

# Research on Intergenerational Writing in Contemporary German Immigrant Literature

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With the deepening of globalization, immigration and pluralism have become increasingly common social phenomena. The research of the resulting immigrant literature is an important way to understand the mental journey of immigrant groups and their construction of cultural identity. In the German-speaking area, immigrant literature has gradually taken center stage over the years, becoming an important part of the German language literature, and immigrant writers have also frequently won various literary prizes, which can be described as particularly dazzling. Meanwhile, generations of writers have been thinking about and exploring the intergenerational relationships and differences among immigrant groups in the context of their own experiences. This paper will focus on some outstanding immigrant writers and discuss the intergenerational writing in immigrant literature by means of their works.

*Keywords:* immigrant literature, immigrant writers, intergenerational writing

## Introduction

At the beginning of the 1950s, with the strong economic rise of the German-speaking countries after the war, all industries experienced varying degrees of labor shortages. In order to solve this problem, they began to introduce a large number of foreign workers. Many writers gradually emerged from these immigrants. They tried to write about the experiences and stories of individuals and groups in the countries of residence, expressing the confusion of immigrants, the complex relationship with their motherland, and the reshaping of their cultural identity. Their writing began to have an impact on the mainstream German literature. Entering the 1980s, “multicultural society” became a hot topic of discussion in the German academic circles. The immigrants gradually expanded from guest workers to various groups, such as international students and refugees. Not only that, the name of “immigrant literature” during this period has also undergone a series of transformations, such as “guest worker literature”, “foreigner literature”, and “cross-cultural writing”.

Today, after generations of development, immigrant writers in the German-speaking area have moved from the edge of the stage to the center of public vision. Due to the different personal experiences, their cultural identity construction and attitudes towards their country of residence and motherland are very different, which are deeply reflected in their works. Not only that, the writers have also consciously or unconsciously thought about the identities of new and old immigrants in their creations, and have conducted various useful explorations on the relationship and differences between the two generations.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Melinda Nadj Abonji, and Saša Stanišić are three famous and influential immigrant writers. Their literary paths and achievements provide valuable materials for the research of the intergenerational writing in immigrant literature.

### **A Dream-Chasing Guest Worker**

Emine Sevgi Özdamar is an outstanding representative of German immigrant writers. She was born in Turkey in 1946. At the age of 19, she went to Berlin as a guest worker and worked in a local factory. She then returned to Istanbul and studied at a drama school. After graduation, she went to Germany again and has been engaged in her drama career in Europe for a long time.

Compared with other immigrant writers from Turkey, Özdamar's literary journey began very late. She started publishing her works in 1986, nearly 20 years after she immigrated to Germany. Among them, what made Özdamar famous was her "Istanbul-Berlin Trilogy", including *The Bridge of the Golden Horn*. After that, Özdamar was awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize and the Kleist Prize. In August 2022, she won the most important literary prize for German language literature—the Georg Büchner Prize.

*The Bridge of the Golden Horn* was praised by Ortrud Gutjahr as an outstanding example of a cross-cultural bildungsroman (2007, p. 124). Set in Berlin, Paris, and Istanbul in the 1960s and 1970s, the novel tells the story of an unknown female Turkish immigrant seeking identity and self-realization in Germany. The 18-year-old girl dreamed of becoming a theater actress and went to Germany to work, but her parents strongly opposed this. After several trips back and forth, she learned German, worked as an interpreter at Siemens, and met a loving Spanish boy in Paris. At this time, her parents called her back to Istanbul, where she went to drama school and actively participated in political movements. After a series of disappointments, she chose to return to Berlin to continue pursuing her dream of theater.

Özdamar divides the novel into two closely connected and complementary parts. In the first part, the original value system of the protagonist gradually collapsed under the impact of the new environment. She began to see Germany as a space to break away from the traditional Turkish patriarchy, and German values began to infiltrate her identity construction (Li, 2019). In the second part, her new, suspended, deregionalized identity construction was confirmed in Istanbul, which was also an important prerequisite for her pursuit of her own value. As a guest worker, she has shaped her own hybrid identity in Germany, forming a self-perception of fluidity between cultures, and this psychological fluidity continued after returning to her motherland (Li, 2019).

The novel reflects Özdamar's thinking about family, generation, and social hierarchy. The two generations attach different importance to traditional values, which is reflected in their attitudes towards the culture of their country of residence and motherland. The socialization process of the first generation of immigrants was mainly completed in their motherland, so they have a stronger identification with their traditional culture and cultural identity. In contrast, the socialization of the second generation was mainly realized in the country of residence, so they naturally speak the language of this country and consciously adapt to the local culture to establish their own identity (Qin, 2005). Getting close to German culture will inevitably mean being alienated from Turkish culture. It can be reflected in the intergenerational relationship within the immigrant group. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist and her Turkish colleagues who had just arrived in Germany were "like three newly hatched chicks" (Özdamar, 1998, p. 54). At this time, they were young, fragile, and extremely dependent on their parents psychologically:

When we three, holding horse meat pancakes in our hands, walked to the other side of the street and passed by the telephone booth, I dared not speak loudly, but spoke softly, for fear that my parents in Istanbul could still hear me. (Özdamar, 1998, p. 33)

This psychological description clearly presents to readers the profound influence of Turkish culture on new immigrants, as well as the intergenerational relationship within traditional Turkish families. As the protagonist interacted more and more with the German society, her old faith gradually began to weaken, which also psychologically widened the distance between her and her parents. The telephone booth she often passed by was no longer a symbol of her connection with family norms, but instead became a link for her to communicate with the outside world. In addition, the difference in cognition between the protagonist and her parents as well as Turkish compatriots also reflects the huge cultural gap between the two countries. In the dormitory of Siemens, the guest workers were still in a “middle state”, deeply trapped in the conflict between Turkish traditions and the modern European value system. Taking the date of a single Turkish woman as an example, the male workers condemned it as an insult to traditional etiquette. They represented the patriarchal authority in Turkish society and treated women as accessories to marriage, so their behavior must be disciplined and their needs must be suppressed. On the road of identity construction in Germany, the protagonist experienced a great change in her heart. In order to integrate into the mainstream, she had to give up some Turkish family concepts and patriarchal social order that ran counter to European individualism.

In short, Özdamar presented the process of constructing a new cultural identity of immigrants in *The Bridge of the Golden Horn* by depicting the conflicts and ideological collisions between immigrants and their parents.

### **Immigrants Seeking Paradise in Switzerland**

Melinda Nadj Abonji is an influential immigrant writer from Vojvodina, Serbia. When she was a little girl, she moved to Switzerland with her parents. After graduating from the Department of History at the University of Zurich, Abonji worked in various jobs, and then tried to write novels in German. Her work *Fly Away, Pigeon* with a strong autobiographical tone was a blockbuster and received favorable reviews. It won two major literary prizes in 2010: the German Book Prize and the Swiss Book Prize. As a result, Abonji also became the first Swiss writer and the first non-German native speaker to win the German Book Prize since its establishment.

The novel is based on her personal experience and revolves around the life of an immigrant family from Serbia, in Zurich, Switzerland. It tells their story from the perspective of the family’s eldest daughter Ildi, and the timeline spans more than 10 years from the death of Tito in the summer of 1980 to the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992.

As a masterpiece of German immigrant literature, *Fly Away, Pigeon* vividly depicts the difficult life of immigrant families in Switzerland, the serious conflicts within the family, the endless longing for relatives in their homeland, the short-lived love, and the deep trauma of the war on the people from multiple dimensions. It successfully presents the tortuous fate and indomitable spirit of individuals and groups in the contemporary immigration tide to readers, revealing the confusion of immigrant groups between two cultures and their hard work for survival, dignity, and respect. At the same time, the novel also vividly portrays the rootlessness of immigrants and the sanctimoniousness of the Swiss society.

In the Cafeteria Mondial, Ildi’s personal experience clearly revealed the ubiquitous contempt and hatred for immigrants. When she was cleaning the bathroom and saw the toilet seat soiled by the extreme right-wingers and

the walls smeared like clowns, she thought it was a declaration of war. Here, the author also revealed the different attitudes of two generations of immigrants when facing provocations. When Ildi told her mother about this, her reaction was:

“This is an isolated incident”, “It won’t happen again”, “We are not treated as human beings here, and we must work hard to win”, “You have to know that we live safely here and run a cafe, so we can’t complain about everything, otherwise we would not be able to stay here long ago”. (Abonji, 2010/2014, p. 219-220 & 225)

Faced with her mother’s fear of fighting back, Ildi learned to defend her rights like the Swiss. Because of her socialization in Switzerland, Ildi’s values diverged from those of her parents. Gradually, she learned to fight for her rights like the Swiss. She did not want to be “dumb” and just wanted to be treated like a human being, so she chose to walk to the police station and write big words on the town square with compressed cream. This was her protest in the way of a child.

By portraying the image of Ildi, a new generation of immigrants, and the differences between two generations, Abonji showed that although young immigrants mastered the languages of both countries and were familiar with two cultures, they were still deeply tormented by loneliness in their hearts and could not understand the unconditional tolerance of the previous generation for survival. Therefore, even if they were greatly satisfied materially, they were still squeezed by the two cultures. No matter where they were, they were like rootless duckweed and could not have any sense of belonging. If Switzerland was the paradise in the hearts of countless immigrants, then where was the paradise for Ildi?

### **Where You Come From?**

Saša Stanišić is a rising star in the contemporary German immigrant literature. He was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a socialist republic of the former Yugoslavia, in 1978. When he was young, Stanišić and his family had to leave their hometown and flee to Heidelberg, Germany, in order to escape the Bosnian War, and thus began his refugee life.

Compared with his parents, Stanišić quickly adapted to the life in Heidelberg and integrated into the local culture. He studied German in an international school and tried to write works in German. In 1997, he was admitted to Heidelberg University, majoring in German as a foreign language and Slavic languages and literature. It can be said that Stanišić’s unique growth experience has created a miracle in the contemporary German literature: In just over a decade, he has leapt from a 14-year-old refugee who did not even know the German alphabet to an outstanding representative of the new generation of German writers. From the moment he entered the literary world, Stanišić was determined to regard the painful immigrant experience as the background of his literary creation.

After years of hard work, his novel *Where You Come From* with a strong autobiographical tone finally won the German Book Prize in 2019. The jury once commented on him and his work:

Underneath every sentence of this novel lies the unavailable origin, which is also the driving force behind the narrative. It is only available as a fragment, as fiction and as a game with possibilities of history. The author amazes readers with his great imagination and releases them from the conventions of chronological narrative, realism and single form... (German Book Prize, 2019)

In this novel of memories mixed with fiction, the author explored his origin through fragmentary narration. Homi Bhabha believes that ethnic minorities or immigrants are in the interstitial and intermediate “Third Space”.

Their identities are mixed and they are also engraved with double inscriptions as “pedagogical objects” and “performative subjects” (Bhabha, 1990). The protagonist’s memories of his motherland were a display of Yugoslav culture, and at the same time, it told the living conditions of immigrants in Germany from his perspective. The discipline of marginalized ethnic groups by German culture was reflected in the repeated questioning of the protagonist by the airport customs about his Slavic name, the harsh treatment of him by the immigration administration for his application for naturalization, and the fact that he and other refugee friends had to live in the officially designated area Emmertsgrund. This was also the real reproduction of the closed and deviated heterogeneous space in Foucault’s spatial theory that disciplines marginalized ethnic groups (Yang, 2021). But it was this kind of personal discrimination and exclusion that made the protagonist begin to resist his identity as a Yugoslav and a refugee, and at the same time inspired his inner resistance to the German authority.

In any case, after experiencing these disciplines, the protagonist chose and successfully integrated into the mainstream society, and “my Heidelberg” was the best proof. On the contrary, the old generation in the novel took a different path. Homi Bhabha (1994) believed:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (p. 37)

In this novel, a necessary condition for the protagonist to integrate into the new environment is to master German. The teacher praised him in his remedial-class report card: “Stanišić has no trouble learning the language. He grasps things quickly and is confident using what he’s learned in new contexts” (Stanišić, 2019/2021, p. 160).

This also paved the way for him to write his own story and conduct a narrative of immigration. However, his parents gave up the attempt to re-socialize in Germany. They never mastered German. Lacking sufficient language and labor skills, they could only do marginal jobs. Such great pressure made them stay away from the mainstream society for a long time. After missing the opportunity to integrate, they became the loneliest strangers in spirit. The destinies of the two generations are self-evident. The protagonist found a job that was closely related to his studies and could support himself, and finally became a German citizen. On the contrary, his parents had to leave this country after years of wandering and start a new refugee life on the other side of the Atlantic.

### **Conclusion**

From Özdama to Abonji and Stanišić, immigrant writers wrote about the ups and downs of each generation of immigrants in the German-speaking area, expressed the identity confusion and emotional demands of immigrants, and reproduced the conflicts and collisions between generations in literature. Just as immigrants play an increasingly important role, make significant contributions to the development of the place where they live, and gradually become equal members of a pluralistic society, their works are increasingly valued and become a new window for studying social issues of immigrants. From the works of these writers, it is not difficult to find that immigrants of the young generation are embracing the mainstream society with a more open attitude and looking at complex social issues from the perspective of new Germans. Compared with their parents, they have stepped out of the closed family space, confidently pursue the rights of new citizens, and play the role of an intermediary between the two cultures. When people think that under the background of globalization and European integration, the pluralism of the German-speaking area seems to be an irreversible trend, the rise of

populism in recent years has sounded the alarm again. Under such a new situation, the immigrant writers emerging in the German-speaking area will inevitably continue to write new stories about their group and present new intergenerational relationships to readers. This will also be a topic worth exploring in the future study of German immigrant literature.

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