Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

6

Reconstructing Identity Amid Displacement: Analyzing Refugee Experiences Through Abbas Khider's The Village Indian

Archana S.K
Research scholar, University College, Thiruvanthapuram
Page No. 32-38

Received: 17/10/2025 **Reviewed: 20/10/2025** **Accepted:25/10/2025**

Abstract: *Forced migration throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has uprooted countless individuals, resulting in cultural dislocation and identity loss. This paper explores the process of identity reconstruction among refugees, emphasizing how displacement and marginalization reshape personal identity. Drawing on Abbas Khider's semi-autobiographical novel, The Village Indian, this paper examines Rasul Hamid's journey as he navigates identity reconstruction amid societal rejection and cultural alienation. Estranged from both his native and host cultures, Rasul's struggle to establish a coherent identity highlights the ongoing effort required to redefine oneself in unfamiliar environments. As an Iraqi of distinct ethnic appearance, Rasul faces discrimination and exclusion in Baghdad, ultimately compelling him to seek refuge in Germany. Migration, however, only intensifies his identity crisis, forcing him to reconcile cultural assimilation with personal authenticity. His experience reflects the broader impact of ethnic identity and racial prejudice on the refugee experience. Applying identity construction theory, the paper investigates how Rasul's identity evolves through negotiation between social pressures and personal agency. Rasul's journey illustrates the tension between societal acceptance and personal authenticity, a central challenge for refugees reconstructing their identities in foreign contexts. By integrating identity construction theory, this study highlights how ethnicity, migration, and marginalization intersect to influence identity formation, offering insight into the complex realities faced by displaced individuals.*

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Refugee Identity Reconstruction, Discrimination, Cultural Assimilation, Racism, Identity Construction Theory*

Migration disrupts not only geographic belonging but also the very foundation of personal identity. For refugees, the forced movement from familiar environments to foreign societies initiates a profound and often painful process of identity negotiation and reconstruction. As Erik Erikson theorized, identity is shaped through a continuous interplay between internal self-perception and external social expectations - a process made significantly more complex under the pressures of displacement and cultural dislocation. Refugees must navigate new languages, unfamiliar social norms, and systemic barriers while carrying the burden of past traumas and cultural memories. Abbas Khider's semi-autobiographical novel *Der falsche Inder* (*The Village Indian*) compellingly explores these dynamics through the fragmented life story of Rasul Hamid. Blending fiction and personal history, Khider portrays migration not merely as a journey across borders but as an existential struggle for selfhood amid persistent marginalization. Rasul's experiences of racial misidentification, cultural

alienation, and socio-political exclusion reflect broader realities of refugee life, highlighting how displacement fractures and reconfigures the self.

Recent scholarship situates *The Village Indian* within post-migration literature, emphasizing its exploration of hybridity, alienation, and cultural in-betweenness (Schmitz). Rather than depicting assimilation as a linear or inevitable process, Khider emphasizes identity as unstable, fragmented, and perpetually evolving. Rasul's struggles with language barriers, memory loss, and systemic exclusion depict the complex processes through which refugee identities are dismantled and reassembled. Moreover, Khider's use of humor and absurdity challenges reductive, victim-centered portrayals of refugees, instead presenting identity reconstruction as a creative, resilient act (Fassmann). Scholars such as Seyhan further argue that the novel's fractured narrative structure organized through bureaucratic files, fragmented memories, and personal testimonies mirrors Rasul's disrupted sense of self (Seyhan). In Khader's depiction, migration emerges not merely as a physical relocation but as an existential ordeal that forces ongoing identity negotiation within often-hostile environments (Witteborn). *The Village Indian* thus critiques both the authoritarian regimes that produce refugees and the Western bureaucratic systems that perpetuate their marginalization, illustrating how displacement undermines both physical security and psychological continuity.

While much of the existing scholarship has addressed *The Village Indian* within broader frameworks of post-migration literature, there remains a critical gap concerning the specific influence of Germany's socio-political context on Rasul's identity formation. This paper seeks to address that gap by employing Erikson's theory of identity construction to analyse how Rasul negotiates between external social pressures and internal personal agency within Germany's migration landscape. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of refugee identity reconstruction, emphasizing the complex interplay between individual resilience and systemic exclusion.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory posits that identity formation is a lifelong process, structured through a series of stages wherein individuals confront and must resolve specific developmental challenges (Erikson). Particularly relevant is the stage of "identity versus role confusion," typically associated with adolescence but often reactivated during major life transitions. In this stage, individuals seek to establish a stable and coherent sense of self within social and historical contexts. Successful resolution leads to a secure self-concept and a sense of belonging, whereas failure results in confusion, insecurity, and a fragmented identity.

Migration profoundly disrupts this process. Refugees, in particular, face the loss of familiar cultural frameworks while simultaneously navigating exclusionary host societies. This dual displacement intensifies the identity crisis Erikson described, as refugees must renegotiate self-perception in the face of external marginalization and internal dislocation (Schwartz et al.; Suárez-Orozco et al.). However, Erikson's framework also allows for the possibility of positive identity development under challenging circumstances. Migration can foster hybrid, flexible identities that integrate elements from multiple cultural backgrounds, offering opportunities for identity synthesis rather than merely requiring assimilation (Berry). When supported by inclusive community networks, positive peer relationships, and access to socio-economic opportunities, refugees can develop resilient, multicultural identities (Phinney et al.).

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

Rasul's experiences in *The Village Indian* vividly illustrate these tensions. The novel parallels Khider's own biography: born in Baghdad, Khider was arrested at nineteen for distributing anti-government flyers and spent years evading capture before arriving in Germany in 2000 (Höll). Similarly, Rasul endures imprisonment and perilous displacement across multiple countries before finally reaching Germany in search of safety and education. The novel opens with Khider discovering a manuscript titled "Memories" during a train ride to Munich, which recounts Rasul's fragmented life story. Throughout his journey, Rasul's physical appearance repeatedly subjects him to racial misidentification and stereotyping, both in Iraq and abroad:

> The boys in my part of town called me 'The Red Indian' because I looked like the Indians in American cowboy films. At intermediate school, they called me 'Indian' or 'Amitabh Bachchan,' after a famous Indian actor I really did look a little like, a tall, thin, brown fellow. (Khider 9)

Here, skin color functions not merely as a biological characteristic but as a socially constructed marker of difference and exclusion (Gowland & Thompson). Even within his native Baghdad, Rasul's appearance marginalized him, foreshadowing the intensified alienation he would experience in Germany. Thus, visible difference becomes an enduring axis along which Rasul's identity is externally defined, complicating his efforts to construct a cohesive sense of self.

Erikson stated that during youth, caretakers exert the most influence on individuals, planting the seeds of identity. However, as they transition from childhood to adolescence, they begin questioning who they are and where they fit in the world (Yilmaz). This phenomenon is evident in the story of the refugee Rasul. Curious about his origins, Rasul asked his father about his mother, her identity, and who he truly was and his father explained:'Son, he said, 'your real mother's a gypsy. That's why you don't look like your brothers!' (Khider 9) The boys in his neighborhood called him "Indianer," associating him with characters from American cowboy films. His classmates referred to him as "Inder" named after a famous Indian actor, based on his appearance. This constant questioning of identity made Rasul increasingly self-aware of his differences. According to Erikson, identity provides continuity and consistency in one's interactions with others ("self-sameness") and distinguishes oneself from others ("specialness"). It enables independent functioning from others (Tija). However, Rasul's situation lacked this sense of consistency and self-awareness because his identity was constantly scrutinized due to his physical appearance and cultural background.

When Rasul traveled by bus to his hometown of Baghdad, the ticket seller spoke to him in English, but Rasul responded in southern Iraqi slang. The Iraqis stared at him, handed him over to the police, and questioned him to confirm his Iraqi origin. Only after successfully answering their questions was, he allowed to proceed. He encountered similar challenges in Tripoli, Turkey, where locals doubted his origin based on his appearance. In Tunisia, women called him "handsome Indian." Even when he spent time with other Iraqis at a cafe along the promenade, he was met with disbelief about his origins. They accused him of pretending to be something he was not, saying, you cannot be an Iraqi! Your appearance and speech do not match!" This pattern continued even after his journey to Europe. The Arabs called me the' Iraqi Indian', the Europeans simply 'Indian'. I can live, of course, with being a gypsy, an Iraqi, an Indian, an extraterrestrial, even -why not? (Khider17)

Rasul's appearance led officials to mistakenly believe he was of Indian or Pakistani origin rather than Iraqi. During that period, Germany primarily granted asylum to Iraqis fleeing the oppressive regime that governed their country. As a result, individuals from other countries,

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

such as Pakistan or India, were often denied asylum. Rasul's experience exemplifies this bias, as officials assumed he was pretending to be Iraqi to secure asylum status. The officials simply wouldn't believe I was Iraqi- they thought I was an Indian or a Pakistani claiming to be Iraqi to get asylum. A fraud, in other words. (Khider 16) Rasul's physical appearance underscores his failure to produce identification as he is repeatedly confronted by police officers who challenge the legitimacy of his Iraqi background, frequently asking him: What do Iraqis like to eat? What songs are sung to Iraqi Children? Which are the best- known Iraqi tribes? Only when I'd answered them all correctly and my Iraqi origins had been proven beyond doubt was, I permitted to carry on. (Khider 9) Rasul's struggle to establish his identity reflects Erikson's theories about the challenges of developing a consistent and coherent sense of self, especially when external perceptions conflict with one's internal identity.

As Khider emphasized, Iraqis at the time had the right to asylum in Germany because of the dictatorship in their homeland. But many citizens of other countries did not, such as Indians or Pakistanis. (Khider) Rasul's experiences illustrate how refugees are often judged and categorized based on their physical appearance or skin color. This form of racial profiling and prejudice can significantly impact their chances of receiving asylum and create further obstacles during their already challenging journeys.

As a writer, Rasul sought to express himself freely, but he faced severe restrictions. To protect his work from oppressive authorities, particularly under Saddam's regime, he developed a symbolic alphabet composed of Latin and Arabic letters, patterns, and numbers. This encrypted writing system ensured that only he could decipher his works. Exposure would have meant death. Fearing the hierarchical systems that threatened his identity construction, Rasul continued to use this technique even while fleeing to Arab countries. His method of writing became a tool for survival under police scrutiny. Born and raised in Baghdad, Rasul was forced to conceal everything. Under Saddam's regime, the slightest evidence of dissent could lead to death. To avoid detection, Rasul recorded all his thoughts using symbols, creating an entirely new alphabet combining Latin and Arabic characters, patterns, and numbers—undecipherable to anyone else. He continued using this method during his escape to Arab countries to evade police control.

Despite his efforts, the same issues persisted. Outside of school and university, reading and writing were considered criminal acts. As Rasul described: We 've all mutated into creatures of imagination. How else can you explain a state declaring as criminal any act of reading and writing outside the schools and universities? (Khider 22-23) Rasul's father, who held conservative views, also sought to destroy his son's manuscripts. Despite his dedication to writing over a long period, his father attempted to eliminate everything Rasul had produced: My father ended up destroying only the permitted books he'd found in my room. (Khider 22 - 23) This was the greatest challenge Rasul faced in preserving his identity. Even after fleeing to Germany (Munich), where reading and writing were no longer criminalized, he continued to struggle with his writing habits. However, he remained dedicated to his craft. As a refugee in Germany, he noted: Since I have been in Munich, my reading and writing habits have also changed. often, I sit in a café in a town to revise my drafts. (Khider 27) Rasul's journey illustrates how identity construction can be shaped by external pressures, censorship, and personal conflict. Despite immense obstacles, he continued to pursue his writing, demonstrating resilience and creativity in the face of adversity.

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 5 (October 2025)

From the perspective of the protagonist Rasul, the journey of identity reconstruction begins at a young age when he encounters the works of Sadiq, a literary critic and book enthusiast. Attracted to Sadiq's collection, Rasul reads a book for the first time that he never encountered in school. It contains poems by Rasul Gamzatov. Upon reading, Rasul becomes deeply captivated, describing the experience as a spark for his passion for literature:

> The first book I read outside of my texts for school was the one he'd recommended and loaned to me. A translation from Russian – Selected Poems by Rasul Gamzatov. Once I'd read it, the bird immediately got hold of me, the books bird. I read as if possessed. Poetry mainly. And then, one day, I thought of writing my own poems. (Khider 18)

Despite lacking a family tradition of writing—" There was no writer in my family" (Khider)—Rasul resolves to write his own poetry. The theoretical foundations of identity construction suggest that identity is shaped or transformed through interactional, situational, socio-historical, and cultural contexts (Taylor). Bakhtin adds that identity is formed through dialogic interactions involving reading, writing, talking, listening, and engaging with various texts (Seban andTavşanlı,).

Rasul's desire to shape his own identity as a writer leads him to write stories and poems extensively. At first, his writing is an attempt to articulate his inner thoughts and emotions:

> When I write, I see everything as if for the first time, I try to empathize, to understand a new. I am both the student and the teacher. I teach myself and learn from myself. One day I came up with the mad idea of writing my story. I locked myself in my room, blocked out the external world and plunged deep within to bring, each time, another concealed part of myself to the surface. I discovered myself and the world anew and committed this insight to papers. (Khider 19)

Viewing himself as a revolutionary writer, Rasul believes that writing, not violence, has the power to change the world:

> Writing was connected to my inner life- it was constantly compelling me to write. Three phases were to emerge, of which I wasn't at all conscious. To begin with, I simply wrote, thinking that by writing I could capture my feelings in words. Wring was a kind of lightning conductor that would protect me from psychological defeats. If a stroke of fate struck, I wrote and, in doing so, felt such relief you'd have thought the lightning flashing through my soul now streaked across the paper. Then I thought I could change the world by writing. Just like a revolutionary but with a pencil instead of a weapon. (Khider 19)

Rasul's journey illustrates how writing becomes a medium for identity reconstruction, allowing him to express his thoughts, emotions, and beliefs while also asserting his place within a broader literary tradition.

This paper examines the struggle of refugees to reclaim and reconstruct their identities, both in their home countries and in host nations. Conflict, violence, and persecution often force them

to flee, stripping away not only their physical security but also their sense of self. Refugees face discrimination rooted in ethnic differences, particularly skin color, experiencing racism both domestically and abroad. Many are driven to migrate not only by war and violence but also by their distinct ethnic appearances, which mark them as outsiders. Despite these challenges, refugees persist in their journeys, striving to rebuild their identities in unfamiliar environments. *The Village Indian* captures this fragile and ongoing process of identity reconstruction through the lens of refugee experiences. Given these insights, further research could explore how humor and narrative fragmentation serve as tools of survival and self-reinvention in refugee literature. Questions such as "How does The Village Indian challenge traditional representations of refugee victimhood?" and "In what ways does the multilingual, fragmented storytelling reflect the psychological realities of displacement?" could deepen understanding of identity negotiation under forced migration. Additionally, a comparative study with other contemporary refugee narratives could reveal broader patterns of resilience, cultural hybridity, and identity reconstruction in post-migration literature.

Works Cited

1) Ammar, A. "GERMAN IS MY NEW LANGUAGE." *Goethe.de*, Oct. 2014, www.goethe.de/en/kul/lit/20437059.html. Accessed 15 Mar.2025.
2) Berry, John W. "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation." *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5–34. Wiley, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x.
3) Erikson, *Erik H. Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1968.
4) Fassmann, Heinz, et al. *Migration and Mobility in Europe: Trends, Patterns, and Control*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018.
5) Gowland, Rebecca, and Tim Thompson. *Human Identity and Identification*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
6) Höll, W. "Der falsche Inder von Abbas Khider." *SRF*.ch, 19 June 2016, www.srf.ch/audio/hoerspiel/der-falsche-inder-von-abbas-khider?id=10871292.Accessed 12 Mar.2025.
7) Khider, Abbas. *The Village Indian*. Translated by Donal McLaughlin, 4th ed., Seagull Books, 2013.
8) May-Chu, Karin. "Reading Germany, Europe, and the World in Abbas Khider's Novel Ohrfeige." *JSTOR*, 2020, pp. 363–382.Accessed 9 Mar.2025.
9) McLaughlin, D. "Complete Review." *Complete-review.com*, 22 Nov. 2022, www.complete-review.com/reviews/iraq/khidera.htm.Accessed 3Mar.2025
10) Phinney, Jean S., et al. "Ethnic Identity, Immigration, and Well-Being: An Interactional Perspective." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2001, pp. 493–510. Wiley, https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00225.
11) Reitz, Laura. "'Meine eigene Geschichte': Identity Construction Through Reading in Abbas Khider's Der falsche Inder." *TRANSIT*, vol. 13, 2021.
12) Schmitz, Bettina. "Postmigrantische Identitäten und kulturelle Hybridität: Eine Annäherung." *Hybridität und postmigrantische Gesellschaften*, edited by Martina Tißberger, transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 59–74.
13) Schwartz, Seth J., et al. "Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation: Implications for Theory and Research." *American Psychologist*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2010, pp. 237–251. American Psychological Association, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019330.
14) Seban, Demet, and Ömer Faruk Tavşanlı. "Children's Sense of Being a Writer: Identity Construction in Second Grade Writers Workshop." *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 2015, pp. 215–232.
15) Seyhan, Azade. Tales of Crossed Destinies: The Modern Turkish Novel in a Comparative Context. *Modern Language Initiative Books*, Cornell University Press, 2011.

16) Suárez-Orozco, Carola, et al. "Making Up for Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification Among Immigrant Families." *Family Process*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2002, pp. 625–643. Wiley, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2002.00625.x.
17) Taylor, Stephanie. Identity Construction. *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2015, doi:10.1002/9781118611463.wbielsi099.
18) Tija, R. "Links of Adolescents' Identity Development and Relationship with Peers: A Systematic Literature Review." *Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2016, p. 97.
19) Witteborn, S. "Forced Migrants, Emplacement and the Senses of Place: Displacement and Disconnection in Refugee and Immigrant Narratives." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–20.
20) Yilmaz, E. "Identity: Definition, Types, & Examples." *The Psychology Notes Headquarters*, 2022, www.psychologynoteshq.com/identity-definition-types-examples/. Accessed 2 Mar. 2025.