

Andreas Pflitsch

To Fit or Not to Fit. Rabih Alameddine's Novels *Koolaid*s and *I, the Divine*

What the hell am I doing here?
I don't belong here
(Radiohead, *Creep*).

“In America, I fit but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong but I do not fit” (Alameddine 1998: 40). This is how one of many protagonists and narrators in Rabih Alameddine's first novel *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* describes his situation between two different kinds of ‘home’. In the following I want to present some examples of how this author circles the topics of identity, home, homelessness, belonging and fitting.

Alameddine was born in 1959 in Jordan to a family of Lebanese Druze origin. He was raised and educated in Kuwait, in Lebanon, and in England. Today he lives as a painter and a writer in San Francisco and in Beirut. Alameddine writes in English. His first novel, the above quoted *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War*, was published in 1998. It is a non-linear, highly fragmented textual mosaic, a collage without a plot, narrated by a multitude of voices. The AIDS epidemic in America and the Civil War in Lebanon “merge into”, as *Publishers Weekly* put it, “a graphic portrait of two cultures torn from the inside”.

The tone of the novel is laconic, it is very economically written, an almost aphoristic text. “Death comes in many shapes and sizes, but it always comes” (Alameddine 1998: 1), reads its very first sentence. Irrespective of its tragic and even dark content, the novel is enormously humorous. Maybe the best characterization of *Koolaid*s is given by the novel itself: “I wanted to write an endless book of time”, we read in one of the many references **to** the book **in** the book.

It would have no beginning and no end. It would not flow in order. The tenses would make no sense. A book whose first page is almost identical to the last, and all the pages in between are jumbled with an interminable story. A book which would make both Kant and Jung proud. – I was not

able to do it. I would have been copying the master. Borges did it before me (Alameddine 1998: 118).

It was also Borges who “told me historical truth is not what took place; it is what we think took place” (Alameddine 1998: 12).¹ Accordingly, the narrator voices some strange views:

Ronnie was the greatest president in history, right up there on Mount Rushmore.
AIDS is mankind’s greatest plague.
Israel only kills terrorists.
America never bombed Lebanon.
Jesus was straight. Judas and he were just friends. [...] Menachem Begin and Yasser Arafat deserved their Nobels (Alameddine 1998: 12).

Kooloids “issues pronouncements”, wrote Amy Tan in a review, “while pointing out the absurdities of any kind of truth. It contemplates the meaning of death while redefining the meaninglessness of life”.² “Reason”, reads one of these pronouncements, “is only good to mummify reality in moments of calm or analyze its future storms, never to resolve a crisis of the moment” (Alameddine 1998: 106). And another one: “I wonder if being sane means disregarding the chaos that is life, pretending only an infinitesimal segment of it’s reality” (Alameddine 1998: 184).

The parallelization of the two quite different deadly threats, the AIDS-virus and the civil war, is used as an artistic, literary device in more than one scene,³ e.g. when a protagonist is “cleaning out his phonebook [because] he had to erase out the names of a number of friends who have died” of AIDS. He tells his mother about it, and it reminds her of Lebanon at wartime: “In the eighties, I would go through my phone book every year. So many friends died, so many simply moved away, emigrated. The war took a terrible toll” (Alameddine 1998: 31).⁴ To give another example: The same woman writes in her diary:

1 Cf. Alameddine (1998: 59): “Rewriting history is a passion for most Lebanese”.

2 Quoted from the sleeve of the paperback edition of *Kooloids*.

3 Cf. Alameddine (1998: 74): “Addressing a virus, a war, or oneself”; pp. 85, 88, “the good old days” when one did neither know AIDS nor the war; pp. 234sq., about Ronald Reagan: “Lebanon, like AIDS, was hardly ever mentioned by our president”).

4 Cf. also Alameddine (1998: 8).

March 20th, 1976

Dear Diary,

This day is without a doubt the worst day of my life. The shelling was getting closer to our apartment (Alameddine 1998: 5).

Some ten pages later, we read:

September 5th, 1988

Dear Diary,

Today is without doubt the worst day of my life. Samir told me he has the AIDS virus (Alameddine 1998: 16).⁵

Alameddine's definition of Lebanon and the Lebanese turns out pronouncedly laconic:

Lebanon is a piece of land (not a piece of heaven at all – you only have to be in Beirut in the summer) but it's *our* land, *our home* (even if we are not actually living there). It's our Sweet Home and we *love* it. So we are called Lebanese (Alameddine 1998: 183).

Cultural diversity can, it is true, cause feelings of inner conflict, maybe even schizophrenia: "The happiest day in my life was when I got my American citizenship and was able to tear up my Lebanese passport. That was great. Then I got to hate Americans. And I really do" (Alameddine 1998: 243). The reason for this hate is surprisingly simple: "America is the birthplace of *Wheel of Fortune* and I will never forgive it for that" (Alameddine 1998: 243).

Identity can be a prison, a burden which to get rid of can develop into a real life task. The narrator suffers from identity. National clichés and cultural stereotypes haunt him. He becomes possessed with these questions as he rails at different nations like mad:

Something English. That's what I want. I am too tired of America and Americans. Still they are better than the French. I hate the French, probably more than I hate Americans. Such arrogant bastards. [...] But they are better than the Lebanese. The Lebanese are just arrogant. I fucking hate the Lebanese. I hate them. They are so fucked up. They think they are so great, and for what reason? Has there been a single artist of note? A scientist? An athlete? They are so proud of Gibran. Probably the most over-rated writer in history.

5 Cf. Alameddine (1998: 47): "July 4th, 1967 – Dear Diary –, This is without a doubt the worst day of my life. It looks like we have to go back to Beirut. My husband can't take it here in Washington anymore".

Not surprisingly, our hero suffers badly from bitter self-hate:

I tried so hard to rid myself of anything Lebanese. I hate everything Lebanese. But I never could. It seeps through my entire being. The harder I tried, the more it showed up in the unlikeliest of places. But I never gave up. I do not want to be considered a Lebanese. But that is not up to me. [...]
Nothing in my life is up to me (Alameddine 1998: 243sq.).

So far, *Koolaid*s. In the following year of 1999 Alameddine published *The Perv*, a collection of stories (Alameddine 1999),⁶ which was followed in 2002 by his second novel *I, the Divine*, which is subtitled *A Novel in First Chapters*. It is indeed a novel in 43 ‘first’ chapters. Sarah Nour el-Din, the Lebanese-American protagonist, plans to write her memoir, her autobiography. She was named after Sarah Bernhardt, the great actress admired by her grandfather who “considered having met her in person the most important event of his life” (Alameddine 2002: 3). Sarah Bernhardt was known as ‘the Divine Sarah’, “the greatest woman who ever lived” (Alameddine 2002: 77).

Again and again Sarah Nour el-Din begins with the first chapter of what should become her memoir. She tries out different stylistic levels, different modes and genres of writing and even different languages: Two ‘first’ chapters are written in French. Some of the chapters are only a few lines long, others have two pages, ten, twenty or more. There are chapters written in the first person and others in third person. Alameddine also uses sort of ‘fictionalized’ para-texts, such as title-pages, mottos or dedications.

In the forty-third ‘first’ chapter, which is the very last one of Alameddine’s book, Sarah sits in front of her TV, eats ice-cream and states: “I was having trouble writing my memoir, not being able to figure out how to attack it. I had tried different methods, but the memoir parried back expertly” (Alameddine 2002: 306). Sarah failed – and yet the sum of her failing attempts of writing her memoir *is* her memoir.

What seems at first sight to be nothing more than a nice idea, a “structural gimmick”, as *Publishers Weekly* put it, turns out to be a highly effective device for writing a – **post-** or at least a **very** modern – novel, a device for circling the multilayered protagonist, for writing

6 For an interpretation of the story “The Changing Room” (Alameddine 1999: 63-80), cf. Pflitsch (2005).

a biography **not** along chronological lines. As Amy Tan put it: “the structure is literary genius [...] and perfect to the notion of someone reinventing and revising herself”.⁷

Sarah, by reinventing and revising herself, thinks, like the – mainly male – protagonists in *Koolaid*s, a lot about identity and home, belonging and fitting. “Whenever she is in Beirut”, we read, “home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not” (Alameddine 2002: 99). Home, obviously, is not the place to **be**, but the place to **long** for because of **not** being there. **Belonging**, accordingly, describes a state of mind that has overcome the desire of being elsewhere, thus having overcome **longing**. Not being at home means at the same time uprooted; the drawback of freedom seems to be loneliness, as Sarah experiences it in New York:

She feels alone, experiences the solitude of a strange city where no one looks you straight in the eye. She does not feel part of this cool world, free for the first time. But at what price? How can she tell the difference between freedom and unburdening? Is freedom anything more than ignoring responsibilities, than denying duty? [...] In New York, she can disappear. What is the purpose of a city if not to grant the greatest of gifts, anonymity? Beirut offered no refuge from unwavering gazes [...]. But her heart remains there. To survive here, she must hack off a part of herself, chop, chop, chop (Alameddine 2002: 98sq.).

Home and homelessness are always ambivalent in the work of Alameddine. He does not provide simple solutions, but shows the unavoidable complexity of the topic:

I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to assert my individuality and the need to belong to my clan, being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing myself in relationships (Alameddine 2002: 229).

But Alameddine’s novels and stories do not just, as it appears in this passage, deal with suffering from what Samuel Huntington calls the clash of civilizations. They show at the same time the latent advantages of not belonging, of not fitting. When asked about the meaning “belonging” and “fitting” have for his work, Alameddine answered

⁷ Amy Tan, quoted from the sleeve of *I, the Divine* (Alameddine 1998).

that not belonging to society, i.e. having a certain kind of distance to it, is as crucial for his work as it is for each and every work of art.⁸ This leads me to the broader question of fitting and belonging or not fitting and not belonging and the impact this problem has on writing and literature.

In his *Theory of the Novel*, which was published in 1920, Georg Lukács wrote that the form of the novel is like no other genre the expression of a transcendental homelessness.⁹ Lukács, here, is echoing the genuine, archetypal romantic position of Novalis who defined philosophy as “homesickness”, as the desire (or instinct) to be at home everywhere.¹⁰ And Theodor W. Adorno in his *Minima Moralia* formulated that it is part of ethics (or morality) not to be at home at one’s self.¹¹

Except for this general meaning belonging and not belonging has for literature and art, there is another, more concrete dimension of the topic in Alameddine’s novels. In December 2004, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Berlin organized the workshop “ArabAmericas – Literatures without a fixed abode”. The goal of the workshop was to search for adequate intellectual categories for literature that does not fit into concepts such as ‘national literature’ or ‘world literature’. It showed that the often so-called hybrid literature should by no means be confined to lamenting the schizophrenic situation of the exile. In fact, the opposite is true: This kind of literature distinguishes itself by taking a valuable position from the outside, something Ottmar Ette termed *Außerhalbfindlichkeit* (Ette 2004: 229).

From this perspective, we see the peculiar way in which authors who are “writing outside the nation” (Seyhan 2001) deal with identity, individual as well as collective: Elias Abou-Haidar, Nada Awar Jarrar, Dominique Eddé, Zeina B. Ghandour, Hani Hammoud, Tony Hania, Elie-Pierre Sabbag or Sélim Nassib – to name but a few Lebanese

8 Personal conversation, Berlin, Dec. 2004.

9 “[...] die Form des Romans ist, wie keine andere, ein Ausdruck der transzendentalen Obdachlosigkeit” (Lukács 1988: 32).

10 “Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, der Trieb, überall zu Hause zu sein” (quoted in Lukács 1998: 32).

11 “Es gehört zur Moral, nicht bei sich selber zu Hause zu sein” (Adorno 1951: 58).

writers of the younger generation who, living in Morocco, England, France and elsewhere, write in French or in English.¹²

To aptly describe the literature of authors like those mentioned we have to differentiate between various understandings of cultural identity. There is, first, a multicultural, second an intercultural, and third a transcultural identity.¹³ The first and the second refer to concepts of fragmented identities or, to put it in a more positive way, multiple identities, identities of “components”. The multicultural describes a side-by-side situation, the intercultural indicates a dialogue. The established concept of the multicultural and of the intercultural implies that these kinds of “identity” are somewhat outside the norm. They seem to be imperfect, defective, inadequate. The norm is still the ethnically and culturally homogenous nation, while multiculturalism and intercultural relations are the exception, the results of a violation of the norm. Transcultural identity, on the other hand, understands identity as mobile, flexible, having no fixed borders. Transcultural identity is an identity on the move (Ette 2001). Transcultural and transnational literature is not about “establishing a dialogic relation between geographically distinct societies”, but about “exploring the process of production of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces” (Gupta/Ferguson 1992: 14).

We have to overcome seeing transcultural identity as an exception. It is the rule, the normal case. The same, of course, is true for the concept of the nation, for national, international and transnational identities (Pflitsch 2003; 2004b). Each and every identity is unique by definition, it is necessarily and always a mixture. The collective, homogenous identity, be it national or cultural, is fiction. And it is a historically comparatively young construct, which had its heyday under the rule of the nation-paradigm in the 19th and 20th centuries. We have to give up these ideological concepts to see the many forms of transitions, overlaps and movements that constitute reality. The burden of proof has to be reversed. Cultures are by far more ‘mobile’ than

12 Cf. Pflitsch (2004a; 2003) and Neuwirth/Pflitsch (2000).

13 Ette (2001: 13): “Neben ein multikulturelles Nebeneinander und ein interkulturelles Zwischen- und Untereinander ist – und ich meine dies in einem sehr positiven Sinne – ein transkulturelles Durcheinander getreten, in dem sich die verschiedenen Kulturen wechselseitig durchdringen und verändern”.

the established traditional concepts and their vocabulary allow us to express. To put it in a pathetic manner: We are prisoners of a highly ideological discourse.

To come back to Alameddine, it goes without saying that we have first of all to distinguish between author, narrator and protagonists. Whereas his **narrators** and **protagonists** often suffer from their position between two 'cultures,' the **author** shows how these 'cultures' are constructed or fabricated. It becomes clear that Alameddine is not just the product of Lebanon and America or a kind of result of a simple fusion of two cultures or of two national identities.¹⁴ The identity Alameddine is writing about is much more than the sum of its parts. And this is what is shown in his work. Herein lies the value and the merit of this kind of literature. It unmasks the simplistic ideas of identity.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. ([1951] 2001): *Minima Moralia*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Alameddine, Rabih (1998): *Koolaid's. The Art of War*. New York: Picador.
- (1999): *The Perv*. New York: Picador.
- (2002): *I, the Divine. A Novel in First Chapters*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Ette, Ottmar (2001): *Literatur in Bewegung. Raum und Dynamik grenzüberschreitenden Schreibens in Europa und Amerika*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.
- (2004): *ÜberLebenswissen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie*. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos.
- Gupta, Akhil/Ferguson, James (1992): "Beyond 'Culture': Space, identity and the politics of difference". In: *Cultural Anthropology* VII, 1, pp. 6-23.
- Lukács, Georg (1988): *Die Theorie des Romans. Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Form der großen Epik*. Frankfurt/Main: Luchterhand (1st ed. Berlin 1920).
- Majaj, Lisa Suhair (2005): "Of Stories and Storytellers". In: *Saudi Aramco World* LVI, 2, pp. 24-35.
- Neuwirth, Angelika/Pflitsch, Andreas (2000): *Agonie und Aufbruch. Neue libanesishe Prosa*. Beirut: Dergham.

14 In her survey of Arab-American Literature, Lisa Suhair Majaj raised the question, "how 'Arab' and how 'American' are 'Arab-American' writers?" (Majaj 2005: 31).

- Pflitsch, Andreas (2003): "Literatur, grenzenlos. Aspekte transnationalen Schreibens". In: Szyska, Christian/Pannewick, Friederike (eds.): *Crossings and Passages in Genre and Culture*. Wiesbaden: Reichert, pp. 87-120.
- (2004a): "Die libanesische Literatur". In: Arnold, Heinz Ludwig (ed.): *Kritisches Lexikon zur fremdsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. 63rd. ed. München: edition text + kritik.
- (2004b): "Ortspolygamie". In: Neuwirth, Angelika/Pflitsch, Andreas/Winckler, Barbara (eds.): *Arabische Literatur, postmodern*. München: edition text + kritik, pp. 191-201.
- (2005): "'Peter Gabriel left Genesis in the summer of 1975.' Rabih Alameddine über unterschiedliche Unterschiede". In: *Figurationen. Gender – literatur – kultur* 1, pp. 13-22.
- Seyhan, Azade (2001): *Writing outside the Nation*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.