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Alwan's Quest of Home: Re-Mapping Heimat and the Nation in Hussain Al-Mozany's *Der Marschländer: Bagdad–Beirut–Berlin*

Yasemin Mohammad

In the last two decades a remarkable number of Turkish-German writers such as Aras Ören, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Zafer Şenocak have formed critical affiliations with an ethno-culturally defined understanding of twentieth- and twenty-first-century German national identity and history and have drawn analogies between Turkish and German collective memory discourses. One of the important questions they explore is whether a transnational memory discourse can be established in Germany and how this would affect German nationalist imagination.¹ Through their critical interrogations these writers attempt to remap a new Turkish-German future and transgress essentialist imagination of identities.

German writers of Arab origin have also made significant contributions lately to the reimagining process of German national identity and history. One of these eminent and prolific writers is the Iraqi-German writer Hussain Al-Mozany (1954), who has published three German novels in the last two decades. In this paper I choose to focus on Al-Mozany's first novel, *Der Marschländer* (1999), to explore the ways he negotiates with the imagination of *Heimat* and the nation in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) of the 1980s. Based on the traumatic life story of a young male protagonist of Shiite origin living in Iraq, Lebanon, and, finally, the FRG, the novel explores Alwan's negotiation of his exile identity and his critical confrontations with the nationalist discourse. What becomes important in this study is Alwan's perceptions and experiences of the small German town Hilter² (located in the Teutoburg Forest), where he seeks asylum. I argue that, by depicting Alwan's interactions between German national-memory discourse and the private memories of German characters, Al-Mozany attempts to transcend a narrow and ethnically homogenous understanding of national memory and opens it up to productive, critical negotiations.

Although there are a significant number of successful German writers, artists, and intellectuals of Arab descent,³ their works have not received enough critical attention

¹ For instance, in Aras Ören's postmodern novel *Unerwarteter Besuch: Auf der Suche nach der Gegenwärtigen Zeit VI* (1997), the anonymous poet-narrator's S-Bahn journey from West to East Berlin, becomes a means for projecting the German proletariat in the Weimar Era, German-Jews, Turkish-Germans, Ottoman-Turks, and East-Germans. While Zafer Şenocak's famous novel *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (1998) is based on the post-1990 experiences of the male protagonist Sascha—whose family shares German, Turkish and Jewish origins—in his recently published Turkish novel *Alman Terbiyesi (Deutsche Schule* 2007), Şenocak forms analogies between Ottoman, Turkish, German, and German-Jewish memory discourses of the early- and mid-twentieth century. Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Seltsame Sterne* negotiates between the memories of Turkish-German immigrants and Jewish-Germans of the past.

² Hilter is a municipality that is in the district of Osnabrück. It is located in Lower Saxony.

³ A large number of German writers of Arab descent come from the Middle East. According to Nina Berman, in Germany “the number of individuals from Arabic-speaking countries, as listed in *Kleines*

and popularity among the German audience.⁴ The pioneers of Arab-German literature in the FRG are considered to be Jusuf Naoum (born in El-Mina, Lebanon), Suleman Taufiq (born in Beirut and grew up in Syria), and Rafik Schami⁵ (born in Damascus, Syria), who started publishing in the late 1970s and garnered attention in the 1980s. These writers, along with Franco Biondi, were the founders of the PoLiKunst association (1980). On the other hand, Adel Karasholi (born in Damascus, Syria) who began publishing poems in the late 1960s, can be considered the pioneer East German-Arab writer. In the last four decades writers such as Salim Alafenisch (born in Negev, Israel to a Bedouin family), Wadi Soudah (born in Nablus, Palestine), and Abbas Khider (born in Baghdad, Iraq) also made important contributions to the German literary scene.

Having encountered political, social, and cultural barriers in his homeland of Iraq in the turbulent period of the 1970s, Hussain Al-Mozany embraced his writing career as a means to transcend imprisoning categorizations and beliefs. Born in Amarah, Southern Iraq (The Iraqi Marshland), Al-Mozany grew up in Baghdad. After leaving Iraq in 1978 as a result of political turbulence, Al-Mozany worked for two years as a journalist in Beirut. During this time, Al-Mozany began to publish his first literary works in Palestinian-Lebanese newspapers and magazines. After coming to Germany in 1980, Al-Mozany's foremost goal became the mastery of the German language, a process he defined as the "sacrifice of his mother tongue."⁶ Al-Mozany studied Arab Studies, Islamic Studies, German Studies, and journalism at the University of Münster and taught at the same university and other language institutes between the years 1993 and 1998. While he published essays and literary pieces in Arabic at the beginning of his career,⁷ Al-Mozany also translated the important literary works of Grass, Musil, and Rilke into Arabic.⁸

In 1999, Al-Mozany published his first German novel, *Der Marschländer*. In 2003 he was awarded the prestigious Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis for his second novel, *Mansur oder der Duft des Abendlandes* (2002), in which he parodies the ethno-cultural understanding of German-citizenship law prior to the year 2000. This was followed by his third novel, *Das Geständnis des Fleischhauers* (2007), which is based on a cold-blooded murder story. Al-Mozany's German novels share thematic and

Lexicon, amounts to about 320,000" (299). While a great number of Moroccans and Tunisians immigrated to Germany as guest workers in the 1960s, in the following decades a large number of students and refugees from the Middle East came to Germany.

⁴ The number of scholarship focusing on the works of Arab-German literature is still scarce compared to the one on Turkish-German literature. In Germany Uta Aifan, and Manar Omar published two book-length studies about Arab-German authors. In the USA, while Iman O. Khalil published several articles on Arab-German literature, Nina Berman discussed the recent situation of German writers of Arab descent in the last chapter of her book *German Literature on the Middle East. Discourses and Practices, 1000–1989*.

⁵ Schami, who is the most widely known and bestselling Arab-German writer, later turned the focus of his works from the guest worker problems in Germany to the interlinking life stories of Muslim and Christian Arabs in Syria. Schami became popular for his use of Arabic storytelling tradition, fairytale elements, and frame-tale techniques.

⁶ In *Parallelwelten* Al-Mozany states, "Immer mehr ergriff nun die fremde Sprache von mir Besitz und verdrängte meine alte Sprache, Stück für Stück, ein eigenartiger Vorgang sinnlich-ästhetischer Verschmelzung fremder und einheimischer Synästhesien" (15).

⁷ In 1996, Al-Mozany's first collection of Arabic stories, whose German title is *Herbst der Städte*, was published by Al-Kamel-Verlag. In 2004 Al-Mozany's second collection of Arabic stories entitled *Wächter des Verborgenen Imams* was published.

⁸ Some of the important German works that Al-Mozany translated into Arabic are Nicolas Born's *Die Fälschung*, Günter Grass' *Die Blechtrommel*, Robert Musil's *Drei Frauen*, and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*.

structural similarities in that they focus on the identity dilemmas of exiled Iraqi male protagonists in their home country, the Middle East, and Germany as a result of their experiences of social, cultural, and religious discrimination. Cultural hybridity does not always empower the protagonists and is critically interrogated in his novels.

In my analysis of *Der Marschländer* I take the recent theoretical discussions of intellectuals such as Leslie Adelson and Andreas Huyssen as guiding principles. These scholars have focused on the necessity of transcending the framework of the Oriental and Occidental world divide in the interpretation of works written by German writers of Turkish origin. (I contend that their arguments are relevant for the works of German writers of Arab origin as well.) Adelson, who defines Turkish-German literature as “Orte des Umdenkens,” posits an important question: “If the still emergent literature of Turkish migration functions as a technology of localization in Germany today, what could it mean, beyond simplistic appeals for inclusion, to say that this literature incorporates itself into the historical culture of Germany, a country undergoing rapid change?” (9). It is pivotal for Adelson to depict the ways this literature challenges the homogenous ethno-cultural imagination of German history, culture, and the nation. For Adelson immigrants writers do not necessarily recuperate past losses, but through a new imaginative language they rework “cultural matter from which historical narrative is fashioned and forged” (14). As a result, they also try to form a shared future history.

In a similar way, Huyssen is critical of the European host nations for their exclusion of millions of migrants from their historiography. Focusing on the complex relationship between diasporic and national memory he states, “The question here raised for the memory debate is simply this: is it possible or even desirable for a diasporic community to migrate into the history of the host nation? How does such a temporal migration, as it were, affect diasporic memory itself?” (154). Huyssen challenges the traditional understanding of diaspora as linked to roots, soil, and kinship—therefore representing a state of loss. Rather he wants to see it as “one that denaturalizes its notions of memory and culture and takes account of its changing relationship to the equally changing world of the national” (151). While national memory presents itself as “natural, authentic, coherent, and homogenous,” diasporic memory is “cut off, hybrid, displaced, split” (152). For Huyssen, the structure of diasporic memory carries an affinity to the very structure of memory, which is “is always based on a temporal displacement between the act of remembrance and the content of that which is remembered, an act of *recherche* rather than recuperation” (152). As a result, diasporic memory has the potential to transcend the exclusionist tendencies, erasures, and silences in the national memory discourse.

I propose that in *Der Marschländer*, Al-Mozany also portrays the complex relationship between diasporic and national memory. The protagonist Alwan’s perception of the German nationalist imagination of the 1980s and 1990s is formed through a critical vision. Alwan’s relations to German national memory are shaped by his traumatic memories of Shiite discrimination in Iraq, his involvement in the Iraqi Communist Party, and his negative experiences as an asylum seeker. As a result, through Alwan’s problematic experiences in the German town of Hilter, the reader is invited to reconsider and remap the topographies of the collective historical imagination of *Heimat*, German Romanticism, and the Second World War.

Narrated through a third-person perspective with a narrow focus on the inner world of the Southern Iraqi male protagonist Alwan, *Der Marschländer* is based on his quest for self-understanding as an exile. His experiences are shaped by his travels to Baghdad, Lebanon, East and West Germany in the turbulent period of the 1970s and

early 1980s. Having left Iraq for Lebanon at the beginning of the 1980s because of his refusal to fight in the bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Alwan experiences a similar traumatic period amidst the Lebanese Civil War. Encountering meaningless torture and slaughter in the name of narrow conceptualizations of religion, ethnicity, and the nation, Alwan gains a pessimistic and depressive attitude. Having lost his trust in the idea of nation, especially in the Middle Eastern context, Alwan decides to go to Europe as an asylum seeker. Immersed in the writings of thinkers such as Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, Alwan chooses the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a residence where he can learn more about Marxism. He supposes that ethnic, religious, and racial affiliations do not play an important role in the GDR's nationalist imagination. As a result, equipped with a false Yemeni passport, he travels to East Berlin in the fall of 1982. However he quickly becomes disillusioned with both the coldness of the local population and the unwillingness of fellow Marxist Iraqi immigrants to help him.⁹ Consequently, he decides that his only hope of survival is to move to West Germany.

Yet, life in the Federal Republic of Germany of the 1980s is imprisoning for Alwan. His worst fear comes true when he realizes that the nationalist imagination is informed by ethno-culturalist barriers. As an Arab man, with weak language knowledge and a dark complexion, Alwan is approached by the Germans with prejudice or treated as a non-entity. His fellow countrymen, on the other hand, engrossed in their own traumas and everyday problems, cannot provide him with emotional support. While he is determined to meet new people, improve his language skills, and familiarize himself with the culture, Alwan finds no interlocutors. His distortion is exacerbated by his status as an asylum seeker, which hinders him from finding a decent job, travelling freely, or getting a promising education.¹⁰ Despite his hopeful mood at the beginning of his arrival, he is slowly dragged to the brink of madness as a result of social and cultural alienation.

Alwan's Impressions of Hilter and the Local Community

While *Der Marschländer* does not explicitly deal with the political and social debates of the 1980s regarding the asylum seekers, it reflects on the underlying reasons behind the national identity crisis during this period from an exile protagonist's point of view. It does this through its implicit criticism of the narrow

⁹ Only a short part of the novel concerns Alwan's experiences in the GDR. The novel focuses mainly on Alwan's dilemmas as an asylum seeker in the FRG.

¹⁰ Alwan's negative experiences in the FRG might be related to the economic deterioration in 1979 and increasing asylum numbers, as a result of which the presence of non-German immigrants and refugees became a controversial topic. According to Sanna Inthorn, "While in the 1970s political rhetoric in (West) Germany drew largely on economic considerations to imagine non-German immigrants as problematic other, in the 1980s the political debate on 'foreigners' was opened to explicitly ethno-cultural rhetoric" (66). Due to the lenient asylum laws in Germany and the political turbulence in the Middle East and Turkey, a great number of asylum seekers escaped to Germany between the late 1970s and early 1980s. This caused important transformations in the asylum law. For instance, "in 1978, a law for the acceleration of asylum proceedings came into effect which restricted the possibilities of appeal. In 1980, a second change to the law for acceleration replaced the recognition juries at the BAFI by single adjudicators, and restricted the mobility of rejected asylum seekers to one federal state (Bundesland)" (Bosswick 45). Furthermore, "in the same year the Federal Labor Office decided to deny asylum seekers work permits during the first year of stay" (Bosswick 45). This period was later extended to five years. Violent attacks against asylum seekers and refugees increased during this period. The situation deteriorated further with the publication of the Heidelberg Manifesto on March 4 1982.

conceptualization of *Heimat* and its ironic negotiation with a romantic/organic imagination of the nation, which was embraced by conservative segments of society. Alwan's tragicomic confrontations with the romantic German national imagination begin right after his transfer to a hotel in Hilter. Accustomed to living in big cities such as Baghdad and Beirut, Alwan considers his allocation to Hilter almost as a punishment. On a metaphorical level, Alwan's negative feelings about the town might also be connected to its conjuring up images from the National Socialist past. The narrator also implies this when he considers the name Hilter as "verkehrt" (120). Not only does Hilter bring forth images of the Third Reich and the Holocaust because of its association with Hitler, but it also carries importance in German national imagination since it is located in the Teutoburg Forest. The forest is believed to be the sacred ground where an alliance of German tribes under the leadership of the German hero Arminius (later called Hermann) destroyed three Roman legions in AD 9, leading to their independence from Roman serfdom. The prominent Roman historian Tacitus lengthily described Arminius' courage in his *Germania* (written around AD 98), and set the tone for future generations. In the nineteenth century, Tacitus became an inspirational force behind the German romantic nationalist movement.¹¹ In the twentieth century the National Socialist regime used Arminius's struggle as a symbol of German racial superiority in an attempt to incite hatred against foreign influences in the culture. Filled with the contradictory memory traces of a valorized past and the horrors of National Socialism, the space of Hilter reflects both the constructive and dark aspects of nationalism.

Although nearly four decades have passed since the end of WWII, Alwan still has to confront the closed ethno-cultural and linguistic barriers of the local society in Hilter. When he arrives in the town, Alwan is not provided guidance by local authorities. Nobody is interested in teaching him German, introducing him to the local community, or listening to his story. As opposed to the inhabitants of Alwan's hometown, people do not initiate a conversation or show hospitality in Hilter. The bank clerk, for example, who pays Alwan his benefit, looks at Alwan in a reproachful, unfriendly way. On the other hand, another member of the community treats Alwan like a child by telling him to buy toilet paper, soap, and a comb and always to keep himself clean. Alwan is also warned not to leave the vicinities of Hilter, since the police might arrest him. Despite these difficulties, Alwan, at first, does not predict the alienation and disillusionment that he will experience in the town.

Alwan arrives at Christmas time when the town is enlivened by the Christmas market and immersed in dazzling Christmas lights and decorations. The inhabitants of the town, with their nice houses, cars, and attire, form a sharp contrast to the lifestyle of Marsh Arabs and the lower-class inhabitants of Baghdad. In the narrator's words, "So und nicht anders hatte sich Alwan eine wohlhabende deutsche Stadt vorgestellt. Frauen in dicken Mänteln, Männer mit warmen Mützen, Kinder, die vor Angst und Freude im Karussell schrien. Es war eine wohlgeordnete und zufriedene Welt" (15). Having been afflicted by the political struggles and social inequality in Iraq and Lebanon, Alwan yearns for a peaceful life in Hilter and become a community member: "Wie er da so durch die Straßen mit den gemütlichen, kleinen Läden lief,

¹¹ Koshar states, "Between 1750 and 1850, approximately two hundred poems and operas used the Hermann theme. The patriotic movement of 1830, spurred by Prussia's role in an alliance against Napoleonic armies, enhanced Hermann's symbolic capital even more for educated German speakers" (37). In August 1875, a monument was dedicated to Hermann as a national shrine in Teutoburg Forest.

mit seinem langen, schwarzen Bart, der sein Gesicht verbarg, und den steifen Blicken, die er zur Seite warf, gehörte er, wenn auch heimlich, dazu. Er hatte zwar nicht gefragt, nicht um Erlaubnis gebeten, trotzdem kam das Gefühl der Zusammengehörigkeit von innen, von ganz allein" (15).

While Alwan cannot communicate with the people on the street—who seem to be engrossed in a cocoon-like existence—he decides to take his chance in a local bar. Unfortunately, his attempts at communicating in broken English end in failure. When people inquire after his reasons for coming to Germany, he mistakenly states that he wants to fight against the German people. (Alwan, in fact, fights against his own burdens from the past.) Although he tries to clarify his mistake when his words are translated, the locals look at him with a critical gaze. Nobody offers him another chance to rephrase his statement in order to understand correctly why Alwan came to Hilter, despite his attempts to smile in a friendly manner. One person even jostles him and threatens to punch him.¹²

In the face of this misunderstanding and disinterest, Alwan decides to walk alone in the snowy night. In his perception of Hilter, the color blue takes dominance. While the town seems to be "blauschimmernd" (9), the snow also seems azure blue and white. The dominant blue image might, on a metaphorical level, reflect Alwan's longing, homesickness, or sorrow. The moon also seems "abgesondert, allein und verlassen" (9), which projects Alwan's current feelings. The next day Alwan decides to return to the bar once more and apologize to the man for the misunderstanding; however, he cannot find him. The other people in the bar do not pay attention to him: "Die dörflichen Leute waren, wie Alwan sich vorstellte, viel zu sehr mit sich selbst beschäftigt, sie rauchten, grinnten unbekümmert, lachten und schrien; sie hatten einfach zu viel zu tun, um auch nur im geringsten auf seine Sorgen und seine Entschuldigung zu achten" (11). The seeming serenity and contentment of these people begins to look suspicious to Alwan:

Alwan wunderte sich über den glatten Verlauf ihrer Gespräche, über die Gelassenheit, die Freude, die die Leute aus dem Dorf in dieser dunklen, kalten Bar zu empfinden schienen. Er fragte sich, ob diese Freude und offensichtliche Zufriedenheit echt waren, ob sie wohl natürlich oder eher eine Art Zurschaustellung oder gar Verdrängung waren. [...] Wie glücklich mußten all diese Leute sein, die von der Welt nichts wußten oder wissen wollten, die so ausgeglichen und bestimmt wirkten, als ob sie ihrem Endziel nahe wären. Oder waren sie bloß lahm, betäubt?" (11–12).

The people's disinterested attitude towards world events and their suspicious approach to outsiders seems incomprehensible to Alwan, who receives strength from his multiple affiliations and a more engaged outlook on world affairs.

¹² This incident, in fact, bears similarities to Alwan's negative experiences in Baghdad when he was a child. His family moved there from the marshlands of Southern Iraq in order to have a better income. However, when Alwan's father died at a young age, he had to start working and help his mother. This was a traumatic time for Alwan because he experienced cultural and linguistic discrimination. When he was selling lottery tickets in the rich neighborhoods of Baghdad, several residents made fun of him because of his thick southern Iraqi accent. One day a drunk man turned his anger toward him and attacked him.

Alwan's Experiences in the Teutoburg Forest

In the following parts of the Hilter episode, Al-Mozany unpacks the underlying causes behind the cultural and social boundaries against foreigners in the Germany of 1980s, which are not solely limited to Hilter. The novel represents an ethno-cultural/organic conceptualization of the nation, which can be traced back to the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century¹³, as the main barrier against Alwan's integration to society. This becomes obvious in the parodic attitude of the narrator, especially toward the Romantics' association of German national identity with the forest. It seems that after his failed attempts at integration, Alwan also naively believes that he can become a member of the nation if he immerses himself in nature. After Alwan resides in the town center of Hilter for a couple of months in disillusionment, he starts living with an old farmer couple. Their old house lies at the end of a narrow street on the outskirts of Hilter, surrounded by a small forest. One of the interesting remarks of the narrator is his designation of this forest space as "das reine deutsche Herz" (19), and his ironic claim that Alwan can become an authentic German as a consequence of his residency here. He states,

Der Wald war zu dieser Zeit in vollem Laub, von einem üppig leuchtenden Grün. Regentropfen rannen sichtbar die harten, nackten Zweige herunter. [...] Man konnte sich fragen, warum sich die Leute ausgerechnet diese einsame hügelige Gegend zum Leben ausgesucht hatten. Doch solche Fragen stellte wohl nur der städtische Mensch; das Ursprüngliche und das Natürliche waren einsam und vergessen. Man erkannte hier, wie die Jahreszeiten sich aneinanderreiheten, sich gegenseitig und in allem Einvernehmen ablösten; man war hier mit den Bäumen, den Vögeln und dem Unkraut vertraut, man wuchs Tag für Tag wild mit der Natur. [...] Er würde hier rasch deutsch reden können, deutsch sehen, deutsch atmen und deutsch singen, im Wald, auf dem Feld und in den weiten, ausgedehnten farbenfrohen Wiesen... (19)

The narrator implies that Alwan's becoming German depends on his formation of close emotional ties to the Teutoburg Forest, rather than his forming voluntary ties with the state institutions and the society. As a result of his stay in the forest, Alwan might undergo a complete transformation in his perception of everyday reality and the world, which might also erase the traces of his former identity.

The narrator's association of Germanness with immersion into the wild nature of the forest brings forth images of the *Heimat* discourse. As Alon Confino states, "Heimat always depicted the nation as a community within nature and in harmony with nature. Trees, fruits, gardens, brooks, hills and the earth were made part of the representation of nature" (46). Indeed, *Waldbewußtsein* became a defining characteristic of the German nation for the *völkisch* thinkers, especially after the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ While in discourses prior to the eighteenth

¹³ Romantics' understanding of nations and national identity was particularistic. As opposed to being based on a legal contract by the will of the individuals, the nation was seen as an organism leading its life according to natural laws and possessing a spirit of the people, which was named as the *Volksggeist* and *Nationalgeist*. Inspired by the Herderian ideal, romantics considered each nation as a unique cultural, linguistic, and ethnic unity that absorbed the individual self of its members. The members of the national community were bound together by a myth of common origin and shared a culture.

¹⁴ In Imort's words, "During the first half of the twentieth century [...] German public discourses were replete with ethnic or *völkisch* interpretations that presented forest-mindedness not as a learned cultural

century the forest was associated with darkness, evil, and sorcery, in the late eighteenth century these images began to change. For some of the romantic thinkers, such as Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, and Schlegel Brothers, the wild and disharmonious nature of the forest became the very ground where individuals could commune with God and reach sublimity. Through the works of Ernst Moritz Arndt,¹⁵ Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, Heinrich Kleist, Casper David Friedrich, and the Brothers Grimm, the image of the forest began to reflect the core of national identity. Confronted with Napoleonic invasion, these writers searched for a common symbol that would unite Germans. Tacitus, who in his *Germania* associated the barbaric and freedom-loving nature of Germans with the forest, became an inspirational force for them.

The forest's association with the nation was also disseminated by the works of social scientists. The most influential among them in the nineteenth century was the cultural historian Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897). Riehl supported a romanticist understanding of the nation and considered industrialization and urbanization as threats to the rootedness of the community. He insistently pleaded for the protection of the forest, since it “kept the pulse” of the national life “beating warmly and happily” (50). He stated, “In the contrast between forest land and arable land we see the most natural and elementary precondition for Germany's social diversity, that plenitude of unique qualities in which our nation's strong powers of rejuvenation lie concealed.” (50). Riehl's utilization of the forest symbolism also gained anti-Semitic qualities since he idealized the forest dwellers and peasantry in opposition to the wandering Jews who lived in the cities. Riehl became an inspirational force for many *völkisch* movements in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Weimar Germany, ultra-nationalist groups perpetuated the biological association of the nation with the forest through their ritualistic activities.¹⁶ The Third Reich, by developing the blood and soil ideology, took the forest imagery to its extreme.¹⁷

Turning to the 1980s and 1990s, the nature discourse was not only taken up by the Green Party, but also, surprisingly perhaps, by right-wing environmentalists who were alarmed by the increasing numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers. In Jonathan Olsen's words, “asylum seekers were conceptualized as sources of dirt, filth, and pollution who threatened to overwhelm and destroy Germany's natural and social environment” (127). Conceptualizing the German nation and people as an “eco-system,” many right-wing, conservative politicians and intellectuals argued for the

pattern, but as a national characteristic of the Germans that was supposedly the result of two thousand years of coevolution between forest and people” (55).

¹⁵ One of the important shapers of an organic understanding of German nationalism was Arndt, who fought for the protection of the forest. “In 1820, in an appeal for the national cultivation of the forests, he had warned that the axe that was put to the tree was in danger of becoming an axe that was ‘put to the entire nation’” (Radkau 217).

¹⁶ In the 1920s, one of the biggest ritualistic activities took place around the Hermannsdenkmal. “In 1925 50,000 young men in warrior costumes marched through the woods to Hermannsdenkmal, in a celebration organized by Jungdeutschenorden (Order of Young Germans) and Stahlhelm (Steel Helmet)” (Hayman 108).

¹⁷ In 1934, Dauerwald forestry (back-to-nature forestry) became the official doctrine as a result of Hermann Göring's special interest in forestry. The basic idea in this principle was the management of the whole forest organism rather than individual trees. While an entire stand could not be cut, selected trees were cut on a continual basis. For the Nazis the forest became a natural example for their imagination of German community: “Like the sustainable forest, the national community was supposedly an eternal collective in which the individual worked toward the greater good but was ultimately dispensable” (Imort 72). This ideology was also disseminated in the semi-documentary *Ewiger Wald* (1936), in which the two-thousand-year history of the German Volk was reflected through events that emerged in the forest.

transformation of the asylum law since they thought that the carrying capacity of the nation was overburdened.

Alwan and the Rural German Couple

In the following parts of the Hilter episode, Al-Mozany perpetuates his parodic attitude against the ethno-culturalist understanding of the nation by depicting Alwan's education by an old German farming couple. The novel implies that Alwan's integration might be successful only through a symbolic rebirth in the forest, which will be supported by his upbringing by authentic Germans. That Al-Mozany parodies romantic descriptions of German rural community in *Heimat* literature becomes apparent from the superficial depiction of the couple who appear almost like stock characters. The narrator does not even disclose the name of the farmer woman, which might indicate the unequal gender dynamics in the *Heimat* discourse: "Die alte, beleibte Bäuerin und Herrin des Hauses war Alwan auf Anhieb angenehm. [...] Sie benahm sich fast überschwenglich freundlich, verlangte aber auch Respekt: Man sollte seine Schuhe nicht vor die Tür stellen, sonntags keine Wäsche aufhängen, die Haushaltsgeräte, vor allem den Staubsauger sauber und geräuschlos halten und so weiter" (19). On the other hand, the narrator describes the husband, Hans, as follows: "Stattlich, breitschultrig und sehr ruhig. Wie alle Leute hier war er Bauer, und so wie alle hatte auch er den Krieg mitgemacht, war verwundet worden und dann in russische Kriegsgefangenschaft greten" (20). While the first description foregrounds the old woman's association with the private realm, the second description emphasizes Hans's public role as a farmer and former soldier. By informing the reader about Hans's controversial past, which introduces the topic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the narrator introduces a critical perspective to the *Heimat* discussion, which I will discuss in the proceeding part of the essay.

Another symbolic inhabitant of the house is the yellow-orange canary bird named Hans, which sings all day long. While Hans or Hansi is a common name given to canary birds in Germany, its having the same name as the farmer might point to a metaphor. One way the imagery of birds has been used in literature is to represent the human soul.¹⁸ The canary bird might stand for the imprisoned soul of the farmer Hans, who feels trapped or imprisoned by his traumatic memories of the war. The canary's singing might bring forth images of the indoctrination of the German youth to romantic German nationalism at the beginning of the century. Between 1900 and 1920 numerous back-to-nature movements appeared in Germany that cherished *völkisch* attributes. The *Wandervogel* (1901) was one of these prominent youth movements, the overarching aim of which was to awaken the German nationalist spirit among the young. *Wandervogel* groups would take trips into the German countryside where they hiked, camped, sang songs, and tried to associate themselves with nature.¹⁹ While the movement had no "overarching political coloring [...] there were powerful *völkisch* undercurrents within it, and it has been estimated that by the end of the First World War more than one-third of the *Wandervogel* groups could be placed on the extreme right of the political spectrum" (Olsen 64). The singing of the canary might stand for Hans's invocation of his memories of youth and also his

¹⁸ For detailed information read Beryl Rowland's *Birds with Human Souls*.

¹⁹ The *Wandervogel* held rites of Germanic origin where they celebrated their heroic ancestors. They also reviewed many folk songs, which they believed united them through their sharing of emotions.

stories of victimization. This might result in his disregard for, or blindness towards, his deeds as a *Wehrmacht* soldier.

During his stay with this old couple, Alwan metaphorically experiences his childhood once more through learning German and he miraculously seems to understand “the German soul”. The first word that the farmer woman teaches Alwan is *singen*, which might metaphorically point to Alwan's indoctrination to a romantic/organic understanding of German national character. As a result, Alwan undergoes a miraculous transformation in the one-year period and seems to develop a unique relationship to the isolated forest landscape where the farmhouse is situated. The narrator states that before living with the couple Alwan could not differentiate between *Geist* and *Seele*, and he was not familiar with concepts such as *Charakter*, *Moral*, and *Sinnlichkeit* (21). Now, however, he has a deeper understanding of them: “Die deutsche melancholische, unruhige Seele, die sich aus Rebellion, Dichtung und Musik zusammensetzte und die dann durch die seltsame, einzigartige Natur geschliffen worden war, in diesem scheinbar offenen, in Wahrheit jedoch verschlossenen Nordteil der Erde, began er eben erst zu erahnen” (21).

Through his unique relationship to the landscape and the German couple, a *Heimat* feeling seems to awaken in Alwan, which, however, will not last for a long time. The narrator states, “Das alte, abseits gelegene Bauernhaus mit seinen netten Bewohnern ließ Alwan Geborgenheit und Vertrauen fühlen, wenn auch nur für kurze Zeit. Er fand plötzlich das, was ihm die ganze Zeit gefehlt hatte, die gute, bodenständige, aber gleichzeitig schlichte Seele bei diesem alten Ehepaar” (20). For Alwan the easily perceived peace and modesty that shines from this idealised couple's faces becomes an indicator of this soul. It is interesting to see that in this short passage the narrator's choice of words to describe Alwan's feelings and the soul conjure up images of *Heimat* discourse. The German ideal of *Geborgenheit* denotes the safety and protection one might feel at a specific place or with a specific person. It is associated with concepts such as *Schutz*, *Sicherheit*, *Vertrauen* and *Wärme*. *Geborgenheit* has usually been related to the concept of German *Heimat*, where one also feels sheltered and at home. The adjective *bodenständig* also has the meanings of *einheimisch*, *heimatsverbunden*, and *in der Heimat verwurzelt*. The adjective *schlicht* can be interpreted as *bloß* and *rein* in this context. These attributes imply the rootedness, simplicity, and authenticity of the soul which, in a kitschy way, is embodied by this old couple living in the heart of the forest. Nevertheless, Alwan's idealized time of happiness doesn't last for a long time, since he begins to question the supposed peace and harmony embodied by this couple.

Alwan's Confrontation with the Private Memories of Hans

In the proceeding parts of the same chapter Alwan seems to get over his naiveté and depict a more suspicious attitude regarding *Heimat* imagination. He thinks that sharing some of the character traits of famous German philosophers, musicians, and poets might cause feelings of greatness in Germans. Nevertheless, all of a sudden he remembers his discussion with the old farmer man who used to be a soldier in Russia during the WWII. He asks himself, “Aber was hatte der nette Bauer seinerzeit in Rußland gemacht, als er ertappt wurde?” (21), which is a key moment in the novel.

In Alwan's dialogues with the old farmer, one of the important topics that comes up is the problematic relationship between German collective memory and private and family memory. In the 1950s, after the return of the German expellees and POWs, the collective memory discourse focused on German suffering and loss. In

Robert Moeller's words, "Indeed, tales of persecution carried into West Germany by POWs and those driven out of eastern Europe by the Red Army provided a way for West Germans [...] to assert that they understood what others had suffered because they had suffered no less themselves" (4–5). Over the course of the 1960s, emphasis shifted to the Nazi atrocities and collective guilt in the public discourse. Especially, the student movements in 1968 raised the public's attention to the continuities between the Nazi Era and the Federal Republic. The discourse on German victimization resurfaced during the "Historians' Dispute" and "Bitburg Controversy" in the mid 1980s depicting the tensions in the institutionalization and homogenization of public memory. In the years following German Unification the debates about the exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1945*, the Walter-Bubis affair and the Berlin Holocaust memorial brought up public attention on Nazi crimes once more. In an interesting way, the results of the research "Tradierung von Geschichtsbewusstsein"²⁰ in year 2000 depicted that, "while public memory is dominated by images of Nazi crimes, private and family memory predominantly communicate experiences of suffering, hardship and heroism" (Schmitz 4).

In the novel although nearly four decades have passed since the end of WWII, Hans also still chooses to tell Alwan a story of his victimhood during WWII. The narrator states: "Ein russischer Soldat war zu ihm geeilt und hatte versucht, mit einem Bajonett den Ehering von Hans' Finger abzustechen, aber Hans erwachte im letzten Moment und gab dem Russen seinen Ehering." (20). This is the only story Hans tells about WWII. We do not learn, for instance, about his relationship with the Jewish-Germans and what his ideological stance was. Alwan also does not ask him questions about that period, but he keeps thinking about this traumatic story. Later on, with Alwan's open-ended question²¹, the chapter leaves it to the reader's imagination to conceptualize an answer. A possible answer might reveal Hans as a perpetrator or perpetuate his victimhood.

For Alwan, who, through his traumatic experiences in Iraq and Lebanon, knows the difficulty of clearly separating perpetrator and victim roles, Hans's story is not satisfying. When he was young and naïve, Alwan also acted as a perpetrator in Iraq and informed the government about the identities of several members of the Communist Party who had been critical of the regime. While he did not know the consequences of his action back then, he felt extremely guilty when those members disappeared. After that horrible occurrence, Alwan decided not to support any political groups in the future. Maybe because of these traumatic experiences Alwan does not ask Hans what he did in Russia during the war. He might be afraid to confront his own historical burdens or perhaps he does not want to offend the friendly Hans. All in all, the open-ended question challenges the reader to critically engage with his/her own notion of *Heimat* discourse and its all too often unprobed tensions with the collective and the personal memory discourse.

Alwan and German Unification

²⁰ This extensive research project, which was conducted between the years 1997–2000 was organized by the Psychological Institute of the University of Hanover and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation. The research examined how the stories of National Socialism and Holocaust were transferred from one generation into the other. For detailed information read '*Opa war kein Nazi*'. *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall.

²¹ "Aber was hatte der nette Bauer seinerzeit in Rußland gemacht, als er ertappt wurde?" (21)

In the last part of the novel, the narrator alludes to one of the other important watersheds of German national imagination—the 1990 Unification—which triggers troublesome memories among German minorities. Alwan, who becomes a witness to this event, cannot share the happiness of the crowds, since he feels himself to be a stranger to the German nation: “Aber gerade das, was den einen Freude bescherte, wurde den anderen zu unerträglichem Leid. Im Maße der Wiedervereinigung war Alwan innerlich gespalten. Die große Geschichte lief unbemerkt an ihm vorbei.” (184). Although Alwan has lived in Germany for several years and speaks German fluently, he feels isolated and useless. He is still not allowed to work because of his asylum status and he doesn't have German friends. He feels betrayed by his ex-German girlfriend and her family, who had a condescending attitude towards his ethnic and cultural affiliation. Furthermore, he witnesses the desperate situation of his fellow countrymen who also feel like outsiders. As a result, Germany's celebration of the Unification becomes a suffocating experience for Alwan: “Ein besiegt Araber. Er packte seinen Kopf mit beiden Händen, lehnte sich an eine Mauerfassade und schnappte nach Luft wie ein erstickender Fisch, dann sank er langsam nieder. Halb bewußtlos hockte er sich auf den verdreckten, kalten Boden [...]” (184). In this tragic moment Alwan remembers his mother's last letter from Iraq in which she states her sorrow for not seeing Alwan for a very long time. She thinks that Alwan became a stranger to her, which on a metaphorical level might represent Alwan's distance from the Iraqi nation as well. Alwan's loneliness results in a heavy depression that leads to his suicide in the end. This pessimistic ending, which teems with images of suffocation, trauma, and helplessness, incites the German reader to think critically about the possible consequences of a segregationist nationalist imagination in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Alwan can be considered the embodiment of those twenty-first century asylum seekers and refugees of Middle Eastern heritage whose lives are marked by constant fear and expulsion in the wake of the traumas they have experienced. These individuals can no longer be treated as undesired non-entities who stain the purity and harmony of the German nation. Al-Mozany, through his cosmopolitan interventions, invites his German readers to renegotiate the relationship between their private memories and German collective memory and form multidirectional connections between their own memories and the minorities' in the country. This also holds true for the minority populations in Germany who should be willing to contribute to a cosmopolitan memory culture rather than clinging to a competitive memory discourse. Despite the melancholic end, I contend that the novel forms an open-ended dialogue with the readers through its dialogic structure that aims at the dissolution of nationalist barriers.

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