

The Migrant as the Protagonist of the 20th Century: A Comparative Analysis of Four Contemporary Authors

Jutta Weingarten

Abstract:

In *Migration and Literature* Søren Frank argues against a restriction of the concept ‘migration’ to authorial-biographical approaches to literature, and for the development of ‘migration literature’ in opposition to the former ‘migrant literature’. He analyses four contemporary novelists — Grass, Kundera, Rushdie and Kjærstad — and shows how a wider conceptualisation of migration helps to reflect upon its thematic and formal roles in his readings of the novels. In comparing four authors from different countries and with different personal experiences of migration, Frank offers a wide-ranging insight into the pervasive influence of the social phenomenon of migration on the aesthetics of literature.

How to cite:

Weingarten, Jutta: „The Migrant as the Protagonist of the 20th Century: A Comparative Analysis of Four Contemporary Authors [Review on: Frank, Søren: *Migration and Literature*. Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad. New York: Palgrave, 2008.]“. In: *KULT_online* 23 (2010).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2010.521>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

The Migrant as the Protagonist of the 20th Century: A Comparative Analysis of Four Contemporary Authors

Jutta Weingarten

Frank, Søren: *Migration and Literature*. Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 248 p., hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-230-60828-3

Like no other, the 20th century is characterised by large-scale migration across the globe. Two world wars, processes of decolonisation, and the emergence of totalitarian regimes have changed the perception and understanding of concepts such as identity, belonging and home (cf. p.1). Bringing about waves of migrants, refugees and exiles alike, these historical and social events have made the migrant the protagonist of the 20th century. Naturally, the phenomenon of migration has influenced the different national literatures as much as postcolonial literatures. In *Migration and Literature* Søren Frank reasons for a new conceptualisation of migration that moves beyond looking at the individual authorial-biographic background. Therefore, Frank suggests a change of terminology from ‘migrant literature’, which focuses too strongly on the role of the author, to the more inclusive term ‘migration literature’, which implicates social processes and intratextual features of migration in novels.

In the “Prolegomena” to his comparative literary analysis Frank designates migration as his conceptual point of departure. Drawing on Erich Auerbach’s concept of *Ansatzpunkt*, he uses migration as a “prism with the necessary ability to link authors or works hitherto not seen in relation to one another” (p. 4) to illuminate four otherwise distinct authors, and to “shed light on much of contemporary literature as it arguably bears traces of migratory thematics and stylistics” (p. 5). Contemporary authors Grass, Kundera, Rushdie and Kjærstad — the only one without personal experience of migration (cf. p. 9) — are studied on the assumption that it is possible to speak of migration literature without necessarily referring only to the author’s life, but rather by focusing on the work’s stylistic and thematic design. Kjærstad, “not a migrant in the traditional sense of the word” (p. 15), is thus included because he represents a “new type of literature that both formally and thematically interbreeds with the increasing number of migrant authors just as his work is clearly shaped by and answers to the new social processes of globalization” (p. 15). The author continues on to argue that migration as a concept bridges the gap between sociology and aesthetics as it relates to both form and theme.

Frank reasons that migration has a strong influence on the structural and thematic level of novels — a point he supports by developing eight functions of migration in fiction, which distinguish “migration literature from other kinds of literature” (p. 17). These functions are either

related to the thematic level, which is characterised by a mimetic logic in that the novel creatively reflects an extratextual and migratory world, or to the stylistic or formal level, which is characterised by a constructivistic logic in that the novel's form reflects and performs intratextual migratory tendencies. The two major categories theme and style, which are not strictly separable from each other, are further differentiated into eight subcategories or criteria, of which some apply directly to the specificity of migration literature and others are viewed as part of a more general development in literature.

On the thematic level the criteria of authorial biography and the biography of characters, as well as the themes nation and nationalism, Europe and European literature, and globalisation can be studied in relation to the genre of migration literature (cf. p. 19). Authorial biography and the biography of characters is, for example, focused upon in the analysis of Grass's *The Tin Drum* (p. 31 ff.). On the basis of his biography, Grass is characterised as a migrant — although he only partly fits Rushdie's definition of a migrant as "a person who has been uprooted from language, place, and culture" (p. 33) — and Oskar, the protagonist of *The Tin Drum*, is found to be in self-chosen exile (cf. p. 44). The second novel to be analysed, *Dog Years*, proves Frank's hypothesis that Grass's writing in the so-called Danzig trilogy is guided by dislocation as the paramount principle of existence (p. 42 ff.), which, in combination with other functions on the stylistic level, such as the narrative form, typifies it as migration literature.

On the stylistic or formal level, the subcategories enunciation, composition and narrative form, and language (cf. p. 20) point out the literary qualities of the migration novel. These criteria are discussed in the chapter on Jan Kjærstad's novels, which problematise the status and position of the narrator through the usage of multiperspectivism (cf. 181 ff.). The multiperspectivism of the novels leaves the reader without a definite centre or authority, a "progressive undermining of the narratorial positions" (p. 185). Describing Kjærstad's work as rhizomatic, Frank picks up on the idea of the rhizome introduced earlier (cf. p. 29) as "the poetics of the fluid work that is constantly migrating and proliferating." Again, the analysis of the stylistic level is further crossed with criteria for the thematic level as, for example, the novels' setting in Norway, which can be characterised as 'glocalized' for "the trilogy contracts the international space at the same time that it expands the national space" (p. 191).

Following the preliminary considerations on migration and the functions of migration in literature, a chapter each is devoted to the novelists and selected works. It is striking, however, that although Frank stresses the novelists' equal importance for this study, beginning with Günter Grass (*The Tin Drum*, *Dog Years*) and continuing on to Milan Kundera (mainly *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Ignorance*) and Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*), the chapters decrease significantly in length, until the chapter on Kjærstad is merely half the length of the one on Grass. This therefore creates the impression that the authors have indeed been prioritised by their work's relevance for this study, leaving Kjærstad to be of least interest to the project. This impression is further augmented by the author's honest statement that he wished to include at least one Scandinavian novelist (cf. p. 177). However, although Kjærstad is not treated with the same

attention as Grass, the novels analysed (*The Seducer*, 1993; *The Conqueror*, 1996; *The Discoverer*, 1999) do confirm Frank's main findings: that migration literature can be described in terms of the simulacrum and the rhizome (p. 28 ff.).

The literary analyses themselves are very convincing. Frank himself tries to qualify his contribution to the research on migration literature, pointing out that it must be imagined as having blurred edges and no absolute lines of demarcation. However, his insight that it is not the presence of all subcategories mentioned, but rather the combination of various criteria which determine the character of the novel and thus its status as migration literature proves his argument. As he succeeds in pointing out the functions, and thus fully demonstrates his argument that migration does work on both the thematic and the stylistic levels, Frank makes a case for defining migration as "oscillatory and inconclusive processes that manifest themselves on different levels in the literary work – for example, in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language, narrative form, and enunciation" (p. 8).

While at first glance the comparison of the four chosen authors seems a daring project, Frank conceptualises his Ansatzpunkt well and manages to broaden the scope of migration on both the formal and thematic levels. Although further subdivision of the Prolegomena would have been helpful for orientation, this does not detract from the author's accomplishment. Frank's approach of incorporating biographical information in the interpretation of the literature where appropriate works well with the novelists chosen. In including an author who does not have a personal migratory background, Frank convincingly argues for expanding the literary designation of migrant literature to migration literature and thus draws attention to the ongoing social processes which find their way into the aesthetics of a 'migration literature'.