Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
JICS 2026, 1: 34-52
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2026.1417.3

Hässlichkeit/Ugliness (2023) by Moshtari Hilal between Evolutionary Aesthetics and Normalism

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Abstract

Mosthari Hilal is a young visual artist born in Kabul in 1993 and raised in Germany. In 2023, she published her first literary work, which brings together her experiences and reflections on the concept of ugliness. According to her, this concept develops at the boundary between "nature" and "nurture", inextricably linked to both human physiology and the social and cultural dimension. A person's appearance is fundamental to their identity, especially in an image-dominated society such as ours. For an artist like Hilal, the concept of beauty is not just a category imposed from outside, but a dimension that has tormented her internally and informs her entire existence as an artist. Her choice to write a hybrid-genre text—somewhere between a picture book, poetry, essay, and autofiction—demonstrates that this discourse is developed not only in content but also in the form. She selects autofiction and self-centered images as her expressive medium both because it allows her to creatively explore her identity and because it entails a profound reflection on authenticity and the nature of literary mimesis. Given the main characteristics of Hilal's work, this article has two objectives: First, it aims to show how the concepts of beauty and ugliness of Moshtari Hilal are shaped by power dynamics involving gender, postcolonialism, ableism, and today's social-media culture. To grasp the richness of its conceptualisation, it is necessary to consider it against the backdrop of evolutionary and philosophical aesthetics, postcolonial thought and normalism, from which it originated. Secondly, it aims to highlight the formal hybridity of Hilal's text, which consists of poems, images and essayistic passages, and to show its connection with the theme of ugliness.

Keywords: *German culture, Beauty, Ugliness, Autofiction, Postcolonial Aesthetics*

1.Ugliness from the point of view of Evolutionary Aesthetics

Ugliness, which is the title and the central theme of Moshtari Hilal's contemporary literary text, is based on the human sense for the beautiful that allows us to perceive both beauty and ugliness. The first to discuss the sense and role of beauty both in animals and in humans from an evolutionary perspective was Charles Darwin (1981) in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Darwin's study, which is quoted in Hilal's text (Hilal, 2023, p. 117ff), contains hundreds of descriptions of the role of beauty in the animal world, along with several insightful reflections on bodily adornment and human art. Darwin, as a theorist of beauty,

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How to cite this article: Salgaro, M. (2026). *Hässlichkeit/Ugliness* (2023) by Moshtari Hilal between Evolutionary Aesthetics and Normalism. In: *Alma Mater Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies 3:1*, 34-52.

Submitted: 27.09.2025 & **Accepted:** 30.11.2025

notes that ornamental feathers and horns have evolved in some animal species into remarkably striking forms which, in everyday life, are cumbersome and poorly suited as weapons or tools that would contribute to the animal's fitness. These ornamental features—most famously exemplified by the peacock's tail—therefore, do not serve a function in natural selection, already theorized by the great biologist some years earlier in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), but rather in sexual selection. Indeed, such traits are subject to what he calls the *law of beauty*, and serve to attract and impress potential mates during courtship.

Sexual selection in the animal world is governed either by the *law of battle*, characterized by strength and aggressiveness, or by the *law of beauty*, which is based on the aesthetic features of the animals. Darwin clearly expresses a preference for the latter one and the reason for this preference lies in the fact that the *law of beauty* entails a more peaceful and effective form of competition compared to the often brutal nature of the *law of battle* (Darwin, 1981, II, p. 98). Birds, whose aesthetic sense Darwin appears to particularly admire, can, depending on the species, impress the female partner with their plumage, song, nest architecture, or specific movements reminiscent of dance. Bodily ornaments and song typically serve a dual purpose: they act simultaneously as a challenge to rivals and as a means of courting the opposite sex. It is Darwin himself who proposes a link between the sense of beauty in animals and humans. Yet aesthetic sensitivity plays a foundational role not only in evaluating natural bodies, vocal and choreographic arts, and movement in the animal world, but also in the distinctively human appreciation of works of art. Within its scope—where the human and animal dimensions are in constant interplay and differentiation—one particular 'ornament,' which is generally not perceived as such, captured Darwin's attention: bare skin. As he notes, the loss of hair from the hairy skin surface of our ancestors most likely led to the most visible distinction between Homo sapiens and the ape:

> The absence of hair on the body is to a certain extent a secondary sexual character; for in all parts of the world women are less hairy than men. Therefore we may reasonably suspect that this is a character which has been gained through sexual selection. We know that the faces of several species of monkeys, and large surfaces at the posterior end of the body in other species, have been denuded of hair; and this we may safely attribute to sexual selection, for these surfaces are not only vividly coloured, but sometimes, as with the male mandrill and female rhesus, much more vividly in the one sex than in the other. [...] So again with many birds the head and neck have been divested of feathers through sexual selection, for the sake of exhibiting the brightly-coloured skin. (Darwin, 1981, II, p. 376-378)

The hairless surface, which Darwin considers to be especially characteristic of the female sex, serves as a kind of *canvas* upon which the human being can draw and display various forms of self-decoration. Moshtari Hilal questions the glabrous skin explanation offered by the Darwinian sexual selection theory when she asks: "War die sexuelle Selektion eine ausreichende Erklärung für das immer Nackter- und Haarloser-Werden der Menschen?" (Hilal, 2023, p. 117). She notes that just seven years after Darwin's publication of *The Descent of Man*, a Danish doctor developed the diagnostic category of excessive hair: hypertrichosis. The new disease sparked a medical debate about the difference between pathological hair growth and normal hair growth that mainly affected women. As soon as young women exhibited excessive hair, "deutete dies auf eine Störung oder Abnormalität der *evolutionären Entwicklung* hin" (Hilal, 2023, p. 121).

Also, Darwin points out that beauty can give rise to suffering and deprivation. He was particularly fascinated by the travel accounts of explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt, which describe the many forms of bodily adornment practiced by the populations of so-called exotic lands—tattoos, facial coloring, prosthetics, distinctive hairstyles, and bodily piercings: "Hardly any part of the body, which can be unnaturally modified, has escaped. The amount of suffering thus caused must have been extreme, for many of the operations require several years for their completion, so that the idea of their necessity must be imperative." (Darwin, 1981, II, p. 342). Just like the traits governed by the *law of beauty* in the animal world, these ornaments have a single purpose: to impress and to please. As we can observe in the phenomenon of fashion, the human imagination has made it possible to pursue these aims in a prodigious and potentially infinite variety of forms.

According to Winfried Menninghaus, who, in his *Wozu Kunst? Die Ästhetik nach Darwin* (2011), follows in the footsteps of Charles Darwin's reflections on aesthetic taste, the nakedness of the skin is the first ornament of man (Menninghaus, 2011, p. 57). The aesthetic preference for the hairless parts of the human body, which has become consolidated over millennia despite undeniable practical disadvantages—such as the loss of thermal and mechanical protection—has reinforced this trait to the point of an almost complete loss of body hair, particularly in the female body. The eroticization of human skin leads to the tendency that "humans generally treat the entire surface of their bodies as an erogenous zone that can be stimulated through touch (caresses)" (Menninghaus, 2011, p. 58). Darwin does not rule out the possibility that human skin may serve other biological functions; nevertheless, he seeks to demonstrate that it is also the result of an aesthetic preference. We humans are, to use Desmond Morris's (1968) phrase, "the naked ape." The hairless human, as theorized within the classical discourse of the visual arts, corresponds to the hairless human outlined by Darwinian aesthetics from an evolutionary perspective.[2]

By becoming hairless, human skin provided the first surface suitable for giving rise to visual culture. Winfried Menninghaus identifies in makeup and body adornment techniques the ancestors of the visual arts. "Makeup is probably the oldest form of painting. From findings of ochre, we can infer that such practices date back 150,000 years—possibly even more than 250,000 years." (Menninghaus, 2011, p. 66) With these arguments, Menninghaus certainly does not intend to reduce human art to a mere function of sexual selection, for three additional vectors—play, technology, and symbolic thought—are necessary for the evolutionary process of human aesthetics to take shape (Menninghaus, 2011, p. 195ff).

2.Ugliness and the struggle for power

As we have seen, aesthetic perception in the context of sexual selection cannot be separated from a moment of evaluation and competition. This judgment—which, in the animal world, typically falls to the female—carries significant weight, as it determines the reproductive success of a potential sexual partner. It is from this "courtroom" that *Ugliness* by Moshtari Hilal takes its cue: a piece that, within the framework of aesthetic judgment, sides with the

[2] Evolutionary aesthetics has set itself the goal of explaining the human arts and sense of beauty from an evolutionary point of view. The discussion in this field of research has been very lively, and for this reason we limit ourselves to pointing out a few significant texts: Bartalesi 2012; Cometa 2024; Dissanayake 1999; Eibl 2004; Gottschall & Wilson 2005; Mellmann 2006.

losers—those who are defeated in the aesthetic competition. By interrogating the power structures that underlie such judgments, Hilal demands that each individual make their position within the system of beauty explicit. Darwin—who was the first to formulate theses on aesthetic judgment—appears, to her, in a very specific position within this system: he is male, white, and English. This privileged, hegemonic, and Eurocentric perspective becomes apparent, for example, when he—conforming to the conventions of his time—refers to non-Western peoples as "savages." (Darwin, 1981, II, p. 338)

Hilal positions herself at the very opposite pole from the nineteenth-century thinker: to his focus on the "sense of beauty," she opposes an emphasis on "ugliness," already foregrounded in the title of her work. To the male point of view, she prefers an attention to the female body—upon which male beauty standards have been imposed, often through violence.[3] In Hilal's text, the human body—with its flaws and virtues—is no longer viewed through the eyes of the colonizer, but rather through those of the colonized, who endures the stigmatization of their appearance. Moreover, in the play of roles that characterizes courtship and evolutionary aesthetics, she favors—not the elevated and supposedly neutral perspective of Darwin—but the partial, grounded perspective of the defeated.[4] This long-distance confrontation with the English biologist already makes Hilal's text noteworthy. Moshtari Hilal's response to Darwin does not unfold on an exclusively speculative plane. The text's focus on the author herself is evident from the cover, which features, above the title, a faded ID photo of the author. On the first page of the book, she explains: „Dieses Buch handelt vom Sehen und Gesehenwerden. Dieses Buch handelt vom Hass in der Hässlichkeit und vom Abseits und Gegensatz des Schönen. Es beginnt bei mir und endet in uns allen" (Hilal, 2023, p. 1).

The gaze of the other, which questions and unsettles Hilal, reveals two trigger points on her body: her nose and body hair, both perceived as overly pronounced and cumbersome. To understand the reasons behind the discomfort Moshtari Hilal has felt since early childhood, it is useful to recall that Hilal was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and moved to Germany at the age of two, where she still lives today. Her discomfort with her own body, in her perception and reflection, is closely linked to cultural and intercultural issues. To shed light on these, we must briefly return to Darwin who, as we have already noted, addressed human body hair:

> It is remarkable that throughout the world the races which are almost completely destitute of a beard dislike hair on the face and body, and take pains to eradicate them. The Kalmucks are beardless, and they are well known, like the Americans, to pluck out all straggling hairs; and so it is with the Polynesians, some of the Malays, and the Siamese. [...] On the other hand, bearded races admire and greatly value their beards; among the Anglo-Saxons every part of the body, according to their law, had a recognised value; „the loss of the beard being estimated at twenty shillings, while the breaking of a thigh was fixed at only twelve." (Darwin, 1981, II, p. 349)

Darwin, who asserted the transcultural and 'trans-species' nature of the appreciation of beauty, had no difficulty acknowledging the local and cultural peculiarities of fashions and aesthetic customs reported by explorers' travel accounts. From his perspective, the elements considered

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[3] These standards relate to body shape, face, weight, height, and the social pressure they produce drive many to surgically alter them. Hilal does not meet these standards mainly because of her excessive body hair and pronounced nose. For this reason, one of the texts most cited by Hilal is Sander Gilman's (1999), *Making the body beautiful.*

[4] Darwin insists on the transcultural and universal nature of the sense of beauty and of disgust; as Umberto Eco noted, in his essay on *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* "the various movements described as expressive of contempt and disgust appear to be the same across much of the world." (Eco, 2007, p. 16).

beautiful are arbitrary, and therefore no hierarchy can exist among aesthetic tastes. Our contemporary Hilal holds a markedly different view. In line with the theories of Frantz Fanon, she perceives a hierarchy in the evaluation of bodies belonging to non-hegemonic cultures. In 1952, the psychiatrist and anticolonial philosopher Frantz Fanon analyzed the psychological consequences of assimilation in the French colonies in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) (Hilal, 2023, p. 32). The whiteness of the colonizers' skin—who consider themselves beautiful, superior, more reasonable, more perfect, and purer—places the bodies of others in a subordinate position, compelling them to don 'white' uniforms and masks. Fanon's psychoanalyses of colonized patients describe the internalization of white norms permeating every aspect of the body, beginning with the skin. The colonized learn to see themselves 'from within' through the hateful gaze of the colonizer. In a concise formulation, the Afghan-born writer asserts that "Hässlichkeit ist bei Fanon das Trauma, in einem Körper leben zu müssen, den man zu hassen lernt." (Hilal, 2023, p. 33) The consequences of this hierarchy, as already suggested by Fanon's studies, are both political and psychological in nature.[5] In an interview given to an Italian newspaper, Hilal makes the psychological subjugation based on aesthetic and intercultural grounds even more explicit:

> Whether you are in Paris or Karachi, the standard of beauty is the same because it is Paris that imposes it on Karachi, Pakistan, and not the other way around. Therefore, anyone who does not conform to Parisian standards is excluded, deemed ugly and hated. Unfortunately, in Karachi, almost no one can claim to be close to the standards imposed by Paris, and thus the sense of inadequacy grows—the feeling caused by the perception of being ugly. (Serafini, 2024, p. 17)

Against this intercultural and ethnic backdrop, the discourse on beauty becomes a negotiation of the power to impose aesthetic canons and the subjugation of those who receive them. Within this flow of thought, Hilal also revives a term from Marx—"alienation"—which in this new intercultural context acquires new connotations. Originally describing the negative effects of private property and capitalist division of labor on workers, the concept, when observed through Hilal's perspective, seeks to capture the "self-alienation" of the colonized, not only through their economic exploitation but also through their cultural subjugation (Hilal, 2023, p. 33). No one can escape the gaze of the other, and one's identity is constituted in relation to that gaze. The standards of beauty imposed by Western culture are met by only a narrow elite and produce millions of unhappy individuals. Paradoxically, from the perspective of the author of *Ugliness*, it is not the beautiful who profit from this situation, but rather those who create ugliness as a form of exclusion:

> Exklusive Schönheit ist wirksam, weil sie die Nicht-Schönen hervorbringt. Ihre Entwürdigung, ihr Ausschluss, letztlich ihre Entmenschlichung ist der eigentliche Sinn des modernen Schönheitsbegriffs. Die Produktion hässlicher, kranker und abnormaler Körper und die partielle oder absolute Negation des Schönen in den anderen ermöglicht ihre Ausbeutung durch die sogenannte Zivilisation. Die Ausgrenzung und Ausbeutung der vielen wird ermöglicht durch die Verherrlichung der wenigen. (Hilal, 2023, p. 94)

Colonized peoples are subjugated by Western cultural models from which they cannot escape. The 'alienated' colonized individual is left only with the attempt to overcome their sense of inadequacy—arising from the failure of their own body to conform to Western standards—through the imitation of others' outward appearances. The self's body is perceived as an

[5] Fanon cites examples of this self-hatred: "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly" (Fanon, 2008, p. 93).

external entity and thus described in the third person, as Hilal consistently does in her autofiction: "Ich übte mich in Gedanken darin, ihren Körper zu tragen wie eine fremde Haut, die mir gehören sollte. Eine Haut, die ich mir abschaute" (Hilal, 2023, p. 17).

The bodies of white people become a second skin, a "foreign skin" into which one slips because it holds the promise of acceptance and integration into the host society. Hilal's text accumulates numerous examples of these attempts at integration, such as rhinoplasty—an operation widespread both among Iranian women and Black people in the United States—who wish to hide their "colored nose" (Hilal, 2023, p. 56). The discussion of this physical feature becomes a real "nasal analysis" (Hilal, 2023, p. 36), as the ironic title of the second chapter of *Ugliness* reads, permeating Hilal's entire existence and becoming an obsessive thought. Irony is the preferred rhetorical device of the state of alienation because it reveals a suffering interiority. The author's nasal analysis matures through long reflections, beginning with the processing of her childhood traumas: although she is convinced that her father loves his four daughters, he does not cease to remind them how difficult it is to bear their noses. Numerous other examples of body shaming suffered by the author and her sisters are also recounted, both for the shape of their noses and for their pervasive body hair. The "witch's nose" (Hilal, 2023, p. 48) holds a paradoxical status: on one hand, it testifies to descent from the mother (Hilal, 2023, p. 41); on the other, it becomes a trait that, ideally, should not be genetically transmitted to one's children (Hilal, 2023, p. 47). At the end of these painful reflections, the author decides not to undergo surgical alteration of her nose; her sister, however, opts for surgery (Hilal, 2023, p. 41). In support of resistance to surgery, celebrities such as model Bella Hadid and Kim Kardashian's sister are cited, both of whom have regretted their rhinoplasty procedures precisely because they interrupted the continuity with past and future generations (Hilal, 2023, p. 100).[6]

It is a historically significant fact that modern cosmetic surgery was pioneered by the Jewish surgeon Jacques Joseph, the son of a rabbi who lived from 1865 to 1934, who operated on the noses of Jewish patients to remove features stigmatized by the antisemitism of the time (Hilal, 2023, p. 37). In a text that reflects on aesthetic judgment through the lens of intercultural tensions, this origin cannot be dismissed as mere anecdote. "Das Assimilationsversprechen ist das Versprechen der Normalisierung unserer Existenz" (Hilal, 2023, p. 56). As the history of European Jews in the 20. century has tragically demonstrated, attempts at assimilation are doomed to fail.[7]

The examples of past stigmatization of ugliness should not be misleading: discrimination remains a painful reality for many first- and second-generation immigrants. Under the title "Imitation," Hilal recounts the story of Anna Sorokin, a Russian immigrant raised in Germany, who pretended to be a wealthy heiress and ultimately ended up in prison in the United States. Moshtari Hilal senses a certain affinity with Sorokin when she contends that both she and Sorokin "studied the lives of the beautiful and rich" whose postures they "imitated" (Hilal,

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[6] Hadid states: „Als meine älteste Schwester ihre Nase operieren ließ, kam es mir vor, als hätte man meine Familie kastriert. An dem Tag, an dem ich mich zu meiner Nase bekannte und mir geschworen habe, sie zu tragen, nicht als eine Bürde, sondern als ein Erbe, an jenem Tag habe ich die Kontrolle über mein Bild zurückgewonnen." (Hilal, 2023, p. 112).

[7] Umberto Eco's *The History of Ugliness* includes a passage from the antisemitic Giorgio Montandon's *La difesa della razza* (1940): "What are the characteristics of the Jewish type? — A strongly curved nose, varying among individuals, often with prominence of the nasal septum, and very mobile nostrils." (Eco, 2007, p. 269).

2023, p. 21). In equating life and imitation, Hilal also quotes Jia Tolentino who states that "communicating an identity requires a certain degree of self-deception" (Hilal, 2023, p. 105; Tolentino 2019, p. 63). Paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu with subtlety, Hilal argues that Anna Sorokin, whose biography spawned a successful series on Netflix, imitated the "habitus" of a German heiress without possessing the "economic capital"—that is, the inheritance (Hilal, 2023, p. 22). For her, the impostor syndrome is a necessity for those who wish to integrate into a foreign culture, since "counterfeiting as a way of life is demanded of us every day" (Hilal, 2023, p. 23).

3.Ugliness and normalisation attempts in contemporary society

To highlight the power of aesthetics, Hilal's reflection proceeds both diachronically and synchronically. On one hand, as we have just seen, she traces back through human evolution to uncover the roots of aesthetic sense; on the other, she contextualizes it within highly current phenomena such as social media and artificial intelligence. Many images reproduced in the volume show the author's face altered by Instagram or TikTok filters (Hilal, 2023, p. 19, 24, 87, 99, 101). As has been unequivocally demonstrated by several studies, these manipulations distort the perception of the self and one's body, fostering disorders among young people such as body dysmorphia, in which it becomes impossible to separate one's real image from the one posted on social media. Another current phenomenon is the pervasive "Selbst-Optimierung" (self-optimization), namely the relentless demand of modern society to consider the body as a means to achieve personal satisfaction (Hilal, 2023, p. 39). The illusion, shared by many of our contemporaries, is founded on the idea that happiness derives from a life devoted to the capacity to constantly improve and adapt to social requirements (Tolentino, 2019, p. 63). What social media implements, often to the detriment of its users, are measures of 'normalisation' that Fabrizio Acanfora defined as follows:

> By normalisation, I mean that subtle but pervasive process, which began in the first half of the nineteenth century, through which the dominant culture creates a narrative that establishes, from time to time, what is scientifically "normal" in various areas of human existence: from politics to economics, from language use to medicine, from science to personal relationships, from behaviour to the body. It is a silent device that regulates our expectations, sets the boundaries of what is acceptable, and suggests how we should align our lives with a set of norms, often established arbitrarily. (Acanfora, 2024)

Not surprisingly, there is another conceptual pair, alongside the obvious one of beauty/ugliness, that forms a leitmotif within Hilal's illustrated book: the juxtaposition of 'normal' and 'abnormal.' This is not surprising, given that an aspect deemed pleasant or agreeable can also be defined as a 'normal' body within a particular society.[8] Like normality, beauty is both a descriptive and a prescriptive concept because something is beautiful or normal not only because it is perceived as such, but also because it is deemed desirable. "Normal is both an aspiration and a state, a value and a condition" (Acanfora, 2024). Every society has its own canons of aesthetics and normality. For this reason, normative appearance and social integration go hand in hand. Hilal reminds us that the idea of physical self-optimization through plastic surgery appears as an ideology that regards the education of

[8] In *Making the Body Beautiful*, the plastic surgeon Benjamin Gelfant is quoted as saying that his patients "merely wish to be normal… [they] simply want to fit in" (Gilman, 1999, p. 41).

individuals into modern citizens as a duty. The purpose of anatomical correction is not only to enable the patient-client to develop a greater joie de vivre by attaining a so-called normal appearance, but also to gain access to social participation as such (Hilal, 2023, p. 39). The already cited example of Anna Sorokin is paradigmatic of this type of constraint: "Die Imitation ist ein Versprechen auf den sozialen Aufstieg für die einen und eine Überlebensstrategie für die anderen. Sie kann bedeuten, dass wir versuchen, in der Masse unterzugehen, Normalität nachzuahmen, bis zu einer Austauschbarkeit zu verwässern, die uns aus der Vereinzelung, der Andersartigkeit, der Unsicherheit befreit. Das Assimilationsversprechen ist das Versprechen der Normalisierung unserer Existenz" (Hilal, 2023, p. 22).

Although "normalization" is a necessity for all citizens, it is particularly pressing for those with a migratory background and, consequently, this need is tied to integration into the host society. Following this perspective, those coming from a colonized culture start, in any case, at a disadvantage. This discrepancy is also visible in the so-called ethnic rhinoplasty, which refers to attempts within cosmetic surgery to break away from the racist past of the discipline by promoting ethnic peculiarities in facial and bodily features. This branch of cosmetic surgery understands beauty within the aesthetic boundaries of each ethnic group and therefore seeks to formulate specific ideals and proposals. According to Hilal, "Es lasse sich von einer allmählichen Normalisierung von sogenannten Schönheitsoperationen sprechen" (Hilal, 2023, p. 85).

Although the German-writing author employs the vocabulary of "normalism,"[9] as we have just observed, she appears to overlook the ongoing discussion surrounding the concept of the normal—closely linked to that of beauty—which has been recently revitalized by Sarah Chaney's essay *Am I Normal?* (2022). In her research, Chaney traces the history and rise of the concept of normality within Western culture and society. In the nineteenth century, this concept migrated from mathematics and statistics to the social sciences, where it became a determining factor for the inclusion or exclusion of individuals or groups within the social collective. Chaney does not question the concept of normality and norm as such, but rather their partiality and the consequences that follow. She gives the example of average height in the United Kingdom, which for men ranges between 1.62 m and 1.85 m, and for women between 1.50 m and 1.70 m. This range includes 95% of the population. The remaining 5%, corresponding to three million people, thus fall outside what is considered 'normal.' (Chaney, 2022, p.12) The majority of the world's population is not considered in these statistical studies, as 96% of participants in psychology research and 80% in medical studies are individuals living in the Western world—so-called WEIRD subjects (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic)—who represent only 12% of the global population (Chaney, 2022, p. 7). The disadvantage of non-hegemonic populations in aesthetic evaluation noted by Hilal, according to Chaney also applies to the concept of normality.

The problem with the concept of normal is that it implies a binary opposition with the abnormal, which, depending on the context, can mean 'extreme,' 'exceptional,' 'unusual,' or 'strange.' However, in medical terms, the opposite of normal is now considered 'pathological'

[9] Normalism has been theorized by Jürgen Link as an interdisciplinary field of study bridging sociology and literary theory (Link, 2006). This branch of studies shows that concepts of beauty and normality are deeply linked to issues of power and specific institutions (Colombo, 2006). For reasons of space, we cannot go into the fundamental reflections on normality and power presented, for example, by Michel Foucault, Georges Canguilhem and Erving Goffman.

(Chaney, 2022, p.17). Conceptual aberrations of normality have historically led to exclusion and discrimination. Not coincidentally, Francis Galton, who coined the term "normal distribution," was also the first theorist of eugenics (Chaney, 2022, p. 29). Cesare Lombroso, another example of normalist thinking, believed that criminals shared common physiognomic traits. The stigma of abnormality has affected, for example, people with disabilities, homosexuals, or individuals distinguished by particular physical or intellectual characteristics (Chaney, 2022, p. 31). Hilal recalls that according to outdated medical concepts, as soon as young women showed excessive hair, this indicated a disorder or "abnormality" in her evolutionary development (Hilal, 2023, p. 121). In this strain, Vera Gheno defines body hair as one of the characteristics most subject to normalisation:

> Not exclusively through our own fault, let's be clear, but because of a context that pushes us to normalise this type of behaviour, which is often obsessive. Take, for example, the fight against body hair. While, on the one hand, everyone is free to like themselves more or less hairy, it is equally true that we learn to hate our body hair from a young age. Legs, armpits, bikini line, upper lip, arms for women, but also chest, legs and biceps for men. From razor blades to epilators, from razors to waxing, ending with the extremely expensive laser, it seems that we cannot tolerate even the slightest trace of hair. (...) But the fact that a woman with unshaven armpits provokes disapproval and comments such as "you're disgusting" speaks volumes about the obsession that afflicts our society. (Gheno, 2025)

As we have just seen, there are many connecting threads between Hilal's and Chaney's texts. First and foremost, both develop their reflections starting from their own intimate concerns and anxieties. The trauma they share is having been considered abnormal or ugly. Surprisingly, their theoretical reference points are also very similar. The two scholars just mentioned as key to Chaney's reflection, Francis Galton and Cesare Lombroso, also appear in Hilal's text (Hilal, 2023, pp. 62–71). For Hilal as well as for Chaney, the conceptual issue is merely the surface of a deeper question related to power: "Who holds the authority to determine what is beautiful or normal?"

By tackling the concepts of abnormality and ugliness in relation to the human body both authors enter the field of disability studies. In this research framework, another phenomenon that both closely examine, as symptomatic of the aberrations that stigmatization of the 'ugly' or 'abnormal' body can produce, is that of the freak show (Hilal, 2023, p. 130–136; Chaney, 2022, pp. 68-70): In the nineteenth century, these traveling shows exhibited bodies deemed monstrous according to the aesthetic standards of the time. According to Hilal, in these shows the discourses on 'beauty' and 'normality' intertwine: "The display of deviations from the norm that was initially a religious matter is […] transformed into supposed scientific hypotheses concerning primitiveness and civilization, normality and abnormality" (Hilal, 2023, p. 130).

4.Ugliness and the hybridisation of literary genres

Moshtari Hilal's text resists easy classification from the standpoint of literary genre. Her book *Hässlichkeit/Ugliness*, is a composite text that encompasses essays, 37 images, dozens of poems, and autobiographical writings. Continuous cross-references are established between these and the narrative and essayistic parts. The hybridisation of genres is linked to the theme of ugliness, which arises from the encounter between "normative" images imposed by society—and therefore external to the subject—and the frustration and alienation that come from within the subject, who cannot meet those social expectations. In the visual part of Hilal's work, the

first predominates, while in the lyrical part, the second predominates. Coherently, *Hässlichkeit* by Hilal expresses at least two aesthetic dimensions that we want to analyze in the following: 1) images and 2) lyric poetry.

4.1. The images

The prominent role of images in Hilal's illustrated book is evident from the fact that a photograph already appears on the cover. The text contains 37 images, whose sources and credits are listed at the end of the volume (Hilal, 2023, p. 222–223). It is noteworthy to observe the variety of photographs employed, ranging from private and personal images such as passport photos, selfies, and childhood pictures to historical photographs and satirical illustrations. There is also considerable variation in reproduction techniques, which include screenshots, realistic photos, drawings, and distorted images. Each type of photo and image performs a specific function, enriching the narrative and broadening the meaning of the themes addressed in the essayistic and literary passages (Meyer, 2020; Vangi 2005).

The very first image inside the book—the portrait of the author as a child—is emblematic: it is a passport photo, the same one found on page 15, appearing wrinkled and crumpled. The visual identity it should reveal has evidently been rejected. The reason for this rejection is evoked by the book's title, *Hässlichkeit*, and is reflected in the image's highlighting of certain unaesthetic features—the thick eyebrows, facial hair, and slightly irregular nose—that the protagonist questions throughout the text. The cover image engages in a dialogue with the epigraph that precedes the main text, in which Hilal emphasizes that this work is about "seeing and being seen" (Hilal, 2023, p. 5). The first image that appears inside the book is the same passport-style photo already featured on the cover, here repeated fourteen times (Hilal, 2023, p. 14–15).

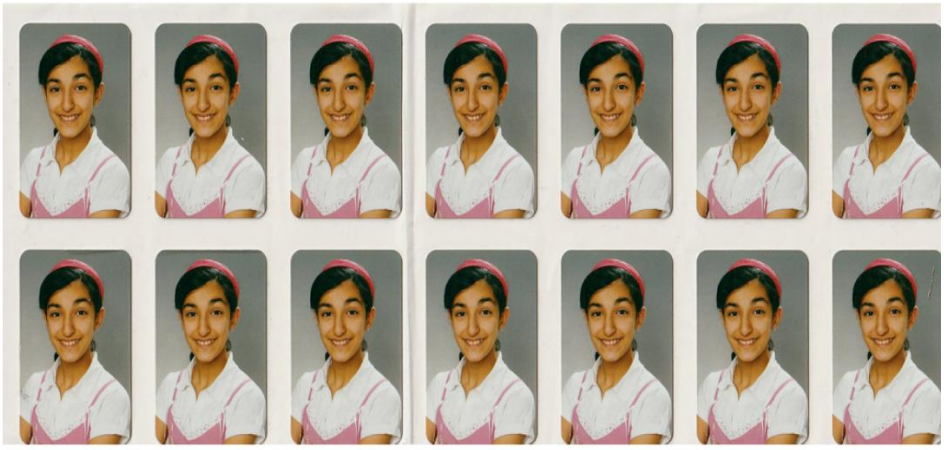

Image 1: (*Hilal, 2023, p. 14-15)*

The photograph captures the author as a smiling child, posed for the camera. The function of this image is explained in the poem that precedes it, which justifies its placement on the cover:

> Ich suche das Foto für dieses Buch.
>
> Ich suche vergeblich
>
> eine hässliche Pferdefresse.

> Finde nur das Bild eines Kindes,
>
> das Zähne zeigend
>
> vierzehn Jahre lang
>
> zum letzten Mal gelächelt haben wird. (Hilal, 2023, p. 13)

The child with the "horrible horse face" becomes here a visual symbol of the childhood trauma linked to the perception of one's body under social judgment. Although she smiles in the posed photograph—well-dressed and groomed, with a pink headband matching her dress—this photo attracts negative aesthetic comments. As is well known, passport photos are standardized portraits that enable official institutions to identify individuals; here, they become symbols of the rigidity of aesthetic canons and stereotypes. Upon entering adolescence, young Moshtari becomes aware of these criteria that condemn her, and thus we witness here the "last time this child would smile." The image serves as a metaphor for the reduction of beauty to rigid, universal standards that, starting from a single passport photo of a preadolescent girl, determine a negative prejudice against her youthful appearance. For the author, this marks the painful starting point of a lifelong confrontation with self-perception: the uniqueness of her own face here clashes with the "technical reproducibility" of the image, which we will discuss in the next section. The photographic seriality represents not only the loss of the aura of uniqueness in representation, that has been brilliantly studied by Walter Benjamin, but also the possibility of infinite replication of the social judgment it provokes.[10] Each replication thus becomes a new episode of exposure and vulnerability, rendering the subject a prisoner of a judging gaze that seems never-ending. For this reason, the image evokes conflicting reactions: on one hand, there is the protagonist's refusal to see herself represented in these images, which are indeed discarded and repudiated, as implied by the cover. Opposed to the protagonist's desire to reject them is the affectionate gaze of the mother, who wishes to keep them as precious memories (Hilal, 2023, p. 12).

The subsequent images contextualize Hilal's reflection within today's world of social media. Apps developed by certain social media platforms allow users to alter their faces at will. In a screenshot of a photo of Hilal modified by an app, her face is transformed "as if it were that of a woman" subjected to an act of 'ethnic cleansing': in the altered image, her skin tone is lightened and clearer, and her nose appears less pronounced (Hilal, 2023, p. 19). These apps therefore do not merely manipulate images, but also influence our imagination by expressing dominant beauty stereotypes and undermining the self-esteem of those who do not conform to them. Another app transformed Hilal's face into a "horse muzzle" (Hilal, 2023, p. 24). On one hand, this image could be read as an ironic critique of the excessive use of beauty filters that distort the face, erasing authentic features to the point of near unrecognizability. On the other hand, it is the author herself who assigns to her face a resemblance to a horse muzzle. This image is thus not

[10] In the current age, the "aura" of the natural body has definitively faded due to technological advances: through app filters and cosmetic surgery, any alteration of one's outward appearance is now possible and socially accepted. The same principle applies to identity, where the idealized self-image seems to have supplanted the biological body. Hilal herself highlights the link between the philosophical aesthetics of Walter Benjamin and the aesthetics of cosmetic surgery when she states: "Wenngleich Benjamin eigentlich über Kunstwerke spricht, erlaubt uns der Diskurs um den schönen Körper, seine Kulturkritik auf Schönheitsstandards zu übernehmen" (Hilal, 2023, p. 108). The author draws on Benjamin's insights to emphasize that, due to the reproducibility of images, the ontological difference between copy and original is lost (Benjamin, 1980, pp. 471-508).

only a distortion of the artist-author's external appearance but also an attempt to externalize her painful inner experience, expressing alienation and a sense of rejection.

In the "cartography of her own ugliness" (Hilal, 2023, p. 31), Hilal ironically depicts Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, which, through its harmonious proportions, is supposed to symbolize the perfection of creation. She playfully reverses this symbolism by drawing on one tilted leg several hairless regions labeled with the means that caused the absence of hair: razor, bleaching, laser, and wax. Also making an appearance are a caricature of Darwin depicted as an orangutan (later referenced again, Hilal, 2023, p. 128) and a drawing of Hilal's own face covered with hair.

Following this depiction, a series of images focuses on the nose and rhinoplasty, another sensitive issue in Hilal's processing of her appearance (Hilal, 2023, p. 38, 44, 48, 55, 58, 61, 67, 78, 87, 99). In particular, several self-portraits show the protagonist's nose exaggeratedly enlarged and distorted after being altered through the use of filters. These images can be understood as mirrors in which the protagonist sees herself through the filter of social judgments and Western cultural expectations, resulting in a self-perception that is inadequate, negative, and outside the norm. This phenomenon corresponds to the previously mentioned 'body dysmorphia,' a condition characterized by excessive and persistent concerns about real or imagined physical imperfections. What emerges clearly from the images included in the text is the author's self-referentiality, presenting herself as an obsessively scrutinized object of investigation.[11]

Within the text, there is also a depiction of a "witch's nose" (Hilal, 2023, p. 48), which illustrates how this physiognomic trait has historically led to the stigmatization and social exclusion of many vulnerable individuals. This image further reveals how certain Western prejudices and aesthetic canons have been deeply rooted across history and various epochs. As is well known, aesthetic-moral condemnation has often targeted women who resisted the patriarchal yoke (Jude, 2019). One example mentioned by the author is physiognomy, which historically linked certain physical features to moral, racial, and social judgments.

The final image appears strategically at the end of the last chapter titled *Versöhnung* (Reconciliation). Here, after extensive sociological and psychological discussions and exhausting processing of her traumatic past, Hilal comes to terms with her body and accepts it in its "non-conformity". In the struggle between external and internal perceptions of her own body, the latter seems to have prevailed.

[11] In an interview Moshtari Hilal explained the need to include her images in the text: "First of all, the book is about images, and about the context in which the images in our mind get constructed. […] I had to come up with a way to show that all these things have historical roots, so I inserted myself into those illustrations. […] I saw it as a process of self-reflection, like I had become a prototype that we can all experiment with and deconstruct: we can deconstruct my insecurities about ugliness until we access the collective history of it" (Wells 2025).

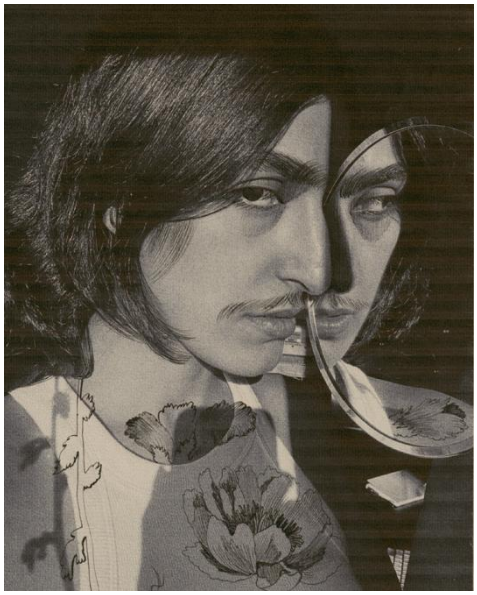

Image 2: *(Hilal, 2023, p. 217)*

In a contemporary reinterpretation of the Narcissus myth (Orlowsky & Orlowsky, 1992), a mirror positioned obliquely before the artist's face reflects the part of her visage hidden from the viewer. The mirror becomes a key element in the dialogue between image and identity, as the viewer sees both the side of Hilal's face directed toward them and the reflected side. The interplay of "looking and being looked at" is further intensified by the author's gaze: her right eye meets the viewer's, while her left eye is reflected in the mirror. This reflection evokes the conflict between self-perception and the external gaze, but also the sense of distance the protagonist feels toward her own image, perceived as nonconforming to dominant aesthetic standards. The mirror appears as the deceptive "trick mirror" (Tolentino, 2019, p. 63) that reflects both the illusion of perfection and the alternative self-flagellation of constantly finding flaws, as described by Jia Tolentino. Hilal's face openly challenges this judgment by emphasizing, through the use of filters, precisely those features that disqualify her — the facial hair along her ears, thick eyebrows, mustache, and pointed nose — which the protagonist problematizes within the text, transforming them into a symbol of authenticity and resistance to imposed aesthetic norms. As a modern Narcissus, burdened by such torment, Hilal is thus destined to perceive "herself" as ugly, as expressed in the lyric parts of her texts we will analyze in the following.

4.2. The lyric poetry

While it is possible to establish an exact number of images in Hilal's text, the same cannot be said for the poems, which sometimes interrupt the essayistic sections and at other times extend over several pages without it always being clear whether they belong to the same composition. An example of this is the long cycle of poems from pages 9 to 13. As we have already noted, the dialogue between text and images is not only strong but constitutes the very lifeblood of Hilal's work. Indeed, immediately following the title of the first chapter, "Hass/hatred," we find a poem that establishes a dialogue with the cover image and the subsequent one:

Pferdefresse,

was hast du dir gedacht,

so freundlich zu grinsen,

aus meinem Gesicht? (Hilal, 2023, p. 9)

The poem describes the preparation and photo shoot of the Hilal child's passport photos we have already discussed. The lyrical sections, as we anticipate, most vividly express the author-artist's alienation from her own body. The verses cited constitute a reckoning between the lyrical self and her own "horse face." The self's face is no longer perceived as part of the body but becomes a sort of reified object, the target of a fierce invective. Here photographic shooting is understood in a literal sense as attack, the shooting of the subject "captured" in the image.

Through anthropomorphization, the 'face' gains its own autonomy, to the point of being able to "smile through her face." This alienated face, as the author reminds us in the following pages, does not belong to her: "So habe ich nicht ausgesehen […] Das war ich nicht" (Hilal, 2023, p. 10). As we have already outlined in the visual analysis of the work, obsessive repetition is a distinctive feature of Hilal's writing. This is also evident in the rhetorical arsenal of her prose. The aforementioned line, ("was hast du dir gedacht,/ so freundlich zu grinsen,/ aus meinem Gesicht?"), is repeated four times over three pages. The splitting of the subject, as we have seen in the image of Narcissus, is a recurring theme in Hilal's work: the pronouns "meinem" and "dir" always refer to the lyric self. It is a lyric self that obsessively looks at itself in the mirror, that is both subject and object of its own perception and is therefore alienated.

The term «lächeln», meaning smile or smiling, is also notably recurrent, as in the following verses:

Gib mir ein Lächeln.

Der Fotograf an unserer Schule

forderte mein Lächeln ein.

Gib mir ein Lächeln,

und ich lächelte. (Hilal, 2023, p. 10)

The forced smile of the child Moshtari appears, in hindsight, completely inadequate compared to the disdain she would feel for that face exposed and fixed in the passport photo. She looks at herself in the fourteen rectangular passport photos, and the pictures "return her gaze" as if they were not merely passive images but active participants in her lived experience. In Roland Barthes' terms, this image is a *punctum*, because it reveals a personal and emotional connection to the author (Barthes, 1982).

Her first exposure on social media is a kind of trial by fire: after posting her first video, she is labeled "horse face," a nickname which, as we have seen, she ultimately embraces. The poem ends with the mother preserving the photos her daughter has repudiated and calling her "Töchterchen." Only the mother, who generated that body, can appreciate and love it despite it being considered ugly. This passage anticipates the book's conclusion, where the rebellious daughter will finally come to love her body, as her mother always has, embracing the body that gave her life.

In the following poem, the last in the sequence, rhetorical figures like anaphora in the repetition of "Ich suche" ("I search") and alliteration such as "Zähne zeigend" ("showing teeth") dominate. Under the title "Selbstbildnis" ("Self-Portrait"), there is a poem alternating between verse and prose. The piece describes the childhood dreams of little Moshtari, who imagines becoming "a woman with long smooth legs" (Hilal, 2023, p. 16). This attractive woman would draw both female and male gazes, who would be at her feet. The fivefold anaphora of "Ich zeichnete" ("I drew") stands out as the dominant rhetorical figure. The imagined woman is a projection of her desires and an image that overturns her real features: in this dreamlike vision, she has long, smooth legs—hairless—and a nose that is not prominent. The dreamed beauty becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. A few pages later, there is another composition that requires no rhetorical analysis:

> Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde.
>
> Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde.
>
> Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde. Ich werde. (Hilal, 2023, p. 18)

According to Hilal, these verses function like a litany that must be recited as a prayer. The italics in which they are written signal their musical dimension. The prayer for obtaining a *Traumkörper*—that is, a dream body—is also the subject of the subsequent lyric. The title plays on the semantic ambiguity of *Traumkörper*, which refers both to the body dreamed of and idealized by the young Moshtari, and to the "dream body" demanded by contemporary aesthetic standards. The fracture between the real and the imagined body produces scenes of violence in which the child comes into conflict with their own physicality. For this reason, they "spank their own thighs" and "split their nose in two with an axe." The reified body becomes an entity against which the child rebels and wages war:

> Mutter, ich ziehe in eine Schlacht,
>
> mit meiner Klinge an meiner Wange,
>
> mit deiner Tochter an meiner Klinge. (Hilal, 2023, p. 20)

Once again, it is the mother—she who gave life to that body—who witnesses this painful battle. The dangerous "blade," repeated in two alliterations, rests against the cheek but also "your daughter" (addressed to the mother), signaling the state of alienation. Some poems, besides their meaningful content, stand out for their graphic form, such as *Schöne Fratze* ("Beautiful Grimace"), a short poem that addresses symmetry by taking the shape of a Rubin vase (Hilal, 2023, p. 25). The first and last lines are the longest, while the subsequent lines progressively narrow until they reduce to only two words in the center lines. In this poem, which resembles concrete poetry, symmetry—which plays a fundamental role in the perception of beauty—is made visually perceptible. Beauty requires its own geometry, its own space, just as ugliness can be mapped, as Hilal will do a few pages later (Hilal, 2023, p. 31). Lyric text, reflection, and image continuously engage in dialogue in Hilal's *Ugliness* on multiple levels. In the midst of a discussion on the imaginary of colonized peoples inspired by Frantz Fanon, Hilal inserts a poem such as the following:

> Hässlichkeit wäre oberflächlich,
>
> wenn es in Wahrheit nicht um Hass ginge,
>
> um den Wunsch, nicht gehasst zu werden,

> sich selbst nicht zu hassen. (Hilal, 2023, p. 34)

In the lyrical dimension, the etymological proximity between *Hass* (hate) and *Hässlichkeit* (ugliness) unfolds. This closeness is also evoked in the sound of the words, which resonate throughout each verse. It is precisely perception—the sensory data—that justifies the inclusion of these lyrics within an otherwise essayistic work. While the essayistic treatment strives for objectivity, lyrical perception is inherently subjective. Likewise, beauty and ugliness are tied to perception—that is, to "seeing and being seen" (Hilal, 2023, p. 1). Similarly, alienation, frequently depicted in the lyrics, is a phenomenon of perception. The perception of the body's contours is described when "they pass their finger along the sister's nose" (Hilal, 2023, p. 41), or when one discovers the features of one's own body through self-touch:

> Ich fasse mir an mein Gesicht, taste meinen Kiefer ab, lasse meine Finger über mein Gebiss streifen, entlang meiner Nase. Meinen Zeige- und Mittelfinger spreize ich in die entgegengesetzten Richtungen, als formten sie ein Zeichen für den Frieden, um mir mit den Fingerkuppen in die Augenhöhlen zu stechen. Ich lasse meine beiden Finger tief eindringen, so tief, dass ich meine Augäpfel über den Lidern spüre, mir vorstellen kann, beide Augen mit beiden Fingern auszugraben. […] Ich fühle ein Gesicht, das mir nicht gehört, aber in meinen Gedanken wohnt. Es ist das Gesicht einer netten Person, und nicht meines. (Hilal, 2023, p. 60)

There is the sensation that the fingers seek to conquer or reclaim a body perceived as distant, alienated "nicht meines". Alienation has been the consequence of the external gaze; now, perception from within attempts to draw closer. As the text progresses toward its conclusion, particularly in the chapter titled "Consolation," the lyrical texts become more dialogic and comforting. From a self-referential reflection on the body, the body gradually becomes, in Hilal's work, a mediator between the self and others. For instance, the relationship with a man who should have less hair on his arms than the author herself is questioned (Hilal, 2023, p. 143). In the second part, the relationship between the two becomes less antagonistic: with crossed arms, they caress each other mutually. The other, who draws and writes on the lyrical self's body, reveals the loving side of the other's body and makes it reborn. Even the old and ill body of the dying mother is no longer perceived as repulsive nor hated. It is the illness consuming her that is hated. "There is nothing ugly in seeing a loved one lose their body to illness" (Hilal, 2023, p. 176). The mother's death makes Hilal aware of her own mortality. In a subsequent poem, she pronounces: "If corpses exist, so does our death" (Hilal, 2023, p. 188). Through these experiences of the transience of human existence, she understands that the fear of ugliness is, in fact, a fear of losing control:

> Wir fürchten die Hässlichkeit. Wir sehen sie in der Schwäche und dem Verfall alternder und kranker Körper, in der Hilflosigkeit dieser Körper, die uns jede Eitelkeit, jeden Stolz und jede Würde nehmen möchte. Wie viel Kontrolle über unser Aussehen bleibt uns, wenn es andere sind, die unsere Körper pflegen, berühren, ansehen. Der Verlust über die Kontrolle, wann und wie wir gesehen werden, ist der Verlust von Autonomie und Verfügung über uns selbst. Krankheit und Alter nehmen uns die Verfügung über uns selbst, diese Möglichkeit der Wahl, das eine zu zeigen, das andere zu verbergen. In Krankheit und Alter beginnen unsere Körper, uns zu verraten. Der absolute Verrat ist dann der Tod, wenn er unseren Körper für uns selbst völlig unverfügbar ganz und gar den anderen überlässt. (Hilal, 2023, p. 170)

This existential condition is not only known conceptually but also deeply experienced through the encounter with her mother's dying body and her own mortality. Her mother had always told her that beauty is fleeting. As an adult, Hilal realizes that her childhood face has changed, and she "learned to love it after many attempts" (Hilal, 2023, p. 198). Now, she desires to be

loved without fearing hatred. She understands that the opposite of ugliness is not beauty but love as she learnt through the unconditional love of her mother. At the end of this intellectual and experiential journey, she has reconciled with her outward appearance, beyond notions of beauty and ugliness; she simply *is*:

> Ich bin hässlich, weil ich bin.
>
> Ich bin schön, weil ich bin. (Hilal, 2023, p. 211).

Before the final image we previously discussed, there is another lyrical moment that seems to offer both a commentary and a key to interpreting that image. She describes Narcissus's mirror with the line: "In the mirror, I see a profile like a sickle" (Hilal, 2023, p. 214). With this symbolic sickle, she has learned to defend herself from the annihilating gaze of others.

4.3. Ugliness and the dissolution of the dichotomy between beautiful and ugly

As we have seen, for Hilal ugliness is always linked to the authority of those who have the power to determine what is beautiful and what is ugly. The central question of who holds the power to determine what is beautiful is also relevant to the literary history in which this text is situated. Historically, aesthetic value—meaning literary value—has been established by publishers, journalists, literary critics, and professors, who had the power not only to guarantee a text's publication but also to determine its short- and long-term success. The ultimate consecration of a work permitted its entry into the canon, that is, the texts representative of a nation or an era. Pierre Bourdieu, whom Hilal likes to cite casually, is undoubtedly the twentieth-century thinker who most convincingly described the logic of the "literary field," by which he meant "an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific power relations, its dominants and its dominated." (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 163) Far from being characterized by disinterest and contemplation, the literary or artistic field is a "field of struggles." (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 30) The main value generated by the "countless struggles among agents" (authors, actors, writers, critics, directors, publishers, dealers, etc.) is the artistic value or prestige of a literary text (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 79). Many factors and institutions can contribute to this process of canon formation: reviewers, publishers, readers, sales figures, film adaptations, literary prizes, and publication within a particular series or edition. This system of aesthetic parameters and power has recently come into crisis (Salgaro, 2023, pp. 131-159). Within the realm of literary value attribution, a process similar to that foreseen by Hilal's text for the aesthetic judgment of physical beauty is taking place: whereas in the past more normative canons were the standard, today more descriptive approaches prevail.[12] Revisionist debates on the function and nature of canons in recent decades have encouraged a rethinking of traditional concepts of literary prestige from a more political perspective. As a result, a greater number of non-Western and non-European writers, women, and popular fiction authors have been institutionalized within literary history. (Löffler, 2017, p. 13; Rippl & Winko, 2013, p. 82).

Since aesthetic categories and the idea of a unique aesthetic canon have entered into an irreversible crisis, in the final pages of her book, Hilal chooses to abandon the fundamental dichotomy in the aesthetic realm based on the opposition between beauty and ugliness. She

[12] While until recently the Western canon dominated aesthetic taste, today this standard has been rightly contested and expanded. Harold Bloom, 1995, p. 10; Rippl & Winko, 2013, 66–76.

breaks away from this dichotomy, both in terms of the perception of her own body, as we have seen in the previous sections, and in terms of the perception of her literary work. Drawing on disability activist Mia Mingus, she rejects this dyad, which has caused so much suffering to herself and others, and proposes to replace it with "magnificence," meaning the richness of lived experience from within, without considering the 'normalizing' parameters imposed from outside (Hilal, 2023, p. 208). Through art, Hilal has learned to reconcile with her own "ugliness". By drawing her own body, by obsessively representing it, aestheticizing it through artistic mimesis, she has overcome her fear of ugliness, creating an object "in which there is no longer space for the contrast between beautiful and ugly." This "third space," to quote a thinker who surely appeals to Hilal,[13] opens up between reality and fiction, beneath the fingertips that gently touch the body, and is also represented in the final lyric of the volume:

> Im Schatten meiner Nase befindet sich ein Ort,
>
> an dem Anderssein erlaubt wird,
>
> alle Anpassung zu überschreiben.
>
> Ein Ort, an dem das Ich an Stelle des Nichts unsere,
>
> eure Blicke entlarvt haben wird. (Hilal, 2023, p. 215)

In this space, differences between people, including differences in appearance, should not be erased, but rather coexist without the need to create hierarchies or to include or exclude anyone (Acanfora 2024; Gheno 2025). As we have demonstrated, the author conquers this space on the margins of normative discourses on power, appearance, gender, and disability that trap our bodies in the digital age.

Credits:

Image 1

S. 14/15 Privat © Moshtari Hilal

Aus: Moshtari Hilal, Hässlichkeit

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Image 2

S. 217 © Moshtari Hilal: Versöhnung, 2023

Aus: Moshtari Hilal, Hässlichkeit

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[13] I mean Homi Bhabha, one of the main thinkers of postcolonial. This "third space" (Bhabha, 2004) is significantly present also in the image that, not by chance, closes the volume and which I described earlier. The mirror is the key element because the viewer sees both the part of Hilal's face turned toward them and the part reflected in the mirror. The third space is located precisely in the interstice between the two, between the real nose facing the viewer and the one reflected in the mirror.

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