How You See Us: on Three Myths about Migrant Writing

Saša Stanišić

Panel: Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile (II)
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Migrant, immigrant, intercultural or multicultural literature today (in Germany and elsewhere) is considered a category of literature from authors who write from an aspect coined by at least two cultures, national identities or languages. An “immigrant background” has become a symptom of today’s world, a world suffering from ADHD and a persistent pattern of hyperactivity, as well as from impulsiveness and anger. Wars, social erosion and even environmental issues are creating a chronic condition of permanent diaspora and migration for which no political cure is available, for it can be delivered neither in the cough syrup called fundamentalism nor in the pill called democracy.

In Germany, I carry my ominous immigrant background in my name and my passport, in the little bump on my nose, in my sympathies for food with lots of garlic, but most of all in my past, having fled a civil war and escaped to another country, a different cultural environment, as well as a different educational and political system. I also fled to different aromatic and culinary qualities, to trains that for some delightful reason are named for lakes or scientists or castles, and even to a different way a hair stylist holds the scissors. After all this, I wrote a novel in a language different from the one I learned as I grew my first teeth, and have come across many thoughts on my “migrant” writing in particular and many views on so-called “migrant literature” in general.

While reading works by my fellow migrant authors, I have discovered a number of prejudices about what and how (and what not and how not) fiction written by foreigners is supposed to function. So, for example, my “migrant colleagues” and I don’t appear to have as much in common as some critics and philologists wish we did, making it difficult for them to place us neatly next to one another on a bookshelf (I would argue the color of the novel’s cover has stronger literary quality than our biographical backgrounds). Also, in placing value in the enrichment of literary language, myths are made: an odd urge exists to simplify disturbingly the exoticism of style and technique migrant authors are “brave enough” to “experiment with,” as if this quality is a talent one brings from his homeland. Finally, the most unsettling reflection is granting the migrant worldview (if such a worldview truly exists) too much credit, based only on their having experienced multiculturalism in more depth than having eaten Thai food every second Tuesday.

I will focus on three above-mentioned discrepancies between how media, readers and literary critics would like to view migrant literature, and how I see it from inside this “kind” of writing (remembering that I’ve said already that I don’t believe this “kind” of writing can or should be separated from today’s mainstream national literature or traditions).

Myth 1: Migrant literature is a philological category which stands on its own and thus creates a fruitful anomaly in relation to national literatures
To speak of a single “migrant literature” is simply wrong, because it is wrongly simple. The nature of migration and the level of foreign writers’ integration vary too much to be unified in one category, not to mention their unique biographical backgrounds and differing cultural, religious or social habits. Even these merely outer literary characteristics point to the great diversity of experiences, possible subjects and intellectual influences which in many cases become a part of the text or even make up the text as a whole. The goal of objective judgment is to overcome the fixation on an author’s biography and move to a thematically-oriented view of the work.

A Russian girl of Jewish ancestry comes to Germany, falls in love with a German student, and writes a book about a Russian girl of Jewish ancestry who comes to Germany and falls in love with a German student – a funny, stylistically and structurally “clean” book full of harmless ironic stings mingled with Russian and German clichés.

A Bulgarian, born in Sofia and raised in Kenya, studies at a university in Germany and writes a novel about the nineteenth-century British colonial officer Sir Richard Burton – a vivid, many-voiced portrait of an eccentric traveler and adventurer.

These two examples from current German writing – by authors Lena Gorelik and Ilija Trojanow – (though one could, of course, go backward namedropping endlessly: Heine, Nabokov, Mann, etc.) illustrate that the expression “migrant literature” places a far too clear-cut frame around manifold books linked only by the loose and minor relevant facts of author’s background and social status.

If one must think in categories, one may speak instead in plural, of migrant literatures, and describe new, smaller categories, e.g.: “Literature of Foreign Workers in the 60s”, “German-Turkish Literature” and “Literature of Second-Generation Polish Immigrants of Germanic Origin who in the Late 80s were Bored to Death with being Housewives and Wrote a Novel about their Neighbor’s Chest Hair.” But even that would not suit one of the literature’s major roles: literature as an act of preferably borderless creativity and invention on one side and a game of reference and relation on the other. One must also consider authors who have immigrated or belong to a minority but choose, nonetheless, not to write about migration issues.

That said, I believe that migrant literature can only be effectively discussed by subject and in relation to the literary premises of genre, style, tradition, etc. Discourses about the aesthetic approach to theme or point of view, particularly in the context of national literatures, are much more crucial to the quality of the work and its understanding than the private life of the author can ever be.

In some countries with high immigration rates, like Germany, the minority culture became a constitutive element of the society long ago. Immigrant authors are no longer a marginal phenomenon, but a significant reference point with almost-mainstream qualities (a good thing, because it rids the work of the exotic-bonus). Migrant literatures are not an isle in the sea of
national literature, but a component, both in the depths, where the archaic squids of tradition live, and on the surface, where pop-cultural waves hit the shore.

Myth 2: Migrant literature deals monothematically with migration and multicultural issues. Migrant authors have a closer and thus more interesting perspective on related questions.

Short before coming to Iowa I spoke with a Polish-German author Artur Becker, who just finished his eighth novel. He told me that he circles exclusively around one aesthetic and metaphysical topic: stories set between two cultures. One could easily refer to his Œuvre as the literature of culture syntheses. Other “characteristic” topics for migrant authors are questions of identity, home and crossing cultural boundaries, producing such interesting plots as: “Holy Cow! My daughter wants to marry a German! I'll first live in denial, then teach him that cows are holy and, in the end, after he's learned to say ‘How are you?’ in Hindu and saved my life on the German Autobahn, I'll accept him as my son in law.”

As a matter of fact, most works of migrant authors I have read deal in one way or another with a single (often biographical) experience of migration. This basic statistical observation speaks for itself. But these percentages lead, in my opinion, to overhasty and deficient assumptions about subjects “reserved” for an author with a certain background. Any “good” author should, at any time, be able to write “good” fiction about a child suffering from cancer, a dog with three legs or a dogleg telling a story about a migrant author, all without ever having even talked to a child sick with cancer, without ever owning a dog, or without personally being friends with me. Writing fiction also means inventing worlds which are not part of writer’s own world. Through research, travels, interviews and other methods of approaching the unknown, these experiences are within the reach of any author. Though he can choose not to, any writer can become aware of new aspects of life and, from it, construct the “tellable” by choosing a perspective or a voice that even a writer who stands in middle of the topic might even have overlooked. Personally, I find non-migrant authors trying to get behind the questions “reserved” for migrants equally remarkable.

I'm always keen on reading the second or third book from a migrant author – the one coming after he has told his exile-story. I find it more provocative to witness how someone from one cultural sphere sees his new environment without focusing on the “new.” It is worth every effort to tell an everyday story in the voice of a local German clerk, a love story without the exotic flair of an intercultural embrace, or to tell of a war not being fought in the country from which the author fled.

In order for an author’s work of literary fiction to be significant, being a migrant is as essential as it is to be a guy named Jeff living in a 3000-person town in South Carolina with a 1967 Ford Mustang Coupe parked in your garage. That is to say, it is entirely irrelevant. It doesn’t make a work any more special or any more deserving of a careful reviewed. The quality of the writing.
does not automatically increase because a migrant author survived five wars and tells the world about it. Biographic facts and legends will always appeal to both audiences and critics. I deem them, exciting as they may be, notable only in discussions of biographical non-fiction.

**Myth 3**  
An author who doesn't write in his mother tongue enriches the language he has chosen to write in

Asked, if it's hard to write in a language I learned so late (I was 14), I answer no. It's never late to learn a language, I say, it just eats up more time that would otherwise be spent on fishing trips as you get older. And then I say: There is nothing special about writing in a foreign language as long as you think you can use it in a sufficient and productive way.

For me, writing itself is a foreign language. For every story, for every play, for every new creation, I have to learn a new language: I have to find the narrator's voice, I have to decide on my figure's specific verbal characteristics and I have to learn and keep the rhythm and flow of the whole.

Many authors now writing through that filter of a foreign language had to make, at some point in their career, a choice of which language to use. Never as smart as Nabokov or Kundera, I never even considered the possibility of becoming literarily bilingual. For me, it was merely a pragmatic matter. I picked my "better" language - German.

In one review of my novel, a well-known critic wrote: "Stanišić puts our old German under the oxygen tent!" I, of course, took that as a compliment and bragged a lot about it, as I do now. Still, I am very suspicious when, in terms of literary quality, the fact that an author writes in his second or even third language leads to a more favorable critical judgment, even when the "uncommon" use of linguistic constructs is highlighted, the "exotic" figures and the "rich" vocabulary. Giving a migrant author credit for every little language-game he tries, is (to exaggerate slightly) nothing more than another way to say "Oh, look how well that foreigner learned German." Of course, moving without caution into a second language can lead to beautiful results, through direct translations of phrases and sayings, through structural transformations and rhythmical imitations and even neologisms inspired by the first language. This is a good writing strategy, but only if done in a meaningful and logical way, not just to create a "sound" or a "feeling."

Though critics may find it inconvenient when an author working in a native language (or in his native artistic traditions) exhibits words and images are unusual, fruitful or unique, it is neither impossible nor forbidden for a domestic author to experiment, to produce uncommon linguistic structures or to connect to another folklore. A language is the only country without borders. Anyone can (and should) use the privilege to make a language bigger, better and more beautiful by planting a wordtree there, one never grown before.