

Book review:

**Sandra Vlasta. *Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study*. (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, vol. 187). Leiden/Boston, Brill /Rodopi, 2015, 296 p. [Сандра Властта. Миграционна литература на немски и на английски език. Сравнително изследване.]**

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To begin with the end, Sandra Vlasta has put meaningful motto over the Résumé (and last section) of her monograph *Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study*. It reads as follows: “It is the study itself which is marginal with respect to the phenomena studied”. Words of Iain Chambers, which put in the context could lead us to interesting word association game, and probably have a lot to do with the truth. As for the book of Sandra Vlasta however, her research is anything but marginal, especially considering the shifting of centre and periphery she made visible in the analysed texts. It also falls right into the centre, having in mind the current turbulent times, ongoing European discussion and contradictory migration experience of the Occidental world in recent years.

The title summarizes precisely and clearly the problem and its scope. What follows is a sizable and comprehensive academic survey with coherent terminology and methodology. Conducive is the use of the term ‘migration literature’, taken not so much as texts written by migrant authors, but rather defined as “literature on the topic of migration”, i.e. the definition proposed by Sandra Vlasta in this volume. Hence, as stated by the author herself, this book presents “an analysis of texts on experiences of migration independent of the authors’ personal background”. Moreover, it focuses on the themes and motifs in the texts suggesting that migration literature can be taken as a sub-genre that occurs in various literatures and languages and in miscellaneous cultural and societal contexts. Thus, the study under question contributes to the discussion on terminology with regard to literature in the context of migration but also sets a completely new direction of research in the field of comparative literature. Concerning the methodology Sandra Vlasta chooses a thematic approach and proposes “an intertextual reading of the themes and motifs, interpreted with regard to other literary works as well as with regard to the historical, cultural, and social contexts”. So the author

suggests several themes and motifs, which, according to her, “proved to be the most relevant and most prominent ones for the comparative analysis of the corpus of chosen texts”, namely: language as a theme; identity and the search for identity in literature of migration expressed by cooking, eating, and food; depictions of the new homeland; and global ethnosapes in migration literature, that is, “the creation of an ethnographic network in the texts by means of the locations, the protagonists, the motif of the border and the shifting of centre and periphery”. In addition, being a profound comparative study, this volume takes into account the broader context, i.e. the history of migration in the two relevant national contexts (Austria and Great Britain in this case), the historical processes, and the cultural transformations that formed and somewhat deformed the literary works in question, highlighting their referential (and why not referent?) power. The latter indicates the interdisciplinary attempt of the author, that applies traditional text analysis as well as theoretical approaches from postcolonial studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, history, and memory studies.

The structure of the volume is clear-cut. It consists of five well-balanced sections, a short summary, a detailed appendix containing bio-bibliographical notes on the authors, and a considerable bibliography, divided into primary sources and secondary sources. It is noteworthy that among other merits of the study, it represents undoubtedly comprehensive source of bibliographic data on migrant literature, both in terms of literary works (in the relevant national contexts though) and with regard to theoretical analyses in the field, and even beyond, due to Sandra Vlasta’s interdisciplinary approach.

In the *Introduction* the author lays the foundation for her work, shedding more light on the most recent and substantial research on literature and migration available in German- and English-speaking world, followed by study on literary themes and motifs, terminology, and comparative approach. An overview of some substantial aspects of the factual context – immigration to Great Britain and Austria for instance – puts an end to this introductory chapter.

Subsequently, the first section of the close reading is dedicated to “the theme of language” in the texts. Sandra Vlasta exemplifies her statements through analysis of texts on “experiences of migration” by protagonists originating from Bangladesh, Bulgaria, China, India, Mexico, Russia, and East Asia migrating to Austria, Great Britain, Germany, and the USA, such as Anna Kim’s narrative *Die Bilderspur* [The Trace of Images], and Dimitré Dinev’s *Engelszungen* [Angels’ Tongues]. As stated by the author herself, “the role of the second generation as linguistic and cultural translators is a theme that can be observed in texts on migration independently of the linguistic and cultural context both of the writing process as well as of the narrated migration”. To put it in a nutshell: it is about a whole generation, that in the end of the story found itself at the beginning of it, where “the trace of images” has led it. “The trace of images”, i.e. the self-made language invented also to bridge

the generation gap, turns into a tongue that is no more functioning, in other words into silenced communication. It is about a whole generation, that has lost its “angelic tongue” from behind the Iron Curtain (and why not from the times of the colonial era, although it comes to other authors then), and everything that followed. Losing “angelic tongue”, or that would be the angels’ language from the age of innocence, turns non-verbal speaking into the clearest way of communicating, in other words into silenced communication again. Or simply it is all about a whole generation displaced and “lost in translation”, that has to make a choice in order to keep up with this non-homogeneous already, ever shifting, and accelerating contemporary world on the move.

In the beginning of the next chapter of her volume, Sandra Vlasta quotes E. N. Anderson and his study on eating and culture, where he wrote: “Everyone has to eat in order to survive, therefore everyone in one way or another is occupied with food. Besides these physiological requirements, eating is a cultural practice strongly charged with symbols, messages, and meanings”. This indicates what the subject of the next section would be: namely identity and the search for identity in migration as seen through the prism of food, cooking, and eating. Certainly literary depictions of these notions are heavy with highly symbolic value. However, what is Sandra Vlasta’s genuine discovery here is that, speaking about migration literature, “the necessity for a re-negotiation of identity is often a main topic that is discussed via food and eating”. Accordingly, she analyses several texts: Preethi Nair’s novel *One Hundred Shades of White*, Timothy Mo’s book *Sour Sweet*, and finally in Vladimir Vertlib’s novel *Letzter Wunsch* [Last Wish]. In the end of it Sandra Vlasta summarizes that “the readings reveal common aspects in the texts in English and German: in novels on both Chinese and Indian immigrants in Great Britain as well as in books on Jewish immigrants in Germany, food, cooking, and eating are used to construct the characters’ identity and to negotiate a changing (hybrid) identity in the process of migration”. In other words, food and eating represent a metaphor, which is not an end in itself but reveals certain angle deviation and dispersion of identities being re-negotiated. It is all about identity. Although it is identity’s gustatory dimension that falls into the spotlight. In the words of Terry Eagleton, “one needs an identity in order to feel free to get rid of it. The only thing worse than having an identity is not having one”. Therefore, is with food apparently, especially when one negotiates and re-negotiates one’s identity via such metaphor.

Re-negotiated identities represent somewhat re-placed identities, or at least identities being re-located. Therefore, with the next chapter of the volume, Sandra Vlasta goes into “depiction of the concrete locations of migration, in particular of the new homeland the migrants immigrate to”. In this section, the author analyses Caryl Phillips’ *The Final Passage*, as well as Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, and also Hamid Sadr’s *Gedächtnissekretär* [The Secretary of Memories]. In close reading, Sandra

Vlasta reveals “differences that can be attributed to the different national contexts the protagonists migrate to, and to the respectively varying experiences of migration”. Focusing on the protagonists’ perception of the present and the new homeland, the author manages to sift repeating motifs, such as the weather and climate, traffic, contacts to the locals, etc. Racism is also an issue for the coloured immigrants in Great Britain for instance. Accordingly, the new home is often portrayed in a negative way. Sandra Vlasta perceives a peculiar reciprocity between the various texts: in most of the English ones “the colonial past is present as a background to reference both the new as well as the old homeland”, the past is somewhat rewritten by the present; in the Austrian ones, on the other hand, recent history of the new homeland is often negotiated from the immigrants’ point of view, focused on the past, i.e. present is somewhat rewritten by the past. Regarding the latter, Sandra Vlasta refers to such stories, “which approximate historical events that hitherto have not been thought of as related”, as “touching tales”, borrowing Leslie A. Adelson’s concept. Although the texts set in Austria, tend to stress the individual experience rather than reflecting the immigration history of the country, as “touching tales” they “write and narrate collective cultural memories in a new way and they also contribute to the search for post-national conceptions of communities”. No matter if past is rewriting the present, or present is rewriting the past; no matter if “the stories of migration told are often stories of a (post)colonial migration” connected to historical events, or “touching tales” that refract recent history of the new homeland through the immigrants’ prism, they are always stories of inscription – an act of inscribing “into the history and the present of the new homeland, and becoming part of its collective memory”. With such an act of inscription a certain dichotomy emerges in most of the texts – call it polarisation of motherland’s nature on the one hand, and artificial reality in the new homeland on the other; call it contrast between urban and rural life, if you will, that becomes “one of the greatest differences protagonists feel in the new homeland”; call it polarization between the past, where one always feels at home, and the present, where one is often a stranger. Eventually silenced, re-negotiated and relocated identity brings to light surrogates in the world, the world of surrogates, or simply the surrogate world of a surrogate identity. This is what comes to mind when reading Sandra Vlasta's readings. After all, in a non-homogeneous, ever shifting, and accelerating contemporary world on the move, as ours, everyone is more or less of a migrant – an often silenced, re-negotiated and relocated identity.

Sandra Vlasta builds the final chapter of her study combining several approaches whose focal point becomes Arjun Appadurai’s key concept of the global ethnoscaapes. Appadurai defines ethnoscape as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals”; but also

those who are not moving themselves, and who are increasingly confronted with ethnoscaapes. Thus, the concept of the global ethnoscaapes refers to places that are characterised by migration, i.e. “the (contemporary) global networks the immigrants move and live in”. In this last section, Sandra Vlasta shows how these ethnoscaapes are “described in, as well as constituted by, migration literature”. She visualises both the transnational and transcultural network that is inscribed in migration literature, reading the chosen texts as artistic representations of these networks. As for the texts, there she refers to works by Monica Ali, Imran Ayata, Emecheta Buchi, Dimitré Dinev, Catalin Dorian Florescu, Yadé Kara, Hanif Kureishi, Timothy Mo, Preethi Nair, Caryl Phillips, Hamid Sadr, Sam Selvon, Zadie Smith, Ilija Trojanow, Vladimir Vertlib, and Feridun Zaimoglu. Ethnoscaapes are expressed by the selected locations, protagonists, and the shifting of centre and periphery. The comparative analysis of Sandra Vlasta shows ethnoscaapes as part of migration literature. In the words of Sandra Vlasta: “The locations, or places, where stories are set or that are mentioned in the texts localise intersections of the net-like ethnoscape. The relations between the various places create and visualize the network. Furthermore, the protagonists in the texts are an expression of the heterogeneity that distinguishes ethnoscaapes, and their individual biographies, as characterised by migration, link them with various intersections of the network. Finally, the shifting of centre and periphery, i.e. former centres becoming less important and the former periphery taking centre stage, means that a supposed balance is unmasked as an imbalance and that as a result forces are rearranged. Diachronic elements add yet another level to the ethnoscape with even more intersections and associations.” Finally, locations, protagonists, and even the very corpus of chosen texts are all expressions of the heterogeneity that distinguishes ethnoscaapes. In the age of the prefix *post-*, when everything solid evaporates, and numerous of the important notions begin with *trans-*, “to move” becomes “a stand”. Therefore, Sandra Vlasta comes to the conclusion that “as a genre, migration literature transgresses the borders of national literature, it is transnational, in line with the processes and experiences described in the texts. It is most effectively studied beyond the borders of national literature and hence is a predestined subject of comparative literary studies”.

The book of Sandra Vlasta is highly readable academic study and thus an interesting and useful text for wider range of readers. Perhaps the greatest merit of this volume though is the setting of new directions for further comparative and interdisciplinary studies. And instead of a conclusion let us leave the author to speak for herself: “Finally, migration literature is always a political project also. It is part of a process of newly defining culture and literature, and works towards their transculturalisation and nationalisation. The texts are not only about the presence of immigrants in a new country and their problems and difficulties, but also about the immigrants’ (cultural, societal,

political etc.) participation and their impact. If literature is understood as a means of gaining insight and a better understanding of the world, migration literature can help us to better understand the phenomenon of migration. It can tell us about how people experience migration, be it the first, second, or third generation. It delivers insight into the societal, political, and medial processes involved and the effects they have on people.”