

THE VILLAGE INDIAN: EXPLORING TRAUMA THROUGH LINGUISTIC JOURNEYS

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Language plays a crucial role in the narrative of a refugee, representing both a barrier and a means of connection. The narrator's struggle to communicate in a new language underscores the sense of alienation and displacement that often accompanies the refugee experience. This linguistic challenge reflects a broader struggle to reconcile one's identity and past. Trauma in the novel, *The Village Indian* is depicted through the protagonist's experiences and memories of violence, loss, and displacement. The impact of these traumatic experiences is mirrored in his difficulties with language and integration, highlighting how deeply trauma can affect one's ability to navigate and connect in a new world. The study attempts to shed light on the complex relationship between personal history, language, and the ongoing struggles of refugees who are forced to rebuild their lives amidst the scars of their past.

KEYWORDS: Language, Trauma, Integration, Displacement, Memory

The Village Indian (2007), Abbas Khider's inaugural novel is infused with autobiographical facets of his own flight from Iraq to Germany. The protagonist's journey across different locations results in a fragmented collection of memories, offering an incomplete account of their travels. All these memories are characterized by pervasive violence and trauma. The collection of different versions of his narrative, each depicting the same trauma, highlights the numerous ways in which marginalized individuals endure pain. Rasul Hamid, the protagonist of the novel chronicles his experiences through memories that bear witness to the scars etched into his body. The narrative descriptions of Rasul's story disorient the readers, mirroring the fragmented nature of memory recall. This invites readers to reconsider a linear timeline, instead of focusing on how he constructs his narrative as testimony. The act of narrating, achieved in *The Village Indian* via narrative is to "produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth" (Caruth 17). Rasul presents his narrative as validation of refugee truth, emphasizing the significance of testimony by its depiction of traumatic events.

The novel, serving as both testimony and memory integrates a frame narrative and an embedded narrative structure. Within the frame story an Iraqi man comes across an envelope bearing Arabic script while abroad a train from Berlin to Munich. Intrigued, he reads the contents of the envelope: a manuscript detailing the journey of a refugee from Baghdad Iraq to Germany. Despite being different individuals, the narrator in the frame story and Rasul Hamid in the main narrative are often mistaken for each other with the several instances where they appear to be one and the same. Morgan argues, the main narrator, Rasul, within the manuscript, focuses on recounting the drama he has lived through and depicts his growth as a writer through the act of narration. He testifies to his memories and often presents them in fragmented episodes, characteristic of someone who has experienced trauma. This interplay between memory and discourse of trauma is central to the narrative (44).

The protagonist Rasul encounters fragmented accounts of his origins which challenges his own sense of belonging. The Title, *Der False Inder (The False Indian)*, initially introduces this theme. In his self – representation, Rasul is initially portrayed as an Iraqi with potential Indian or Gypsy heritage. In this Arabic manuscript, he redefines himself through the ambiguity of his appearance, his uncertain ethnicity, and his genuine connection to Iraq. He tells his readers "I have several possible explanations for my dark skin: the rulers' fire and the Baghdad sun, the heat of the kitchen and the stone-oven embers. They're all responsible for the fact that I go through life with brown skin, the darkest black hair and dark eyes" (8). Various accounts seeking to define his existence underscore the critical role of storytelling as a counter to the silencing of individuals like Rasul, whose identity is continually denied. As Morgan observes, Rasul's sense of not belonging is shaped by his appearance marking him as transcultural and transnational. He also perceives that Rasul's feeling of alienation did not begin with his refugee status; instead, the novel reveals that experiences of both belonging and estrangement occur both before and during his time as a refugee (50). The darker skin complexion of him distinguishes him from those around him, leading others to view him as an outsider within the community. "I remain so different that people tend to doubt my Iraqi Origins [...]as if they 'd seen a ghost" (9), he describes his state of abjection. Rasul's physical appearance underscores his failure to produce identification,

as he is repeatedly confronted by police officers who challenge the legitimacy of his Iraqi background, frequently asking him:

What do Iraqis like to eat? What songs are sung to Iraqi Children? Which are the best-known Iraqi tribes? Only when I'd answered them all correctly and my Iraqi origins had been proven beyond doubt was, I permitted to carry on (9).

Carolin Muller contends Rasul's struggles to find solace in his uncertain identity by repeatedly replaying the different narratives of his life recounted to him by loved ones, seeking to anchor himself in a definitive sense of who he is and where he belongs(5)

Corina Stan asserts that instead of depicting a migrant or refugee, Khider has crafted a passant in Rasul Hamid, "an ideal figure of humanity to come" (299). She provides an explanation that the passerby is ideal as he or she "does not take for granted one's home... learns to leave here and there, always both present and detached from a place, but not indifferent" (299). The name Rasul, which means "messenger" in Arabic and is associated with the prophet Muhammad in Islam, carries significance in the narrative. Despite Rasul not being portrayed as an angel or religious leader, the reader infers that Khider deliberately chose this name for his protagonist to underscore not only the importance of Rasul's message in the story but also the significance of his identity and actions.

Rasul, the character must detach from his existing identity to craft a new narrative, a revised version that can be communicated to others through storytelling. As the messenger of his own story, Rasul adapts and presents himself with his environment. The need to construct a version of himself that others can comprehend places him on another threshold of self-discovery and adaptation. The process of constructing one's identity through language perpetuates his liminal state. He appears stuck in an endless cycle of indefinite abjectivity, where every attempt to define himself only deepens his feeling of alienation. To navigate this predicament, he reverts to writing as a transformative ritual, using it to transcend liminality and forge a path toward self-realization. "Writing was connected to my inner life__ it was constantly compelling me to write" (19). Writing serves not only as a means of expression for him but also as a trap that leads him into unfamiliar and peripheral territories (Muller 6).

In Baghdad, where I was born and grew up, I had to hide everything. During Saddam's rule, a single word was enough to cost you your life. That's why I used symbols to write down all kinds of things. I made up my own alphabet with Roman and Arabic letters, patterns [...] to find the worst fate imaginable awaiting me- my father had become Saddamist. (21 - 22).

A common feature of all traumatic experiences is "the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs" and the traumatic experience causes "a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory" (Caruth 7). For Rasul, writing is a form of empowerment and self-control allows him to demonstrate residence in the face of adversity such as forced displacement, lost memories and vanished writings. As Morgan says, the language of Arabic and German presents challenges in recalling memories and expressing thoughts through writing (40). Rasul opts to navigate these linguistic boundaries by composing his narrative in German rather than Arabic. By writing in German, he allies himself with Germans' enduring literary tradition when questioned about his decision to write in German rather than Arabic. Khider highlights his links both with German and Arabic in 2015 interview:

I was in Germany during the Iraq War. I was very preoccupied with the situation in my country and wanted to say something about it, but somehow, I could not do that in Arabic. But German gave me the possibility, and since then it has been my new language. The German language has a long literary tradition. Of course, it is difficult to write in German when you don't know what has already been written in that language. I had links both with Arabic and with German. I see an advantage in this mixture, in terms of both content and form (Ammar, Interview 2015).

Morgan argues that Khider's narrative technique and stylistic characteristics evoke trauma as he wrestles with his sense of self positioned auto-fiction. Khider's novel blurs the distinction between lived experience and fiction to depict the refugee's journey. While predominantly chronological, the novel also employs a non-linear and fragmented narrative style typically associated with testimonial discourse, reflecting the challenge of narrating traumatic events (37). A migrant is born translated. As one flees, one must always introduce and explain oneself while trying to stay

out of danger; the person encountered might be a generous soul, or a callous informant. A migrant's life is lived in permanent interpellation (Stan 294). Rasul's writings witness to the memories and trauma he has endured. Rasul asks

But What does all that mean? All the wars, rebellions, disasters---- and inhuman exertions required by an escape. The stars on- epaulettes fates that determined my life.? Are they just individual incidents in an exciting, never-ending story—to put behind you, like a childhood illness? [...] I'm still hanging on the cross (135).

He likens his suffering to that of Jesus and even calls himself a suffering Christ.

His experience of transitioning into refugeehood following his escape from Iraq as a political refugee demonstrates that writing as a path to self-discovery and creating honest depictions of one's circumstances can be deceptive and carries consequences. As a refugee, he lacks the means to procure paper, a necessary resource for engaging in self-expression and creative production. Jopi Nyman argues that refugee writing constitutes a distinct genre characterized by its unique themes, perspectives and narrative styles, reflecting the experiences and challenges faced by refugees. "Journeying and problematic adaptation home, trauma and recuperation, limited subjectivity and lack of agency" (12). Rasul not only preserves the past through his writing but also claims to enhance it. When recalling a painful event, he has the power to rewrite it to make it more beautiful or, at the very least, less distressing. This admission of both preserving and beautifying prompts readers to question Rasul's reliability as a narrator. If Rasul alters or obscures facts to make his past more palatable, his account cannot be regarded as entirely factual. This situation forces readers to confront the challenge of evaluating refugee testimonies through a lens of measurable and verifiable storytelling. The concept of truth and its role within power dynamics becomes evident. Rasul's ability to alter his past grants him a semblance of control over his life, a control he did not possess in the actual events.

Rasul's approach to language reveals its pivotal role in expressing dimensions of his identity that his body can't communicate. Despite the threats of danger and imprisonment, writing becomes both a critical tool and a punishable offense, allowing him to assert himself in oppressive settings. Despite the risk of endangerment and imprisonment, writing serves as both a perilous endeavour and a potent means for Rasul to articulate himself within oppressive conditions. Rasul's connection to language underscores its capacity to subversively critique Iraq's regime by boldly documenting and employing language. Language possesses a destabilizing power because of its ability to potentially mobilize resistance. Rasul uses storytelling to stay alive in the face of danger and death. Rasul's self-reflexive memory keeping can be seen as a tactic to endure the ongoing transitions between different uncertain phases of his life.

Rasul's self-reflexive practice of preserving memories can be viewed as a strategy to manage and survive the ongoing transitions between different liminal stages in his life.

When I write, I see everything as if for the first time, I try to empathize, to understand a new. I am both the student and the teacher. I teach myself and learn from myself. One day I came up with the mad idea of writing my story. I locked myself in my room, blocked out the external world and plunged deep within to bring, each time, another concealed part of myself to the surface. I discovered myself and the world a new and committed this insight to paper (19).

Rasul's writing endangers his life and results in his imprisonment in Iraq under Saddam's regime, yet it also provides him a means to express himself within Oppressive conditions. Traveling with his notes and poems, he is compelled to discard, destroy, or leave his work with others, constantly fearing the potential subversive impact his own words might have against him. During the final leg of his journey, at a German refugee facility in Bayreuth, Rasul discovers that the words he left behind had travelled independently through the hands of other refugees. Upon arriving in Bayreuth, Rasul is astonished to find his words once more, this time on the walls of a shared living space. The re-inscription of Rasul's poem onto the walls can be seen as an act of making agency visible amid suffering. By highlighting its narrators and subjects as conveyors of collective trauma, the poem illustrates how Rasul's own trauma becomes understood through its translation. A migrant is born translated (Stan 294). The poem titled "chronicles of Lost Time", reads:

In the seventh wound
I sit beside the graveyards
and await my coffin
that passers- by will carry (60).

Cornia Stan contends the striking image of someone awaiting one's coffin speaks to the profound alienation of a refugee who feels like living dead (293). "In Khider's novels a migrant is always a writer. Not necessarily a published author, but someone who, as a survival tactic, must learn to decipher the signs in one's environment (faces, walls, texts) and communicate with others (graffiti, diaries, shared stories)" (Stan 296). Through his story telling and writing, Rasul documents his traumatic experiences. His work serves as a testament to, and an expose of, the cruelties inflicted on refugees throughout his journey.

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