiated way how what is meant “derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it.” Speaking with Stanzel and Koschorke, one could also say that this narrative situation is formed from different perspectives precisely

14. Koschorke, “Ein neues Paradigma der Kulturwissenschaften,” 11.

15. See Ezli, *Narrative der Migration*, 193–230.

because there is both differentiation and binding here, between speaking and knowing, between surface and depth in structural terms. For all the hidden mediation in this intercultural situation, though, as far as something “French” is concerned, one question remains. What does being “‘a Turk’” mean here? At precisely this point the first-person narrator becomes a figure of mediation, one in which the hidden constituting mechanism of the third takes effect and readers alone become privy to this narrator’s inner conflict. Crucial here is the first-person narrator’s statement that she finds herself and her thoughts “ridiculous.” The distance her words create to her having been affected places her at the interface of identity and nonidentity. When she says that she is a Turk, she is thus not simply speaking for herself or for Turks. Rather, with her assertion of identity, her “French” appearance, and her telling the German woman in German that she is a Turk, she is also saying that she is not a Turk. Her cultural markers acquire a mediating function in this narrative situation between speaking and knowing. This mediating function in turn becomes the narrative material for social contact. In Koschorke’s terms, this narrator enters the intercultural scene “like a third party that has no position of its own, but sets the positions on both sides of the differentiation in relation to each other by connecting and separating them at the same time.” This increases the functional sociability of the narrative situation.

Decades later, Bazyar’s novel *Drei Kameradinnen* stages a completely different narrative situation. Apart from the character name *Saya* and the brand name *McDonald’s* in the recounted scene, nothing explicitly points to cultural characteristics or striking physical differences. We do know that the visiting aunts came to Germany from another country, but at no point do we learn where they came from. Readers might know or learn from the internet that *Saya* is used as a girl’s name in Arabic, and one might assume that the aunts wear headscarves. How should readers understand why other customers at this McDonald’s stare at the aunts the way they do? What kind of meaning is expressed here, and how is it expressed? There is no question that being stared at in public spaces triggers irritating, unsettling, and unpleasant feelings, especially in spaces where indifferent behavior might be required for the safety of all involved. By contrast, for purposes of narrative representation, one might imagine that negative affects of hatred and malignant structures of racism need their objects to appear. Yet neither Bazyar’s novel nor other recent literary narratives by Fatma Aydemir (*Ellbogen [Elbow]*, 2017), Dilek Güngör (*Ich bin Özlem [I Am Özlem]*, 2019), Hegameh Yaghoobifarah (*Ministerium der Träume [Ministry of Dreams]*, 2021), Deniz Ohde (*Streulicht [Sky Glow]*, 2020), Ronya Othmann (*Die Sommer [The Summers]*, 2021), and Olivia Wenzel (*1000*

*Serpentinen Angst* [*One Thousand Coils of Fear*], 2021) rely on such concretions of violence and discrimination.

Representative of this recent trend, Bazyar's *Drei Kameradinnen* (*Sisters in Arms* is the projected title of Ruth Martin's forthcoming translation) advances transcultural diction with the blurring of any traces of origin and ultimately omits any narrative figure of mediation too. This is done programmatically. As the narrator repeatedly states in direct address to readers, she already knows about their culturalizing and racist views. This is a very different narrative situation from the narrator's knowledge of the German woman's perception of "French" in Özakın's novel. Bazyar's narrator does not possess relative knowledge tied to a situation, but absolute knowledge that breaks the intercultural figure of situation. Saya feels normal until she sees the staring gazes at her aunts, gazes that trigger for her both consternation and a form of social withdrawal. Breaking an image, prejudice, or stereotype in this narrative situation to generate sociability cannot happen at all, because there is simply no distinction made here between what is meant and the manner of its meaning. There is no narrative difference here between surface structure and deep structure, between knowing and not knowing. The gaze of others in the narrative situation and also that of white readers is racist. This makes it impossible to detach oneself from the narratively affected position occupied by the character Saya and reinforced by further afflictions in the course of the narrative. No figures of mediation emerge in narrative form here.

Unlike Özakın's novel, Bazyar's text does not end with an altered intercultural situation in a public space, but with the narrator Kasih lying down in bed after finishing the novel *Drei Kameradinnen* and internally embracing Saya. The latter turns out to be the alter ego of the first-person narrator, who in this case is both a personal and authorial narrator in Stanzel's terms. Even if the novel's ending suggests that everything narrated has been fiction, with the merging of Saya as character and Kasih as narrator, the statement that Germany is a racist country functions in narrative terms as not relative but absolute knowledge. However, this is knowledge that not even Stanzel's authorial narrator can have, because even an authorial narrator is bound to the narrative situation, to the connective power of a figure of mediation, so to speak. Becoming free has been replaced here by imprisonment on both sides: vulnerability to racism and perpetuation of racism. The narrative situation in Bazyar's novel thus concludes with Saya's antisocietal impulse to want to be with only her aunts from abroad, without having to worry about other people around her. Saya's vulnerability reveals a new form of victimhood that allows us to take a different look at texts of the 1980s. The comparison sketched here shows how



much earlier texts struggled to mediate between inner confrontation and social agency in narrative form.

### *Narrative Situations as Challenges to Social Cohesion*

Differences between the narrative situations discussed above show that we are dealing with a new structure of narrative and encounter today. What Stanzel once conceived as a circular model or feedback loop of narrative situations must be reimagined today as a folded model instead. Identity and nonidentity are no longer connected through a stable external reference such as a mediator, translator, or threshold, but have been folded into alignment with each other. This leads to a particular form of affectedness. The same applies to narrative perspective, in which outside and inside perspectives overlap and the authorial narrator's position is aligned with identity. The basis for this position is no longer an intersection of subjective perception and general knowledge or an interweaving of what is meant and ways of meaning. Distinctions between knowledge and nonknowledge, between object and language, and between identity and nonidentity are now replaced by affectedness, which becomes the new basis of authorial narrative positions in these contemporary literary texts. This shift undoes earlier distinctions in narrative theory between surface and depth, between knowledge and nonknowledge, between what is meant and ways of meaning. This new constellation of identity politics in narrative form no longer focuses on a relationship between surface and depth, but on what is rendered inflexible in words and stares. Özakin's German traveler has a face, unlike other passengers in the train scene, whereas German figures in Bazyar's narrative have no face in concrete situations but are simply the gaze.

Diversity-oriented and interdisciplinary research in German studies must clearly continue to reflect theoretically on both transcultural and intercultural methods, as divergent as these approaches may sometimes appear to be in the United States and Germany, respectively. However, the real challenge for contemporary German studies should be understood in global terms too, as indicated by the increased adoption, interaction, and translation of terms such as people of color, distinctions such as white and nonwhite, and questions of cultural appropriation. Related questions about new identity politics in cultural practices in Germany have sociopolitical consequences as well. I am convinced that critical questions of affectedness and mediation in literature and film hold out a shared possibility of sociability. This possibility would also allow us to combine cultural-historical analyses and contemporary concerns in academically sustainable ways. This challenges us to design more robust new theories of interculturality, transculturality, encounter, and above all mediation

in both academic and sociopolitical fields. Scholarship as well as public discourses in both the United States and Germany have too long failed to recognize figures of mediation and with them intersections between identity and nonidentity as the constitutive foundations for the joys, sovereignty, and successes of hybridity, and perhaps even as the central components of those entities we call immigration societies. Vulnerability needs to be brought back into view, not as an individual or cultural injury but as a dependence on mediation for narratives and societies too.

**Özkan Ezli** researches in the Department of Sociology at the University of Münster and teaches literary studies at the University of Tübingen.

### References

- Adelson, Leslie A. *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Bazyar, Shida. *Drei Kameradinnen*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 2021.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." Translated by Harry Zohn. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 69–82. New York: Schocken, 2007.
- Ezli, Özkan. *Narrative der Migration: Eine andere deutsche Kulturgeschichte*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022.
- Holdenried, Michaela. *Interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft: Eine Einführung*. Berlin: Metzler, 2022.
- Koschorke, Albrecht. "Ein neues Paradigma der Kulturwissenschaften." In *Die Figur des Dritten: Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Paradigma*, edited by Eva Eßlinger, Tobias Schlechtriemen, Doris Schweitzer, and Alexander Zons, 9–31. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.
- Malik, Sarita. "Beyond 'the Cinema of Duty'? The Pleasures of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s." In *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, edited by Andrew Higson, 202–15. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Mecklenburg, Norbert. *Das Mädchen aus der Fremde: Germanistik als interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft*. Munich: Iudicium, 2008.
- Morrison, Kristin. "James's and Lubbock's Differing Points of View." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16, no. 3 (1961): 245–55.
- Özakın, Aysel. *Die Leidenschaft der Anderen*. Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1992.
- Stanzel, F. K. *A Theory of Narrative*. Translated by Charlotte Goedsche. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Steinmeier, Frank-Walter. "Grenzen überwunden." *taz*, November 27, 2022. <https://taz.de/Bundespraesident-ueber-Emine-Sevgi-Oezdamar/!5898336/>.