

Understanding Sentiments of refugees through “Slap in the Face”

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Abstract

This study is based on Abbas Khider's fictional autobiographical novel "Slap in the Face," and the primary focus of this research is on the predicament of refugees in overseas asylums and countries from the viewpoint of a refugee named "Karim Mensy," who fled his country owing to war, strife, fear of rape, and prejudice in search of a better life. This research is also carried out by push and pull factor migration. Khider also makes an effort to describe not only his or their efforts to obtain a residence permit, a job, and money but also the behaviour of the locals toward the refugees. From Karim's experience, when they are helpless and fall under suspicion, the locals blow them up and torture them while they struggle to survive.

Keywords: Refugees, Residence Permit, Exploitation, Asylum, Employment.

Introduction

Abbas Khider's novel "Slap in the Face" is the primary source for this study He was born in Baghdad in 1973. He was 19 years old and was arrested for his political activities against Saddam Hussein's regime. From 1993 to 1995 he was tortured by the Iraqi police in a prison. After his release, he fled Iraq in 1996 and stayed as an illegal refugee in various countries such as Jordan and Libya. Finally, he was taken into custody in Germany, applied for asylum in 2000 and was granted asylum in Germany in 2007; he settled in Germany as an Iraqi-German writer.

Khider is a renowned author who studied German philosophy and literature. Notably, he earned the Adalbert von Chamisso Prize repeatedly, which was given between 1985 and 2017 to recognise authors whose native language is not German but who write in that language. Most critics of *Ohrfeige* had read it through the perspective of an autobiography rather than evaluating it on the basis of its literary merits, maybe due to Khider's fascinating personal story. Khider acted as a participant in his novel, where he participates in the discussion through various avenues and narrates it through his personal experiences as well (May-Chu, 2020). It is recognisable that the novel is a parallel to the life of the author with the fact that his works are strongly autobiographical, still not being an autobiography (Tabassi, 2014). It is complicated to decipher the meaning of "slap in the face." Because it is possible that the meaning is used for getting "attention" when the refugees feel ignored and also due to the indifference of the locals, it is not only a symbol of attacks and violence but also a signal of "carefulness". When a violent perpetrator speaks in his language, and "Frau Schulz", who is imprisoned by Karim Mensy and is unable to answer because she did not understand, it is also used as a symbol of "shame", and the real reason the protagonist fled was not political persecution but also the breasts he grew during puberty (Pokrywka, 2017, S. 412-425). This study focuses on the refugees' arduous struggle to gain residence permits and identity in German culture. Which strategy do they use to survive in Germany? Or how do the locals behave towards refugees?

Literature review

In his novel "Slap in the Face," Abbas Khider mainly describes the arduous struggle of a refugee through the perspective of a refugee and tries to describe the situation of refugees in asylum through Karim's perspective. Are they surviving there? He wanted to escape to France due to a physical disease called gynecomastia and try to get rid of it, and he also had a fear of rape in Bagdad by local natives and the Iraqi army. However, the smuggler brought him with other refugees to Germany and left him in Zindorf (Bavaria); then, he was arrested by cops; they not only touted him but also snatched his money as a criminal charge landed in German territory. When he was released from prison, he went to Bayreuth and lived in an asylum centre with other refugees' compatriots. Then they struggled also to get a residence permit, money, jobs, etc. Sometimes they are involved in the drug business and sex work, and he also criticises Germans because they wanted to exploit the helpless refugees only for selfish purposes. He says that "some of us sold our asses and cocks to earn a few bucks and others became thieves or drug dealers. The rest of us, like me, had to make do with eighty marks a month" (Khider, *Ohrfeige*, 2016). This novel "Slap in the Face" delivers an influential critique of Germany's and Europe's bureaucracy and social practices of expulsion (May-Chu, *Reading Germany, Europe, and the World in Abbas Khider's Novel Ohrfeige*, 2020).

Cause and reason to flee from home country to overseas

This study is based on the "Pull and Push Factor Migration Theory" and, through it, tries to analyse and explore the pull and push factors of the migration of Middle Eastern refugee "Karim Mensy" to Europe. Let's describe it. According to the push factors of migration, people leave their homes due to non-availability of livelihood, poverty, Primitive Condition, fear of political persecution, poor medical care, war, and conflict. Moreover, pull factors are precisely the opposite of push factors. Pull factor migration attracts people to a specific location or area because of job opportunities, good education, a better healthcare system, religious freedom, security and a stress-free environment (Krishnakumar & Indumathi, 2014). When the novel "Slap in the Face." is read, find out the principal push and pull factors of migration; which factors push "Karim" to flee from Bagdad to Europe! He suffered from a physical disease called gynecomastia. In this case, enlarged breasts in men, although he strived to hide his distortion by wearing loose clothing, and he had a fear that "he would tangle with the Iraqi army and confront the discrimination and harassment," so that is why he had only one aim: to earn more money and get rid of his distortion Invalid source specified.. Karim mentioned that he has always fear of rape and humiliation due to female transformation. He always thought about the behaviour of Iraqi Soldiers, those who had not seen a woman for a long time, how to behave towards women and him, when he would stand near them with wiggly boobs and how to deal with him. "Bis heute verfolgt mich die ständige Angst, von Männern geschlagen, gedemütigt oder vergewaltigt zu werden – und von Frauen ausgelacht oder als ekelhaft empfunden. Vermutlich wäre mir nie im Leben der Gedanke gekommen, mein Land zu verlassen, wenn diese elenden Brüste nicht aufgetaucht wären. Mein Leben steuerte damals allerdings unaufhaltsam einem Riesenproblem entgegen: der Wehrpflicht. Im Fernsehen sah ich oft, wie die Soldaten mit nacktem Oberkörper über den Exerzierplatz marschierten und »Seid bereit, immer bereit!« riefen. Wie würden diese Soldaten mich wohl anschauen, wenn ich mit wackelnden Brüsten neben ihnen stünde und »Seid bereit, immer bereit!« skandierte? Wie würden diese monatelang kasernierten Männer, die niemals Frauen zu sehen bekamen, mit mir umgehen?“ (Khider, 2016). Furthermore, another puss factor is his hallucination, which pursued him. He always suffered from it and hallucinated that males beat and attempted to rape him, and he only screamed. "In der Nacht träumte ich von Dingen, die mir unendliche Angst einjagten. Männer küssten meine Brüste und bissen hinein. Sie stiegen einer nach dem anderen auf mich und vergewaltigten mich. Ich weinte bitterlich und flehte sie an aufzuhören. Einer rief voll Geifer »Halt's Maul!« und schlug mir ins Gesicht. Ich schrie und wachte schweißgebadet auf" (Khider, 2016). That is the actual reason and the push factor to force Karime to flee from Iraq to Europe. When men focused on the pull factor of Karim escaping to foreign countries, they discovered that he wanted to get rid of his

disease, gynecomastia; he read and heard about Europa, where surgery is very well managed. He also imagined that he would be able to find a job in foreign countries easily and would be able to save more money for plastic surgery. “Immer wieder hatte ich gelesen und gehört, in Europa gebe es Chirurgen, die sehr gute Schönheitsoperationen durchführen könnten. Das sei zwar teuer, aber machbar. In mir wuchs die Vorstellung, im Ausland ganz normal zu arbeiten, Geld zu sparen, um mir irgendwann die Operation leisten zu können” (Khider, 2016). This Imagination forced Karim to flee to a foreign Country. When Karim reached Germany instead of France, he faced many challenges and had to overcome them. For example, convincing the judge to grant asylum and a residence permit; finding a job; learning German; coming into suspicion; being exploded by a native German. Let’s describe all the challenges from Karim’s perspective he faced as a refugee in Germany.

Convincing The Judge to Grant Asylum and Identity:

In order to obtain a residence permit, Karim had not only convinced the judge but also passed through the judiciary process because the state government wanted to check out whether he had the right to asylum and whether he was a refugee as defined by the Geneva Refugee Convention, or whether there was another obstacle to deportation. “Hier ist der Termin. Am 21. Februar um 8:30 Uhr. Bitte seien Sie pünktlich! Der Staat muss überprüfen, ob für Sie ein Anspruch auf Asyl besteht, ob es sich bei Ihnen um einen Flüchtling im Sinne der Genfer Flüchtlingskonvention handelt oder ob sonstige Abschiebungshindernisse vorliegen” (Khider, 2016). He wanted to do anything to get it, by hook or by crook! At the hearing, the refugees do not have to tell the exact truth in front of a judge; they collaborated with the opposition (dictator and democracy) or committed the crime. Rafid said to his friend Karim that he just had to say he could not live there anymore because he was tortured in prison by Saddam's novices. That was the best reason to flee his native country or to get a residence permit in Germany, so they also tried to find the right lie to convince the judge: “Niemals die Wahrheit sagen! Sag, dass du mit der Opposition zusammengearbeitet hast. Der Staat sucht dich seit Jahren. Und du kannst nicht mehr dort leben, weil du sonst ins Gefängnis kommen und gefoltert oder sogar hingerichtet werden würdest. Das können die eh nicht kontrollieren. Ist ja nicht so, als würde Saddam für jeden eine Akte anlegen und eine Kopie davon an alle Asylländer schicken. Die Hauptsache ist, dass du den Richter von zwei Dingen überzeugst. Erstens: dass du nicht in deine Heimat zurückkehren kannst. Und zweitens: dass du bisher in keinem anderen Asylland warst.«” (Khider, 2016). Rafid said also that in order to get the residence permit and identity in Germany, Karim said only two things. Firstly, he could not return to his homeland. Moreover, secondly, he has not been to any other asylum country so far. According to Karim's statements, he has six possibilities to convince the judge. Either he has done something against the

government and they want to find him, or he belongs to a Christian, a communist, a member of a Shia party, a homosexual or part of a minority. As an Iraqi, he has no other option but to persuade the judge in order to obtain asylum. “Ich meine es ernst. Du hast sechs Möglichkeiten, um den Richter zu überzeugen. Entweder hast du etwas gegen die Regierung getan und man sucht dich, oder du bist Christ, Kommunist, Mitglied einer schiitischen Partei, ein Homosexueller oder Teil einer Minderheit. Andere Alternativen hast du als Iraker nicht” (Khider, 2016). Karim also said that refugees like him have to pass through this judiciary process to obtain asylum and identity”. When he wanted to get his identity and when the investigation process was done, Karim then got his identity card, which is valid for three months. “Direkt zu Beginn meines Aufenthalts im Asylantenheim musste ich zu einer Befragung in das Verwaltungsbüro. Ich erhielt eine sogenannte »Identitätskarte«. Das war ein Ausweis, der mir eine dreimonatige Aufenthaltserlaubnis bestätigte. Es war ein grünes, längliches Dokument, mit einem Foto von mir und meinen persönlichen Angaben” (Khider, 2016). The few refugees also work as spies for the German state to get residence permits when they have no option. They denounce other refugees to the state officials because they have already applied for asylum and hope to get a residence permit, so they are waiting for the outcome of their asylum application. They also hope that their criminal record can be dismissed as soon as possible, said Karim: “Einige von uns sind tatsächlich Deals mit dem Staat eingegangen und haben ihm Informationen über andere Flüchtlinge beschafft. Sogar die drei Mitglieder der H&M-Gang müssen sich auf so etwas eingelassen haben. Obwohl sie schon seit Jahren auf das Ergebnis ihres Asylantrags gewartet hatten und dieser aufgrund ihrer Vorstrafen hätte abgelehnt werden müssen, bekamen sie mit einem Mal alle drei eine Aufenthaltserlaubnis” (Khider, 2016).

Asylum employment and asylum conditions:

Through the Karim’s perspective, Khider described the job conditions in the asylum. He said that they don’t have permission to go out of the asylum home to do the work, but the German authorities allowed the refugees to do the work under the integration programme to earn the money. But they were only allowed to work eighty hours a month and received eighty marks in compensation. Their work was to clean buildings and gardens, which most refugees did not want. “Als Asylanten durften wir ja nicht normal arbeiten gehen. Ihre Behörde erlaubte uns jedoch, für einen Stundenlohn von einer Mark einen sogenannten »Integrationsjob« auszuüben. Nicht mehr als achtzig Stunden im Monat, also achtzig Mark zusätzlich. Oft ging es dabei um die Reinigung von Gebäuden oder um kleine Gartenarbeiten. Die meisten Asylbewerber allerdings wollten diese Arbeitsangebote nicht annehmen” (Khider, 2016). Although they work hard, they get low wages. For example, Salim found a job in a factory making children's toys,

but unfortunately, he received low wages compared to local people, which he received in return for his hard work. The salary was so little that he bought non-edible food to eat and only ate falafel, hummus, fowl, or makkali. His life is based on food stalls. “Salim fand eine Arbeitsstelle in einer Fabrik, in der Kinderspielzeug produziert wurde. Er kümmerte sich um die Finanzen, bekam im Vergleich zu den Einheimischen jedoch einen sehr niedrigen Lohn, ein sogenanntes »ausländisches Gehalt«. Er überstand diese schwere Zeit mit billigem Essen von den Imbissständen, wie Falafel, Humus und Fowl oder Makkali, während er zu Hause fast nur Bohnen, Fisch und andere Produkte aus der Dose aß” (Khider, 2016). Karim's Profession was waste Collection. He had to sort things like paper, bio, plastic, glass, building rubble, electronic waste, clothes, shoes, and so on, which are sorted like in German supermarkets. The waste was also used in the asylum center. There was also another duty of his to help the people who brought their things to the recycling center. He also bought their bags or boxes, which he distributed to the containers. In return, he was often given fifty pfennigs or a mark as a reward for his good or hard work. Sometimes he returned to the asylum home with some money. “Ich sortierte Abfälle, Papier und anderes Zeug in die Container ein. Der Müll wurde so streng geordnet wie Produkte in einem gut sortierten deutschen Supermarkt. Papier, Bio, Plastik, Glas, Bauschutt, Elektroschrott, Klamotten, Schuhe und so weiter. Dennoch litt ich jedes Mal sehr, wenn ich mit ansah, was alles weggeworfen wurde. Mindestens die Hälfte des Mülls wäre im Asylantenheim noch von Nutzen gewesen, zumindest nach ein paar kleineren Reparaturen. Eine andere meiner Aufgaben war es, den Leuten zu helfen, die ihre Sachen zum Wertstoffhof brachten. Ich nahm ihnen ihre Taschen oder Kisten ab und verteilte die Dinge auf die Container. Die Kunden waren tatsächlich großzügig. Ich bekam oft fünfzig Pfennig oder eine Mark als Belohnung für meine nette Art. Manchmal kehrte ich mit ganzen fünf oder sieben Mark zusätzlich nach Hause zurück” (Khider, 2016).

Condition of Asylum:

Karim opined that the asylum mainly consisted of men who had come unmarried or without their families. The facility was our home, and they were not allowed to stray more than twenty miles from it. "Residence obligation" was the name given to this invisible fence that held us captive “Hauptsächlich war das Asylantenheim eine Ansammlung von Männern, die unverheiratet oder ohne ihre Familie gekommen waren. Die Anlage war unser Zuhause, und wir durften uns nicht mehr als dreißig Kilometer davon entfernen. »Residenzpflicht« nannte man diesen unsichtbaren Zaun, der uns gefangen hielt” (Khider, 2016). Karim also said that during the day, you could hear laughter, shouting, swearing, cursing, fighting and talking everywhere. The residents were like a horde of penned-up monkeys who knew no rest and were constantly making noise. “Tagsüber hörte man überall Gelächter, Geschrei, Geschimpfe, Gefluhe,

Gestreite und Gespräche. Die Bewohner waren wie eine Horde eingepferchter Affen, die keine Ruhe kannten und ständig Krach machten” (Khider, 2016). The government has given asylum names according to the refugees' national identity. For example, the Albanian, African, and Afghan and Belarusian corners, which are called Mesopotamian floor, “Während meiner Anwesenheit war es so, dass die einzelnen Bereiche des Heims nach der Nationalität ihrer Bewohner benannt wurden. Es gab das »albanische Gebiet«, das »afrikanische Eck«, den »afghanischen Raum« und die »weißrussische Stube«. Im ersten Stock wohnten in zwei Zimmern ein paar Albaner und vier Nepalesen, der Rest gehörte uns Irakern. Deswegen nannte man die ganze Etage den »mesopotamischen Flur«” (Khider, 2016). Fortunately, Karim lives with the Arab residents on the "Mesopotamian floor". Karim also mentioned that the Kurds also had their own floor, and the Christians lived in the "Christian block" on the third floor. Those who remained lived on the ground floor: Kyrgyz, Pakistanis, Iranians, Montenegrins, and Kazakhs. This area was referred to as the "Orient Express Station."

“Auch die Kurden hatten ihr eigenes Stockwerk. Und die Christen hausten im »Christenblock« im dritten Obergeschoss. Im Erdgeschoss lebten die Übriggebliebenen: Kirgisen, Pakistanis, Iraner, Montenegriner und Kasachen. Man bezeichnete diesen Bereich als die »Orient-Express-Haltestelle” (Khider, 2016). Because the newcomers naturally live with their compatriots, there are no complexities among the refugees. According to their nationality, the German government could deal with them in the asylum home.

They Sell Their Bodies- Exploitation:

Most of the refugees don't have a job and don't have a work permit, so they choose the wrong path to earn some money to survive, so that's why they sell their asses and cocks to make money. The rest of them, like Karim, had to make do with eighty marks a month, said Karim:

“Manche von uns verkauften ihre Ärsche und Schwänze, um sich ein paar Kröten dazuzuverdienen. Andere wurden zu Dieben oder Drogendealern. Der Rest von uns, wie ich, musste mit achtzig Mark monatlich auskommen” (Khider, 2016). They also involve thieves or connecting with drug dealers. For example, Khaled had been involved in sex work. He had not shared the information about his business with another refugee, because he thought that they would be disruptive to his business, said Karim: “Khaled, ein Mitbewohner aus dem Heim, den wir Khaled die Liebe nannten, war einer der beliebtesten Toy Boys der alten Damen und Herren in Niederhofen. Als ich davon erfuhr, verstand ich mit einem Mal, wieso er ständig außerhalb übernachtete, woher er so viel Geld hatte und wieso er mit uns anderen nichts zu tun haben wollte. Er drehte manchmal sein Gesicht weg, wenn er in einem Café saß und uns auf der Straße herumlungern sah, vermutlich weil er Sorge hatte, wir könnten ihm das Geschäft kaputt machen” (Khider , 2016) Karim also said that, in addition to Khaled and Musa, six other boys

are involved in the business with the weekend visitors. It is easy to find out who is involved. Those of us who could afford a beer or a kebab several times a week must have earned something extra this way, or they had stolen something “Neben Khaled und Musa machten noch sechs weitere Jungs Geschäfte mit den Wochenendbesuchern. Es war leicht herauszufinden, wer beteiligt war. Diejenigen von uns, die sich mehrmals wöchentlich ein Bier oder einen Döner leisten konnten, mussten sich auf diesem Wege etwas dazuverdient haben. Oder sie hatten gestohlen” (Khider, 2016).

The Behaviour of Native German Towards The Refugees

Natives Exploit Refugees

Refugees who lack helpful possibilities, then natives, want to take advantage of their helplessness. For example, elderly ladies and gentlemen staying near refugee asylum homes as weekend visitors, most of whom are drug dealers and sex addicts, want to look for employees or have sexual intercourse with the refugees, said the refugee "Karim": “Ich habe mich nie auf die Wochenendbesucher eingelassen und weiß das alles nur aus zweiter Hand. Bereits an meinem ersten Wochenende in Niederhofen wurde mir klar, was diese Männer und Frauen von uns wollten und wieso sie sich in unserer Nähe aufhielten. Es gab drei unterschiedliche Arten von ihnen. Entweder waren es Drogendealer, die nach neuen Mitarbeitern suchten. Oder es waren ältere Damen und Herren, die junge ausländische Männer vernaschen wollten. Oder es waren Zuhälter, die Nachschub für ihre Stammkunden suchten” (Khider, 2016).

Suspicion of Refugees and Feared Refugees

If he does not have a residence permit, he must be afraid of the police and hide at home. He cannot go out to do the work without a residence permit, said Karim: “Die letzten Monate habe ich in andauernder Angst vor der Polizei verbracht, weil ich keine Aufenthaltserlaubnis mehr besitze, Frau Schulz. Lediglich zum Arbeiten bin ich noch rausgegangen, ansonsten habe ich mich zu Hause versteckt” (Khider, 2016). May-Chu also mentioned that everywhere Karim goes, people are wary of him. He interacts with the German police constantly despite having the proper papers. He avoids train stations and pedestrian areas because he feels uncomfortable and dangerous (May-Chu, 2020, S. 363--382). The refugees fall under suspicion. Whenever something went missing in the city, firstly, police investigated the suspected refugee's house. City police were essential people in the lives of refugees and most visited on Saturdays and Sundays. They were either right outside our front door or walked along the bank and watched if one of us happened to come out. Then, when a refugee left the house, they examined the refugee, said Karim: “Diverse Polizisten tauchten auch oft bei uns auf. Wenn irgendetwas in der Stadt gestohlen wurde, suchten sie zuerst bei uns danach. Die wichtigsten Menschen in unserem Leben jedoch waren weder Sie, Frau Schulz, noch Azrael oder die Bullen. Die wichtigsten

Menschen waren die Wochenendbesucher. Die standen immer samstags und sonntags entweder direkt vor unserer Haustür oder spazierten am Ufer entlang und beobachteten, ob einer von uns zufällig herauskam. Wenn ein Flüchtling dann das Haus verließ, begutachteten sie ihn, als wäre er ein schmackhaftes, saftiges Stück Fleisch in der Auslage des örtlichen Metzgers” (Khider, 2016). Karim satirically highlights in the novel that the German government's safety guarantees are unfounded. In order to avoid being deported, Karim makes preparations to escape Germany and hires a human trafficker (May-Chu, 2020). “Die deutschen Behörden können mich genauso gut hier vor Ort erschießen, dann muss ich wenigstens nicht warten, bis ich beim Einkaufen von einer Bombe zerfetzt werde” (Khider, 2016). Karim, an immigrant, fears that the German government will simply shoot him someplace, or that a bomb will burst while he is out shopping.

Conclusion

This researcher explores and analyses the terms of the lives of refugees in foreign countries, and it is found that their lives are not so good. They are forced and pushed to flee to foreign countries by violence, war, rape, discrimination, and racism. This cause shows the push factor of migration, and because of it, they flee to overseas countries to find a better life, a job, a good education, and a fearless environment, which is the reason for the pull factor of migration. Unfortunately, they also face cruel situations and get trapped in them again. They engage in drug trafficking or sex work due to a lack of jobs, emergency relief, and financial support, basic needs for them to survive there. When they are helpless, natives want to take advantage of the refugees' helplessness and try to abuse them. Then their escape is pointless when they face a similar situation and feel helpless there. This novel also reflects on the current ephemeral situation of refugees worldwide. According to the BBC and Al Jazeera news media, a similar situation in Southeast Asia's "Myanmar," where the Rohingya Muslim refugees are being exploited and raped by the army and traffickers. It also points out the bureaucratic system, which fails to deal with refugees' problems and crises. Every government should consider the refugees' problems and try to build a robust system to handle their problems.

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