

# Syrians in Germany: Literary Contributions towards German- Arab Inter Cultural Competence

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**Abstract** – *The aim of this paper is to explore into the contributions of Syrian writers, who remained as residents in Germany for one reason or the other. The reason could be mainly of political or social instability, which always results in the economic crisis. It is attempted here to illustrate the characteristics of migration literature in Germany as a whole as well as the specialties found in the novels and stories of Rafik Schami. The picture of homeland and the other patriotic elements along with the oriental inclusiveness is discussed here with a great deal of importance in detail.*

**Keywords** – *Diaspora, Exile, Guest Worker, Inter-Cultural Literature, Oriental Representations*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role played by Arab writers in enriching the „intercultural Literature“ of Germany since the last century is widely accepted both inside and outside Germany. Arab writers, in general and Syrian writers, in particular, have contributed tremendously in this regard. Their writings gain the readers` attention not just because of the strange cultural context from which they originate. Their place in the area of German literature has been underscored by the popular awards and the scholarships bestowed to them time to time [1]. Among those honors and titles are Best seller, Alfred-Döblin-Stipendium, Herman Hesse and Nelly Sachs, Georg Glaser prize, Heinrich-Heine-Gastdozentur prizes etc. While some of them pen down their literary pieces in German language, the others are brave enough to write in Arabic. The former group sometimes gets their works translated into Arabic by themselves or by others, while the latter active Arabic writers could illuminate beyond the oriental clichés of narrations and writings. They could also attract the Arab readers all over the world to the extent as some of them have been honored with several awards from the Arab world as well.

The Arab writers in Germany contribute towards not only to the literature but also the cultural activities. The new styles and methods of narrative and play forms of folk arts as well as national arts gain an intercultural give and take (exchange) attitude due to the migrant authors and their intercultural relationships on the spheres of literature and arts to a great extent.

## 2. REFUGEES: GERMAN POLICY

Germany`s open door policy towards refugees helped many a displaced migrants explore into the new possibilities in their lives in Germany to a large extent. Although the Chancellor, Angela Merkel had to compromise on this policy in wake of the commotions unleashed by her sister party C S U, which is in the coalition of the current ruling German government. According to the study for the EMLP committee, “Germany is still the main destination country in Europe (28% of all asylum applicants in the EU In the 3rd quarter of 2017) and applicant numbers started to decrease only in 2017 due to delayed registration procedures. Asylum applicants are mainly from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Eritrea and recently also from Turkey and Nigeria”. German refugee policies have globally been discussed and widely appreciated. Germany was the one and only country that kept its doors open in front of refugees in the last years among 28 members of European Union [2]. The number of applicants from Syria is immensely high and tops the list of applicants. The following table (TABLE 1) gives us a clear picture on the number of the asylum seekers in Germany from various countries all over the world:

Table: 1 Top 10 Countries of Origin of Asylum Seekers (2018)

Die 10 stärksten Staatsangehörigkeiten im Jahr 2018 (TOP-10)	ASYLANTRÄGE		ENTSCHEIDUNGEN ÜBER ASYLANTRÄGE								
	insgesamt	davon Erst- anträge	davon Folge- anträge	insgesamt	davon Rückführung als „unzureichende Schutz gem. § 4 Abs. 3 AsylG“	davon Abschiebung verboten gem. § 4 Abs. 5 AsylG AufenthG	davon Abschiebung erlaubt gem. § 4 Abs. 5 AufenthG	davon sonstige Anträge (z.B. Asyl in Deutschland)	davon sonstige Anträge (z.B. Asyl in Deutschland)	davon sonstige Anträge (z.B. Asyl in Deutschland)	
1 Syrien, Arabische Republik	22.520	21.587	933	21.245	7.193	643	9.208	152	77,99	52	4.640
2 Irak	8.015	8.259	756	10.851	1.865	27	545	803	29,65	4.238	3.400
3 Nigeria	6.141	5.734	407	7.952	564	25	68	633	75,99	3.128	3.559
4 Afghanistan	6.222	5.138	1.084	12.131	1.375	10	462	2.502	35,89	4.619	3.173
5 Iran, Islamische Republik	4.739	4.283	447	5.915	1.247	135	81	53	23,28	2.486	2.646
6 Türkei	4.329	4.089	240	4.741	1.720	353	29	39	22,72	2.271	682
7 Eritrea	3.722	3.535	187	4.938	1.388	104	1.866	146	68,99	165	1.373
8 Somalia	3.260	2.912	348	4.991	1.068	12	613	420	42,19	966	1.924
9 Georgien	2.710	2.450	260	3.659	8	2	8	33	2,39	2.993	617
10 Ungarn	2.427	2.109	318	3.053	719	37	363	96	34,68	1.076	915
Summe Top 10	65.076	60.096	4.980	79.470	17.138	1.090	13.143	4.871	44,25	21.993	22.331
Staatsangeh. gesamt	93.316	81.765	11.551	125.190	19.433	1.693	14.084	6.165	31,76	45.198	40.310

\* Reihung entsprechend der Top-Ten-Liste der Erstanträge im Zeitraum Januar bis Juni 2018.

Source: <http://www.bamf.de> (Asylgeschäftsbericht 2018)

In the recent past, Merkel was the face of German’s open door asylum. Ignoring the resistance from various quarters, she has kept the country’s borders open before the asylumseekers. This stand made her popular worldwide and she became an international icon of power and politics. A majority of German population believe in their “Willkommenskultur” (Acceptance/ Welcome culture). They hereby wish their country to be open to refugee seekers. According to the survey by “Bertelsmann Stiftung” 93 percent of the participants have expressed their vote of support to the welcoming policy [3]. Germany could accommodate these people as asylums as well as in the jobs whereas the government was successful in utilizing this block of human beings as a resource of manpower. It is observed that the existing labor shortage has also played a role in Germany’s migration policy [4].

### 3. SYRIANS IN GERMANY

About 700,000 Syrian migrants live in Germany. 75 Syrian assistance centers have been registered in Germany [5]. Their culture has obviously influenced on the natives and vice versa to a large extent. The exchange of cultural contents on both ends has great impacts on the other walks of life as well. The literature takes birth in the migrated land is always heterogeneous due to transnational mobilization and the intercultural exchanging of ideas to and fro. The integration process opens up new possibilities in the writings of both entities. Germany’s multicultural creative community has helped migrants lead a peaceful life in the primary phase and showcase the talents of migrating folks whereas they could set up different literary societies in and out Berlin. The support extended by the hosting country has made some of the Syrian writers decide not to go back to their homeland. Apart from the state funded refugee supports, refugees were able to constitute refugee led organizations in Germany. The aforementioned Syrian assistance centers are refugee led organizations and they aim mainly to the cultural integration and social cohesion of Syrians and Germans. Although their help and support were at grassroots level of finding a stay and daily breads for the new asylum seekers in the beginning, recent years they started expanding their wings of

assistance to the cultural, community and creative spheres of life. In this regard, many clubs have come into existence, some of which focus on the literature while the other put effort on sports. Abdallah Rahhal’a music band, Musiqana and Ahmad Omar Masri’s soccer team are two instances of such creative groups founded by Syrians in Germany. Some of the important Syrian personalities who paved the way in different walks of literature in Germany should be discussed here, as the same can throw light on the areas whereby the migration literature has blossomed up and flourished out.

### 3.1 Language and Literature

The name, **Rasha Abbas** is prominent in the area of literature as she could contribute towards Arab German intercultural literature as well as the media. Her works have been written in Arabic and translated into German. They have been accepted by the Arabic readers as well as German readers. She received a three-month writing residency at Schloss Solitude Academy in Stuttgart in 2014 and afterwards she moved to Berlin and published the book “The Invention of German Grammar” (Die Erfindung der deutschen Grammatik). It is a collection of short stories written by the author in Arabic (كيف تم اختراع اللغة الألمانية) and translated into German by Sandra Hetzl. Translated version got published before the original came out. The translation was made into the second version just after the Arabic book came into being. Some of her short stories are eye-opener to the Syrian newcomers in Germany whereas these stories play the role of a critic on the very concept of “integration”[6].

#### 3.1.1 Selected Works

Articles and stories (after the arrival in Germany in 2014)

Rasha Abbas (30 October 2017). "Judo". Translated by Robin Moger. Strange Horizons.

Rasha Abbas (30 August 2017). "The Sword and Sheath". Translated by Elisabeth Jaquette. Shubbak Blog.

Rasha Abbas (1 July 2017). "King of Cups". Translated by Elisabeth Jaquette. Shubbak Blog.

Rasha Abbas (20 October 2016). "How Political Can We Get While Writing?". Schloss-Post.

Rasha Abbas (2 November 2015). "Miserable Work Chronicles". Translated by Alice Guthrie. Schloss-Post.

Rasha Abbas (October 2014). "Falling Down Politely, or How to Use Up All Six Bullets Instead of

Playing Russian Roulette". Translated by Alice Guthrie. Words Without Borders.

Rasha Abbas (11 September 2014). "Art and Culture from the Frontline: In the hope that Syria Speaks even more!". Translated by Alice Guthrie. English PEN.

### Books

Rasha Abbas (2017). *The Gist of It* (in Arabic). Milan: Al-Mutawassit.

Rasha Abbas (2016). *Die Erfindung der deutschen Grammatik [The Invention of German Grammar]* (in Arabic). Translated by Sandra Hetzl. Orlanda. ISBN 978-3944666259.

These works emphasize on the cultural differences as well as indifferences. Her contribution in the area of language is also vital as it paves the way for Arabs to be enlightened in terms of language to a larger level. Mentioning these titles here is to throw light on the themes handled by the author in the literature.

### 3.2 About Saeed:

Another Syrian author to be discussed here is About Saeed. Since he got the authors' scholarship in 2015, he shifted to Berlin from Damascus and has been working as columnist for VICE magazine. Many a times he has been hosted by Thomas Böhm in German radio, Deutschlandfunk, under the title "Unterwegs mit dem syrischen Exilschriftsteller About Saeed (on the way along with the exile writer, About Saeed)". His works include the following:

*Der klügste Mensch im Facebook. Statusmeldungen aus Syrien.* Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Sandra Hetzl. mikrotex, Berlin 2013, ISBN 978-3-944543-10-9

*Lebensgroßer Newsticker. Szenen aus der Erinnerung.* Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Sandra Hetzl. mikrotex & Spector Books, Berlin 2015, ISBN 978-3-944543-21-5

*Eine humanitäre Liebesgeschichte,* Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Sandra Hetzl. taz.de, Kolumne Warum so ernst?, 7. February 2016

### 3.3 Bassam Tibi

He is a professor of international relations; he has been to Germany from Syria in 1962 and he got the citizenship in 1976. He publishes in Arabic, English and German. He was the one who propounded "Leitkultur", Euroislam and social scientific study of Islamology. He has been awarded with the first class merit award by German President, Roman Herzog in 2003. The Swiss Foundation for European Awareness has bestowed him in Zurich. Some of his major works are:

*Vom Gottesreich zum Nationalstaat. Islam und panarabischer Nationalismus, Conflict and War in the Middle East.* 1998

*Die neue Weltordnung. Westliche Dominanz und islamischer Fundamentalismus.* Berlin, 1999.

*Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft.* Goldmann 2000

*Islam between Culture and Politics.* 2001.

*Kreuzzug und Djihad, Der Islam und die christliche Welt.* München: Goldmann 2001.

*The Challenge of Fundamentalism. Political Islam and the New World Disorder.* University of California Press. Nova eldono 2002

Similarly Mahmoud Dahoud is a great professional footballer of the club, Borussia Dortmund in Germany; he plays for under 21 national team as well.

### 3.4 Ramy Al-Asheq

He has also conferred his share to the intercultural Syrian German literature. He writes about the new life in Germany for a refugee. In 2014 he could publish his first book entitled "Walking on dreams", it handled the Syrian revolution as main theme. His participation in various literary events was remarkable Eg. eipzig Book Fair 2016 and 2017, the "Arabic Literature Days" in Zurich 2016, the Ruhr Book Fair 2016, Literature House in Munich 2017, the festival "Literature from Syria" in Cologne 2017, Berlin Poetry Festival 2017, Literature Festival Munich and Berlin Poetry Festival 2018. He is a writer whose texts in Arabic get translated into German. Being in Germany he is able to win the literary awards even outside the country. He has got the prize for young writers from Al Qatthan foundation (Palestine). His "in my travel outfit" was considered for this award. Similarly he has been part of an anthology in which 19 migrant authors from Syria, Yemen and Iran took part. IT was written in German with the title "Weg sein Hier sein" (Being away being here). "Das Herz verlässt keinen Ort, an dem es hängt, Wir Sind Hier and La Valeur décimale du Bonheur" is another anthology he contributed into. Recently in 2019 he published "Dogs Of Memory" (Gedächtnishunde). In collaboration with the German poet, Monika Rinck the translation of their works takes place mutually.

He came to Germany in 2014 on a scholarship by Heinrich Böll foundation. It would be his remarkable achievement that he took initiative for a German Arabic cultural magazine. It was named as "Fann" (Art). He has cofounded the festival named as "Arabisch-Deutsche Literaturtage" in Berlin. He has been selected for "Two artist-in-residency" scholarships from Künstlerhaus Lukas (Arenshoop)

and Künstlerdorf Schöppingen. These awards and invitation for the several events in Berlin and other parts of the country implicates his acceptance as an author among Germans. <https://www.dw.com/en/most-important-for-me-is-to-continue-to-write-refugee-author-ramy-al-asheq/a-38781583>

#### 4. RAFIK SCHAMI AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS

The name of Rafik Schami as a German laurate has already been established and his fame has reached beyond the border. Since 1971 he lives in Germany and he cofounded the literature association, "Südwind" (south wind) and the arts club "PoLiKunst" in very 1980. He started writing in German language from 1982. His tireless efforts started getting paid off by several awards, ranging from "Zürcher Kinder- und Jugendbuchpreis" for his "Eine Hand voller Sterne (A hand full of stars)". He explains the way he stretched far to become a writer in his book, the woman who sold her husband in flea market. Although he has become a German citizen by now, as his name (Rafik Schami) means "the friend from Sham or the friend of Sham origin (old name of Syria), his oriental roots reflect in most of his works. It can definitely be claimed that his works enrich not only German and Arabic literature but also all the twenty four languages in which his work are published or translated.

His readership is the best evidence for his acceptance among the readers as he is one of the best-selling authors in Germany. He has been bestowed with several awards time to time since 1985. The Mildred L. Batchelder Award (USA, 1991), Herman Hesse Preis (1994), Hans Erich Nossak Prize (1997), the Smelik- Kiggen Prize (Holland 1989) and Pix de Lecture (France 1996) are few of them. His international reputation is thoroughly clear here as the aforesaid honors are received from different countries across the globe. Rather than contributing towards cultural integrity through literary peace in its variety of forms and genres like stories, short stories, narrations, novels and so on, he could become one of the pioneers among those who laid down the theories in "Gast arbeiter Literatur". He was the one who expanded the theoretical basis of the terminology first time in 1978 [7]. "South wind: guest workers German" is another article series of this kind that he coedited in 1980-1983. Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation has published a book on didactical study of Shami's literature in 1992.

In terms of his contribution towards Arab German literature, it is of huge importance that he could found the literary series Swallow Editions to Publish literature from Arabic speaking countries. These series help bridge the gap between Arab authors and their readers across the globe [8]. London-based Arabia Books and House Publishing get the new

Arabic texts published in English for the Swallow Editions. The capital to start up this nonprofit organization was mutually shared by Schami and Barbara Schwepke. "Sarmada" by Fadi Azzam, the Syrian Journalist is the first of its productions in 2011. He has founded another organization (Schams) in collaboration with Hans Schiler for the benefit of the youth and children in Syria in 2012.

#### 4.1 Common features of his writings

While most of his works reflect homeland and his intimacy towards the motherland on one hand, he narrates his ideas in the most appropriate method to which Germans are accustomed on the other hand. This technique makes him close to the mindset of German readers. His book, Damascus in my heart and Germany in my sight, is a replica of his conceptualization of ideas and its delivery as stories. The ideas he took along with him from his home country are thus delivered in a new form in front of his readers and audience. All the tales he narrates are very close to the emotions of any reader as they are verily related to the real life situations be it professional or personal. It does not mean that he never use the Syrian way of narrating the story. He himself has clarified it in an interview stating that "And then I continue telling the story and I then employ the trick of narrators in Damascus, who leave the story on a cliff-hanger so that people come back to the coffee house again the next day"[9].

Syrian synesthesia is another important feature of his writing. All of his works, be it novel or story, are depicted in an oral and mythical quality, many of them are from the oriental atmosphere with the elements of a calm and beautiful village where he was born. Being homage to his native place, most of his stories take place in Damascus. He has thrown light on his method of writing by explaining the same in many of his speeches as he was tremendously influenced by the eloquence of the desert whereby "eye rests while the tongue is set free" [10]. Ethnographic narration and poetical delivery of autobiography is another salient feature of his writing. Clarity and intelligibility is vividly clear in his literary productions, so that the verbose grandiloquence is hardly found in his books. His writings always certify that he will go on writing about himself and all others who are like him to be Germans but by the souls they all remain Syrians.

#### 4.2 Works by Rafik Schami

Though there are so many books and programs by him, those which have some sort of contribution to the intercultural exchange are being mentioned here. The same is clear from the titles itself.

Der Fliegenmelker: Geschichten aus Damaskus, 1985 : Stories from Damaskus

Weshalb darf Babs wieder lachen?, 1985

Der Kameltreiber von Heidelberg (radio play) 1986 :  
Camel reider of Heidelberg

Eine Hand voller Sterne, 1987: A Hand Full of Stars,  
translated by Rika Lesser, 1990

Malula: Märchen und Märchenhaftes aus meinem  
Dorf, 1987 : Fairy tales from my village

Die Sehnsucht fährt schwarz: Geschichten aus der  
Fremde, 1988

Erzähler der Nacht, 1989 (Damascus Nights,  
translated by Philip Böhm, 1993?)

Das ist kein Papagei, 1994 : That is not parrot (about  
migrants)

Der Schnabelstehe'r, 1995 (The Crow Who Stood on  
His Beak, translated by Anthea Bell 1996)

Fatima und der Traumdieb, 1995 (Fatima and the  
Dream Thief, translated by Anthea Bell 1996)

Gesammelte Olivenkerne, 1997

Die dunkle Seite der Liebe, 2004 (The Dark Side of  
Love, translated by Anthea Bell 2009)

Das Geheimnis des Kalligraphen, 2008 (The  
Calligrapher's Secret, translated by Anthea Bell  
2011)

Die Frau, Die Ihren Mann Auf Dem Flohmarkt  
Verkaufte, Mit Fremden Augen, The Calligrapher's  
Secret and The Dark Side of Love are some of his  
famous novels. His role in integration and cultural  
exchange is vital as he could help producing  
literature in one hand and supporting his people  
around the world to better life situations as well as  
opening up a new horizon of literature in front of both  
the migrants and Germans.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Syrians have played a vital role in enriching Arab  
German socio cultural arenas. The cultural  
integration takes place to a large extent while the  
differences are submerged and give birth to a new  
life to the respective literature. The methods of  
narration and conveyance of meaning imparts the  
advantages and disadvantages to and fro. Authors  
like Rafik Schami write in German language with  
stylistic methods of Arabic narration. To read  
something in own language makes the reader and  
writer closer in emotions with each other. The way he  
delivers his stories from Syria is very attractive for  
the German readers due to its clarity of language  
and some familiar common techniques of German  
literature. This combination of advantages of both

languages makes this type of literature more  
effective and more popular.

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