

## Narrating African Migration: Perspectives and Chronotopes in Narrative Strategies

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### Abstract

This article adopts an illustrative approach to draw attention to the significance, scope and depth of a large range of African writers' migration narratives – exploring aspects ranging from the forces propelling these movements to ways in which they are experienced and the consequences of displacement and relocation. Literature in its affective dimension is equipped to mediate imaginative and empathetic access to the emotional consequences of displacement. Literary narratives have both informative and analytical dimensions and, by means of vivid evocation of complex situations, create contextualising representations that facilitate understanding of intertwined geographic and chronological factors, including political, social and cultural-familial influences on migrants' choices.

Beyond a few 'big names,' African literature remains insufficiently appreciated. The article attempts to provide glimpses of some of these authors' aesthetic achievements. To provide its readers with something of a map to access the vast topic, selected scholarly commentaries are referenced, while the bibliography lists published English translations of texts written in other languages.

**Keywords:** African, migrant, refugees, chronotopes, narrative.

The topic of migration in African literature is a huge one. Africans probably constitute the world's largest body of migrants, huge population movements caused by slave trafficking and regional displacements such as those succeeding Somalia's state collapse, the Rwandan genocide, Nigerian Boko Haram raids and migrant workers' movements to work opportunities elsewhere, or evictions – like those of Indians settled in East African countries and South African apartheid-era forced removals of those classified "non-white". In more recent African

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‘migrant writing’ (the present article’s central focus), the narrative emphasis falls on the experiences of Africans who flee from war, severe repression or extreme poverty. Hence, this article is both a literary and a socio-political historical outline of African migration writings as a composite evaluative portrayal of the causes and forces propelling these movements. Not all African migrations involve degradation in status; the acclaimed Latin comic playwright Terentius (Terence, 0185-0159 BC) was a man from Carthago (modern Tunis) in North Africa. Shakespeare’s Othello was known as “the Moor” to mark his probable North African origins; the dreaded “witch” Sycorax, mother of Caliban in *The Tempest* (first performed 1611), had been transported from what is now Tunis. The African general Othello’s eventual downfall is engineered by Iago the Venetian, demonstrating the destructive power and manipulability of racism against darker-skinned Africans by those of lighter hue as evoked by a non-African author. Likewise, in a late Shakespearean play, Caliban and his North African mother are reviled by ‘white’ European exiles. Yet despite terming Caliban “this thing of darkness,” Prospero finds him useful as a servant (*The Tempest* V.i.275-6 and I.ii.286) – presaging African-American slavery practices and the aftermath of international slavery in worldwide low-paid immigrant labour (see Zeleza 2009).

The authoritative recent essay collection *Refugee Imaginaries: Research across the Humanities* (Cox et al. 2020) uses a thematic frame to group contributions – initially providing a historical overview in “Refugee Imaginaries”; then covering the topics of “Asylum,” “The Border,” “Intra/Extraterritorial Displacement,” “The Camp,” “Sea Crossings,” “Digital Territories,” “Home,” and “Open Cities.” With the exception of the third-last and final of these subjects, the topics are all addressed in the cited African-authored literary works. The article addresses the implicitly analytical qualities in literary works, demonstrating that evocative and affective dimensions coexist in novels with intellectual interrogations of the causes and consequences of the forms of migrant experience evoked in them. The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin allow identification of the chronotopical dimensions of these texts. Bakhtin coined the conceptual expression “chronotope” (Bakhtin 1981, 243) to refer to the deep entanglement of spatial and historical settings in novel writing. This concept pertains to migration narratives where the particulars of “when” (usually implying “why” and “how”) and “where” are of central importance to narrators. In literary writing, the authorial undertaking is to evoke the imagined, remembered or re-imagined territory and time vividly in order to allow emotional as well as intellectual access that can deepen readers’ comprehension and arouse concern. In her literary-philosophical work *Moral Textures*, scholar Maria Pia Lara terms this quality “illocutionary force”: it facilitates the composition of “emancipatory narratives” that “mediate between particular group identities and universalistic moral claims” (Lara 1998, 2-3). As Emma Cox and her colleagues acknowledge: “art [...] can tell us how histories look through new eyes” (Cox et al. 2020, 2). Major European writers such as Arendt, Orwell, Kafka and Beckett have addressed refugee issues (see Stonebridge 2018), but contemporary African literature on migration is too often still overlooked regarding its extent, insight, aesthetic value and vision.

An added advantage of compiling the kind of ‘literary mosaic’ presented in what follows is that it helps readers to become or remain aware of the variety and range of African migrant experiences and of the many kinds of focal perspectives on such subjects and the irreducible individuality of personhood, culture and experience that African refugees display (as delineated in literature). This matters for, as Pauline Ada Uwakhwe reminds us, “a notable problem in migration studies is the tendency of researchers to essentialise Africans” (Uwakhwe 2013, 4). A central undertaking of the present article is, hence, to give a sense of how many African novels and texts articulate migrant experiences, and of the literary art that these writings manifest in vividly individualising a wide diversity of African migrant histories. The article briefly outlines most of the literary texts mentioned and illustrates more fully the aesthetic dimensions of only three novels of ‘representative’ refugee trajectories exhibiting special narrative skills.

While the sequence in which the majority of novels mentioned below is chronological, in a brief preamble below, three texts, one from the 18<sup>th</sup> and then two from the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – evoking in their different ways individual experiences of cross-Atlantic transportation and enslavement of Africans – are first and separately presented. The earliest is the famous account, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself* (Equiano 1789), which remains the best known of the slave narratives. Equiano was born into an Igbo community in West Africa and taken captive at eleven, obtaining his freedom in later life and subsequently prominent in the Emancipation struggle. *Ama, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Herbstein 2000) is a substantial, meticulously researched and empathetically presented work by Ghanaian/South African writer Manu Herbstein concerning the life of a Sahelian woman captured into slavery. She suffers sexual degradation and violent abuse, nevertheless surviving and achieving periods of nominally ‘free’ life by using her wits and charm: never surrendering her sense of self-worth and African pride. Herbstein’s narrative is unsparing and scrupulous, depicting African complicity in the slave trade and in including abusers, both white *and* black, male *and* female. Its emphasis on Ama’s gendered position within slavery is noteworthy (see, e.g. Oduwobi 2017). Zora Neale Hurston, the famous African-American author, was an anthropological researcher who (following a series of interviews) constructed the narrative of an elderly man going by the name Cudjo Lewis (his African name was Oluale Kossola). He was the only living survivor of the ‘cargo’ of the last, illegal slave ship to reach America. *Barracoon – The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo’* (Hurston 2018) is a melancholic account, for even in age, Cudjo vividly recalled his youth in West Africa (perhaps Togo) and retained his still heartfelt African affiliation. As a history and an indictment of ‘whites,’ Africans, and African-Americans – all complicit in Lewis’s and other slaves’ sufferings – it is a moving and memorable account.

One of the earliest and most celebrated African novels in English – South African Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930) – involves displacements caused inter alia by the *mfecane* [this Nguni term, which means “the crushing,” refers to long-drawn-out internecine tribal wars of 1750-1835],

evoking the expansion of the Zulu kingdom and violent northern migration of the Ndebele. It ends with an encounter with the white South African migration dubbed “the Great Trek.” *Mhudi* complements Plaatje’s 1915 study of the effects of the notorious 1913 “Land Act” in South Africa, which expelled thousands of black families from farms in the validation of land appropriation. From another perspective, several novels by writers with East African family histories evoke the 1972 expulsion by Idi Amin of migrants from India long and prosperously settled in Uganda. They came as indentured (often railway) workers who later established prosperous businesses but became refugees *from* Africa pushed into Britain and elsewhere (compare Scheckter 1996 and Hand 2016). Among novels evoking these histories, two notable recent examples are *Kololo Hill* (2021) by Neema Shah and *We Are All Birds of Uganda* (2021) by Hafsa Zayyan – but there is sadly no space to discuss them, nor the fascinating novels by South African Indian authors evoking apartheid-era forced removals of Indians from white claimed areas. The authors of a recent study (*The postcolonial museum: the arts of memory and the pressure of histories*) write appositely: “migrant aesthetics transposes us into another cartography” (Chambers et al. 2014, 7). Such narratives also ‘transpose’ readers into other, often harrowing, time-frames.

African literature, referring to literary texts authored by Africans in internationally accessible languages, grew into a genre meriting the serious attention of scholars and readers’ interest in the second half of the twentieth century. Discussed below are three novels from this era that address migration issues. The earliest is the Cameroonian author Ferdinand Oyono’s third novel, translated as *The Road to Europe* (originally published in French in 1960), presenting a satirical account of an educated young Cameroonian whose desperately desired migration to an idealised France is largely a pretentious dream – until his unscrupulous tactics eventually secure him a passage there. Senegalese author Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* (published in French in 1962 and acclaimed by Chinua Achebe) depicts a young man whose philosophical studies in France rupture his cultural roots and all but destroy his sanity. Another famous text from this era was first published in Arabic; its translated title is *Season of Migration to the North* (Salih 1966). Its leading characters are Sudanese (like the author). This superbly ironic, emotionally and intellectually hugely complex account evokes a British-educated Sudanese man who sets out (in the UK), by means of ruthless seductions, in ironic mimicry of the role of Othello. He destroys several white women in a kind of elaborate anti-colonial campaign – until he is himself enslaved by his passion for a British woman. He marries and eventually kills her before returning to a strange double life involving difficulties and ironies in the Sudanese village he came from, since he is a peasant farmer by day and a British intellectual in an elaborately appointed secret room (his study) by night. Salih’s enigmatic interrogation of African migrancy remains compelling.

*A Squatter’s Tale* (2000) by the Nigerian Ike Oguine realistically and vividly represents the story of a nouveau riche young banker whose lifestyle collapses with the end of the ‘oil boom’. He manages to get (illegal) US access only to discover that in his uncle’s boastful

tales of his life there are fabrications and struggles to survive by doing menial work. Fatou Diome's beautifully styled narrative, *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003, in the original French), evokes the hopeless dream of the narrator's younger brother of becoming a soccer success in Europe. The brilliant title contains both a warning and her own deeply nostalgic awareness of the chasm between her present life in France and her childhood on a Senegalese island. A strongly voiced Muslim faith and proto-feminism permeate the narrative. *Offspring of Paradise* (2003) by Safi Abdi begins amidst the horrors of the bloody Somali state collapse in the early nineties when warlords and armed militias of young thugs dominated the pervasive anarchy. A young girl loses her closest relatives in the violence, eventually reaching a refugee camp in a 'Western' society with her aged, beloved and wise grandmother. She is sought out by fanatic, half-crazed 'Christian missionaries' but fends them off by holding to her memories of her grandmother and her Islamic faith. Simão Kikamba's ironically titled *Going Home* (2005) is a moving and hard-hitting narration of the inhospitalities of African countries towards internally displaced refugees. In this semi-autobiographical text, Mpanda, a MuKongo whose parents fled the Angolan civil war when he was young, is dissatisfied with his life in the DRC – deciding to return (against his father's warning) when peace is supposedly established in Angola. He encounters severe setbacks there and so much hostility in the nominally free country that (like many other Africans, after Mandela assumed leadership) he journeys to South Africa – only to encounter the hate-filled xenophobia of local blacks, who resent the flood of 'other Africans' into 'their' space. It is a bitter and sad story but a necessary record.

*What is the What: the Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng – A Novel* by Dave Eggers (2006) took the flak for its unconventional, unashamed announcement of its co-creation. Despite this controversy, it is a significant contribution to African migrant literature. Deng's story juxtaposes the early part of his life as one of the "lost boys" fleeing violent southern Sudanese conflict in a dangerous, lengthy journey on foot to a refugee camp in Ethiopia – only to find that asylum there is an endurance test. Later some youngsters are given the opportunity of a 'new life' in America, discovering that life there is harsh and socially exclusionary. Even here, Africans can be victims of unprovoked criminal attacks by African-Americans with no fellow feeling (cf. Masterson 2009). This text can be compared with *Tears of the Desert: A Story of Survival in Darfur* (2008) by Halima Bashir (with Damien Lewis). Darfur is in Western Sudan, and the violence there is distinct from southern Sudanese conflict, although both situations involve persecution of pastoral villagers. The *Janjaweed* (ruthless mounted Arab-speaking raiders) are despatched by the Khartoum rulers wanting access to oil resources and agricultural land. The novel unforgettably and unsparingly recounts the main character's experiences, obliged to assist (as a doctor) when a school full of little girls is raped. She herself is punitively raped, and her life is at risk for her resistance, but she later struggles for citizenship in the UK. Bashir, too, had to walk to escape persecution but (like Deng) became a spokesperson for her people's plight and for refugees.

*On Black Sisters' Street* (2008) is a novel by Chika Unigwe, a Nigerian. Her novel concerns African prostitutes (women willingly 'trafficked' to Europe, then trapped there by the inability to repay their flight tickets); created when she, a 'privileged' African migrant with a Belgian husband, noticed the African "working women" in Antwerpen. She interviewed them in order to novelise their stories and draw attention to their plight. Often harrowing to read and providing each character's back story in their African countries of origin, this is a key text concerning sex trafficking. Brian Chikwava's title *Harare North* (2009) uses the mocking Zimbabwean 'nickname' for London since so many of them fled there during Mugabe's rule. This fascinating text is written in strange 'Shonaized' English that vividly reveals the narrator's mental disturbance. Driven by guilt for a political murder he committed (under orders), his inability to ritually honour his mother's death, and dread of deportation as an illegal migrant, the narrator becomes feral and probably insane as his life unravels towards the text's end. The narrative vividly evokes the precarity of life in a ruined society and of existence as a refugee on the margins of the Western 'asylum' site.

It is harrowing merely to read Jamala Safari's account (in *The Great Agony and Pure Laughter of the Gods* – 2012) of the life of a teenage boy in South Kivu province of the DRC, abducted to serve as a child soldier – one of the most awful conditions of the range of problems driving Africans into migrancy. The area (rich in valuable metals) attracts the predatory intentions of neighbouring countries and international consortia, but also of ruthlessly competitive militias causing mayhem in their greed for wealth. As someone who is himself a migrant from eastern DRC now living in South Africa, the author made use of his own local knowledge to depict his protagonists' struggles. A girl with whom the boy shares an innocent but deeply committed love ends up a kidnapped 'wife' to one of the brutal commanders in the camp where they live – the boy unable to help her, himself fighting for survival by taking on a mask of uncaring cruelty. Eventually ejected from the camp by the jealous commander, the youngster is left for dead in the forest. Rescued by chance, he is taken to hospital, though his soul is far more wounded than his body. He cannot settle back into familial and local life. He flees to a Mozambican refugee camp, where he learns that his beloved has returned to their village; she is pregnant by her captor. He returns to her, accepting her little son as his own, and the small family lives in love. The text is significant not only for its compelling account but for evoking the possibility of humane recovery from awful forms of forced migration.

*Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) is ironically probably the most famous of the novels depicting African migrant experiences since her text concerns middle class Nigerians' migration experiences which, if not without stresses, grief and deprivation, are nevertheless immeasurably less dreadful than almost all the other migrations featured in this article. Reviewers and scholars have lavished attention on the writing of this sole famous African writer's text but seem to continue to overlook the literary art and courage of a majority of African writers who evoke their continent's brutal power-mongers and the all-

but overwhelming handicaps with which their compatriots have to cope both before and after becoming refugees. Adichie's writing is notably polished but conveys a sense of complacency in the relative ease with which the main characters overcome difficulties and regain personal prosperity upon returning to their homeland. In the same year (2013), the young Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* was also published; this is a particularly powerful rendition of the African migrant tragedy (see Concilio 2018):

Look at the children of the land leaving in droves, leaving their own land with bleeding wounds on their bodies and shock on their faces and blood in their hearts and hunger in their stomachs and grief in their footsteps. Leaving their fathers and mothers and children behind, leaving their umbilical cords underneath the soil, leaving the bones of their ancestors in the earth, leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you just cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same. (Bulawayo 2013, 146)

The incantatory poetry of such a passage is an acknowledgement of the profound sorrow from which it springs. The novel's main character Darling, leaving her mother, her community and her friends to join an aunt working in Michigan, encounters the usual disillusionment with the US and other idealised 'Western' societies that naïve African migrants are faced with. The country is indeed prosperous, but the society has its own indigent and otherwise marginalised citizens – and even further excluded from its comforts lies the zone where the African migrants cling to whatever papers and jobs they can obtain; disdained for their 'otherness'.

Faïza Guène, who writes in French, wittily but with underlying deep feeling, evokes the life of many Algerians living in the French cities' notorious *banlieues* – far-flung, outer-edge suburbs. Her novel (first published in 2014) bearing the translated title *Men Don't Cry* (Guène 2021) is a contemporary take on the vexed relations between French citizens and the inhabitants of their country's ex-colonies (see Toivanen 2019), although focusing on the problematic relations between migrants who assimilate successfully and prosper, and those who hang on to traditional cultural values and family cohesion. Guène uses humour to alleviate a scenario that might be seen as bleak, vitalising her novels and earning her a wide and appreciative following. Even as the novel eschews an accusing, lamenting or complaining voice (except in the melodramatic outbursts of the mother figure), the strains and threats besetting migrant lives are vividly evoked. (Compare Nada 1997: a careful assessment of earlier "Beur fiction.") In *Adua* (original Italian, 2015), Igiaba Scego parallels the experiences of a Somali father who works as a translator for the Italian military in Rome in the nineteen-thirties with those of his daughter Adua, who is brought to Italy to star in a sleazy film in the late seventies – and stays on. Their lives in Italy confirm findings that masculine migrants

tend to live with feelings of “humiliation” and constant “danger,” whereas female migrant experiences centre on “body, violence and depression” (Ghiroldi 2017, 51), for the father is both used and violently assaulted, whereas the daughter’s body is commodified. The father returns to Somalia while the daughter is reluctant to do so; she marries and supports a much younger Somali refugee before helping him move on to a new life elsewhere in Europe (cf. Gagliano 2020, “Somaliness”).

Jamal Mahjoub, an Anglo-Sudanese author, turned to writing crime fiction both as a more lucrative form and “to release stories that would otherwise go untold” (Mahjoub Interview<sup>1</sup>). Under the pseudonym Parker Bilal, the author has created a fascinating crime fiction series featuring a private detective who is a Sudanese political refugee working in Cairo. The 2016 novel *City of Jackals* centres on the bloody scapegoating of poor Sudanese and ends with the demolition of an illegal refugee camp in the city – presaged as the detective sees (in the beleaguered camp) “children crying” while parents “rushed about trying to find a safe spot to shelter, but there was nowhere left to go” (Bilal 2016, 409). Not long afterwards, he notes media images of “the camp in tatters”; “Twenty-seven dead. Eleven children.” Nevertheless, “Americans and Europeans would remain silent. Nobody wanted to risk upsetting their most important ally in the region” (ibid., 435). Makana (the investigator) also uncovers the horrifying trade in refugee children’s body parts – ‘harvested’ for wealthy, elderly customers. Partly due to his empathy as a fellow refugee, he breaks open such ugly, secret predations on precariously dislocated people, highlighting a pervasive threat to displaced Africans. Imbolo Mbue’s novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2017) does not allude to the struggle for citizenship of children born to illegal migrants in the US but depicts an ‘illegal’ Cameroonian migrant family desperate to remain in America. This cleverly plotted, vividly imagined text is imbued with ironic compassion. It juxtaposes an extremely wealthy ‘white’ American family with an African migrant one; the American couple employing the Cameroonian parents – the father as chauffeur and the mother (occasionally) as housekeeper and child-minder. The two families become emotionally intertwined in unexpected ways. The American man is a leading executive at Lehman Brothers, the gigantic firm that shortly collapses – causing enormous damage to the American economy. The Cameroonian chauffeur overhears conversations about this situation, while his wife discovers the American wife’s insecurity that she seeks to drown in alcohol and dull by drug ingestion. Without the author downplaying the more unpleasant and difficult struggles of the migrant family, their strong bond is contrasted with the ‘white’ family’s strained relationships. Betrayal and blackmail from both sides eventually sever the links between the two families. The Cameroonian couple, themselves at loggerheads about returning to West Africa, is in the end forced to go back, but this family endures and manages successfully to resume life at home.

In his 2018 novel *North of Dawn*, Somalia’s most famous Europhone writer, Nuruddin Farah, has addressed his compatriots’ migrations to Scandinavia – combining this topic with acknowledgement of partly justified mistrust by local authorities due to networking and

cooperation between Somali refugees and terrorists; the latter adherents to a creed of the violent destruction of ‘non-Muslim’ societies. His main characters, a middle-aged Somali couple, lead a comfortable and privileged life contrasting with the fate of the average Somali refugee, which is characterised by experiences of racial “stigmatisation” (see Fangen 2006, 70). The couple’s son empathises with his less privileged compatriots and joins a group that his father reviles as Muslim extremists, fissuring the family. He returns to Somalia, where he dies in a suicide bombing – obliging his grieving mother to fulfil what she sees as a moral duty: bringing his widow and her two children to Norway. This results in serious political and emotional problems for the family. Internecine African wars like Somalia’s have resulted in huge refugee problems, but Africans have also been displaced by conscription into European armies to fight within or beyond Africa, especially in the World Wars. Abdulrazak Gurnah has imaginatively recreated the plight of a near-forgotten group of East Africans – those dragooned into serving in the German colonial army fighting the British and their allies and known as *askari* during the First World War. In *Afterlives* (2020), two such *askari* are important characters, and the accent falls on the psychological consequences and social and familial effects of their alliances with the Germans. Both men were initially displaced from their families by terrible home circumstances: one ran away at eleven; the other was sold by his parents. The first lands up with a gentle German farmer, a learned man who inspires the youth to admire German civilisation and accept Christianity. When the Germans in East Africa come under attack in World War I, he feels obliged to join them, eventually ‘disappearing’. Many years later, his sister’s son, who had been ‘haunted’ by this uncle, discovers that he ended up in a Nazi camp for having had an affair with a white German woman; he died there. The other becomes an *askari* at seventeen, protected but troubled by a German officer’s obsession with him – after the war, he hides his past and, marrying and becoming a father, finds solace in family and a (Muslim) faith community. The novel, with moving skill, recreates the ambivalences in *askari* lives – depicting complex dilemmas that drove their initial dissociation from African communities in men who were never merely colonial collaborators or compradors.

In the concluding section of this article, three novels are singled out as covering a more-or-less representative span of migrations from and within Africa in various, vividly moving accounts. The texts illustrate the achievements of the continent’s authors in creative writing that discloses African understanding of the nature and effects of migration with special skill. The first text addressed is Cristina Ali Farah’s 2007 *Madre piccola*; initially published in Farah’s mother tongue, Italian. It has been expertly translated into English. Farah herself had to flee Somalia, her father’s country (where she grew up), at age eighteen, with a newborn baby strapped to her chest. The English title *Little Mother* (2011) refers to a Somali tradition that refers to the mother’s sister as her own children’s ‘little’ mother. In Farah’s text, this is Barni, with whom the other central female character, her maternal cousin (called Domenica in Italian and Axad in Somali contexts), grew up as both ‘sister’ and mentor. Barni’s maternal powers are confirmed in her adult job as a midwife; in Italy,

she works in a hospital, but she is also a woman who readily ‘mothers’ other Somali refugees – for Somali linkages endure even in foreign surroundings. Cristina Farah indeed dedicated her novel firstly to Somalis, whose “scattered voices of the Somali diaspora ... are woven throughout [her] book” (Farah 2011, xiii). Somalis were dispersed to many locales when Mohammed Siyad Barre’s tyranny collapsed in 1991, unleashing bloodily violent mayhem as competing, anarchic groups overran the society in orgies of killing and rape.

Barni’s beautiful and terrible evocation of the deaths of Somali refugees fleeing in unsafe and overloaded boats in their desperation to reach a ‘safe haven’ in Europe (here, Italy) is unforgettable:

Boats have been coming and unloading illegal immigrants along Italian coastlines for a long time now. The tides go in and out and the beaches keep filling up with garbage: tomato cans, shards of green glass, small tubes of medicine, clumps of tar, and plastic bags, more and yet more plastic bags. And, carried by the sea, lifeless bodies, wearing tattered clothes, their purplish skin blotched with white salt. (Farah 2011, 13-14)

This is how human beings become garbage, pollutants and waste products. Even living refugees are, of course, gazed at with hostile eyes, resented as intruders or predatory, exploitative freebooters. Both a profound fury at those responsible but not accountable for such desperation-driven and eventually fatal risks taken and deep-felt empathy for the victims endow the passage with tragic grandeur coexistent with horror. This is how imaginative or literary writing allows us to *comprehend* forced migration in ways that scholarly studies seldom achieve because it is here rendered in the human voice responding to close perception with appropriate feeling. “The desert swells and bursts inside of me,” Barni says elsewhere, “and I feel in my arms the weight of those bodies swallowed up by the white sea” (ibid., 47).

Nuruddin Farah, Cristina’s namesake (but not relative), fellow novelist and predecessor, wrote *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000) – a work combining his authorial meditations on exile and migration and moving renditions of interviews conveying the sorrow felt by particularly older men at the multiple lives lost due to the Somali state’s collapse. In *Little Mother*, one somewhat feckless drifter represents the thousands of young male Somalis unable to adapt to life as refugees (unlike the women, who generally do manage to settle successfully by remaining pragmatic and familially responsible). The young man refers to feeling (as a migrant) “a deep and shabby sadness” (ibid., 57), vividly evoking his sense of status loss, humiliation and lack of dignity. The third narrator in *Little Mother* represents migrants whose displacement and sense of exclusion and deprivation cause a psychic disturbance. Domenica/Axad resorts to self-harming; cut off from the family members she loved (her father, presumed to have died in the Somali conflict, and her cousin Barni, with whom she later reconnects) in dreary isolation; her life controlled by an autocratic male

cousin – although she acknowledges that he “saved” her from “the usual life of the diaspora, aimless peregrinations” (ibid., 87). Through Barni, Cristina Farah acknowledges that some refugees unwisely maintain ancient clan hatreds even in the diaspora, describing this as a “perpetuating the pain”: “hatred among lonely people, scattered all over the world” (ibid., 155). The narrative concludes with healing words when Barni evokes her and Axad’s decision to live together in Italy, raising Axad’s baby son (named for her father): “we carry our home with us” – adding: “together, we can share the greater part of our pain” (ibid., 226).

Sulaiman Addonia’s *Silence Is my Mother Tongue* (2018), set in a remote Sudanese refugee camp mainly inhabited by Eritreans who have fled the war with Ethiopia, contains a half-hidden love story – a love only once openly expressed for, even though displaced in the camp, the Muslim families (like their Christian counterparts) maintain strict social rules to govern especially young women’s lives. The strikingly individual central character Saba, however, defies rules, particularly those controlling natural impulses by inculcating shame. Addonia’s novel emphasises the extent to which – even in a refugee camp – repression named “tradition” and its ideal, a misnamed “purity,” constitute a system of containment harsher (to young women or the sexually ‘deviant’) than the camp’s. Saba has a mute brother, whom she loves deeply. Puritanically minded camp dwellers like the midwife, her mother’s friend, consider the siblings’ sleeping together and ‘inverted’ domestic roles wrong, but when Saba (who wants to study medicine) is manipulated into marrying the camp’s rich man, she demands her brother’s moving into the husband’s home compound along with herself. Saba’s stipulation is accepted by her husband since he and her brother are secretly in love. Intruding into this complex and highly unorthodox sexual scenario is the further complication of a wealthy local nomad whose help is needed to rescue Saba’s dearest friend. When she visited Saba, she fell victim to a violent rape by Saba’s husband’s brutish son; now Saba feels obliged to get her friend to a proper hospital. The nomad can get Saba and her wounded friend out of the camp, as he is not a refugee. However, the nomad demands Saba’s or her brother’s sexual submission to himself as the price for his help in getting the women away.

Earlier, the friends had disagreed about what they needed to strive for: Saba’s dream of university studies and professional life as a doctor conflicted with her friend’s insistence that fighting for the freedom that would secure food to stave off starvation was more important. Saba argues: “if we all become fighters who will rebuild our destroyed homes [...] bridges, roads [...] treat the ill and educate children?” But, her friend responds, “we must be ready to die like men for our dreams. They are our dreams too” (Addonia 2018, 143). Although he cannot possibly witness her every movement and thought, Saba’s entire life is imagined as narrated by the lonely, artistic camp-dweller who is in love with her and obsessively observes her from his make-do ‘cinema’ – *Cinema Silenzioso* – where he encourages camp dwellers to tell their dreams rather than recall their sufferings. Knowing their “dreams, their fears and crimes” (ibid., 18), he wishes his cinema to be a place of liberty contrasting with the oppressive ethos of “family honour,” of “silence,” of “plodding ahead on [the] path of purity” (ibid., 19).

And it is in resistance to this that he adores the free spirit of the irrepressible Saba, with whom their mutual love is at last fulfilled near the novel's end. At one point, Saba encounters an elderly camp dweller who warns her that "people have confused being a refugee with the end of life" but that he has learned "never to leave my desires behind" (ibid., 110).

The novel, in its beautiful, dreamlike flow, which yet contains and acknowledges the ugly forms of behaviour and deprived conditions of life in a refugee camp, in fact combines several love stories – primarily that of Saba and her sensitive, handicapped brother (a gifted painter); that between her and the camp cinematographer; her brother's and the rich businessman's love; Saba's committed relationship with her friend who is raped, as well as her caring concern with other women in the camp who challenge its ethos. In the camp, it is not a (married) rapist of a young girl who is blamed, for it is *she* who is stigmatised; doomed to become "a moral ghost story for generations to come" (Addonia *Silence*, 108). Real purity is shown in Saba's and her brother's connectedness, for "they linked each other's worlds" (ibid., 53). Her brother submits to rape by the nomad so that Saba can escape the camp and save her friend's life. Saba has resolved that, since her terribly injured friend will probably never be able to follow in her admired mother's footsteps as a freedom fighter, she will do so in her stead. The concluding (if not final) words of the novel are Saba's brother's: "She freed herself before her country, she freed me, and freed love in our compound, in our camp, before she set off on her way to the front to pick up a gun to free a piece of land" (ibid., 203). To the narrator as to the author, the deeper freedom is the one that matters more and overcoming ugly shame about the body's natural needs in the worthier war. Addonia, with superb delicacy, conveys how life among refugees remains in continuity with life before and after.

Although Mhani Alaoui's *Aya Dane* (2019) mainly concerns the psychic damage wrought by exile, it is a narrative leavened by eventual revelations that even unbearable nostalgia, loss and guilt can forge creativity out of ruins and remnants. The title character is a young and lonely (or rather, isolated and hermetic) Moroccan woman, a brilliant painter. Her story is deployed slowly in the course of a complex account. Aya Dane lives in the attic space of a home owned by wealthy Americans, for whom she house-sits. She has a studio where she spends arduous hours creating what is referred to as a commissioned work, since an enigmatic world-famous collector has invited her to submit a new painting to be considered for inclusion in his private collection. This framing narrative *may* be an illusion on Aya's part, for she is imagined as profoundly troubled, haunted by her past and probably "damaged" (in psychiatric terms). It is possible that nearly all of the text we read was penned as therapy suggested to Aya by her psychoanalyst – someone she (apparently erroneously) imagines as her lover and, at times, distrusts.

*Aya Dane* presents us with a childhood lived initially in the 'native quarter' of Tangiers, in a loving family where everything changes when the comfortable life of the enlightened,

affectionate parents deteriorates; silences, ugly secrets and straitened circumstances, and particularly the increasing constraints of extremist Islam dictates, eating into the fabric of lives formerly lived in ease and the enjoyment of modest, simple pleasures. In America, the mysterious texter from Aya's past – in a poem-like message sent annually on the same day, unsigned by the international caller – suddenly adds a new and more painful detail in the 'extra' fourth line to his mysterious note, now reading: *As the fire burns,/ The journey becomes loss/ The departure, exile./ And the muñeca breaks* (Alaoui 2019, 19). This is the fifteenth time Aya has been sent this text. The Spanish/ [Tangerine] Arabic word in the last line refers to a porcelain doll Aya was given by her father – his one-and-only (and expensive) gift to her, which she treasured for that reason but did not play with. The explanations of the other details in the ominous message are given only at the end of Aya's account.

The atmosphere in the Tangiers home is darkened, even poisoned by the son, Aya's older sibling, with whom the little girl still shares a room in the two-bedroomed dwelling. He listens to the fanatic broadcasts of a particular imam, 'reads' the Koran (upside down, as he was never sent to the madrassa), and starts having brutal, exploitative sex in raping trusting 'girl friends' – eventually also his little sister, whose intellectual brilliance and schooling opportunities he resents and would deny her. His violent, incestuous act is thus ideologically motivated, but we learn that his life has been thrown in disarray by some awful event – revealed only much, much later. Yet his viciousness goes unpunished; both parents have been cowed in some way. Subsequent to the sibling rape, Aya is 'surrendered' by her parents to a wealthy patron to safeguard her and ensure a better, freer future – although it separates her utterly from her family and former life. Her patron was born and still lives in Tangiers. He is the son of a woman from a leading local 'Arab' family and a famous American poet, who deserted the woman and their son by returning to the USA but continued to fund their privileged life. Learning that Aya is intellectually gifted, the son decided to take her into his home and give her the educational and other opportunities to move on and out into a wider world. Aya, of course, pays a painful emotional price for this severance from her family, home and culture. While her fame as a painter grows, later, she starts receiving hate mail – "the scorn of the migrant" (ibid., 44). Even in her possibly imaginary lover – wealthy and white, wittily described as "a cross between a latter-day Orientalist and an inextinguishable Don Quixote" (ibid., 59) – Aya senses that "his help could be devastating [...] an ill-disguised male will, an unquenchable hunger" (ibid., 92); closely resembling what she experienced in Morocco.

The irony is pointed, for her admired Tangiers mathematics teacher, Miss Mai, who had recognised Aya's brilliance, had warned her to "find a way" to leave and never "look back" – convinced that "there is nothing left here" (ibid., 37). Yet when Aya takes up painting in the USA, she does so "with a furious need" for an "exorcism of the pain, the loss and disillusionment" (ibid., 105) that she feels there. She cannot stop painting, sensing that "she was like the refugee walking her road to freedom, which was also her exile"; the steps are "painful," but "every pause a brutal reminder of her loss and vulnerability" (ibid., 106). When

the collector turns up and takes away her painting, Aya realises with shock that with it, he has “taken her memories, her foreignness, her Arabness, her nothingness, her talents, her dreams, her loves ... her soul” (ibid., 226). This predation is related to that of her analyst, who writes in a private diary the primly detached words: “*I was fascinated by the migrant condition as a diagnostic category*” (ibid., 238) and that “*her art was the thick rope knotting together her identity and her pathology*” (ibid., 242). The triumph of Aya’s story is that at the end, she counter-analyses her psychiatrist, saying that she was “his Dora, his poem, his experiment, his breakthrough, his work of art, his fraud” (ibid., 247). She walks out of the clinic; savouring “the air of an unmarked path,” for Aya has come to understand that she has “surrendered” her painting, but not herself – no longer do her memories control her, for “they are poised to become color and paint and matter, once more” (ibid., 252-253).

Migration studies, also in literature, have become established as a large and distinct field spanning multiple disciplines. Robert Young (a postcolonial historian) notes: “a new subaltern tricontinental of migrants from the poorer countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America” who remain “invisible” unless they die, are arrested or demonised by politicians” (Young 2012, 31). While studying refugee literature (here, in its African manifestations), we need to note the centrality of the great basis word, *land* – for it allows us to see how African devastation pushing people into migration can be thought of as initiated by the centuries-old slave systems validating both the selling of Africans by Africans to Arab and European slavers in a vast cumulative forced ‘migration’ of many millions of Africans to distant lands, as well as the later (migratory?) invasions of the colonial period by means of which the Europeans came into African areas to claim land by right of domination and assumptions of cultural superiority – displacing African people from African land (see wa Thiong’o 1967). That African and other refugees flock to the West, ‘landing’ there (if they do not die on their journey by boat or plane), can be thought of as ‘chickens coming home to roost’ – i.e., as the penalty to the cultures who colonised their land now have to pay the price by accommodating at least some of the descendants of those whose land they appropriated. By severing links between those living on the land as autochtones and those ‘owning’ and controlling the uses of African land, rulers in urban enclaves have wreaked ecological devastation on the earth with no concern for the fate of future generations in their regions who are doomed to wrest their living from ruined land – while the powerful extract enormous profits by satisfying short-sighted, insatiable demands for lucrative crops and valuable minerals underneath the soil’s surface. The *postcolonial* African rulers are/were not taught by their ancestors to use land and govern those living on it responsibly but follow/ed colonially established traditions of ruthless greed and wide spatial separation from those working the land. Postcolonial misrule and ruthless appropriation of the profits provided by the land and derived from the regions of the governed are the chief propellants of the refugee crises of those who – arduously and at immense risk, incurring harm and often death – have had to make landfall and seek shelter in other countries, as African writers (among others who bear witness to this global tragedy) reveal to those who attentively read their work. Inhospitable responses to those fleeing from uninhabitable lands constitute one of the most flagrant yet enduring politically justified crimes of our time.

The deep sorrow of even the relatively privileged African exile able to articulate the bitter sense of loss and deprivation echoes in a 1970 poem by the South African poet Arthur Nortje, evoking

the way  
I live now  
in a foreign winter  
of centrally heated freedom  
no longer the watchman finding  
nutriment in the glow of an African fire  
but merely a mouthpiece. (Nortje 2000, 392-93)

## **Notes**

1. Mahjoub, Jamal. 2013. "Jamal Mahjoub: My wife says Parker Bilal is much nicer." Interview with John Crace. *The Guardian*, 17 March 2013. Accessed 17/05/2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/17/jamal-mahjoub-parker-bilal>.

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