

**Subjects at the Borders: Refugee Writing and Representation****Janet Wilson, University of Northampton**

Today's humanitarian refugee crisis, which has impacted the western world notably through massive media exposure, has had a polarising effect at all levels of society, but especially on government officials and policy makers who have to deal with the crisis, arousing a range of feelings from compassion and sympathy to anger, fear, revulsion; indeed the refugee crisis has been instrumental in the new wave of populism fuelled by a sense of xenophobia. These widely differing responses are also reflected in the reception of narratives that refugees tell or that are told about them, attributable to unverifiable indeterminacies in their accounts, their need for mediation by western observers or translators, and even by representational appropriation (which leads to ethical issues). For writers of fiction, however, such uncertainties and problematics of representation of border subjects can be exploited through a range of narrative devices, and given greater contextualisation by reference to the social and political structures that affect the lives of refugees. The presentation of character and action in fiction complicates the limited and stereotypical representations of refugees as subjects of dispossession, and allows for multiple, coexisting and directly competing points of view to appear and engage the reader on more than one level. As more literary and visual responses emerge both by and about refugees -- whose drama is one of the most compelling of our time -- most recently the new tragi-comic film about a Syrian refugee, (*The Other Side of Hope*, by Aki Kaurismaki-) it is possible to identify a range of interpretive frameworks including, voice and point of view, narrative and aesthetic strategies that regulate our ways of perceiving them.

So in order to examine the way that ' frameworks of perception and recognition can mobilise and manage affective and ethical responses' (JAGO)- I will compare two novels that deal with different stages of the refugee experience and so are diverse types, *African Titanicus*, originally written in Arabic by Abu Bakr Khaal (2014), an Eritrean writer now living in Denmark, set in the chaotic world of flight, the exodus of migrants from Africa to the Mediterranean, is a rare example of a refugee novel, and so unfamiliar in many respects to the Western reader, (author was refugee in Tunisia). *The Year of the Runaways* by British born Indian, Sunjeev Sahota, about three Indian illegal migrants in England is a novel about immigration and so belongs to a more established, familiar literary genre. Both rely on a degree of stereotyping but expand portraits of individual suffering to present wider social pictures of flight (in the first) and immigration to a new land (in the second), so generating different social imaginaries. (Christ 32 qtd Korte, 2012, 76)

In considering the topic of this conference, I also frame my analysis in relation to the new thinking on poverty and precarity, In Abu Bakr Khaal's novel we infer that widescale poverty in Eritrea raises questions of social capability, which Amartya Sen and Felicity Nussbaum see in their analysis of the causes of poverty - as lack of agency, opportunity and access to knowledge, tradition, rights and capabilities. This deprivation in turn triggers a willingness to risk life – making it precarious - by exodus. In the longer and more wide-ranging novel by Sahota, by contrast, the poverty and socioeconomic deprivation of the three migrants are represented and relativised against other types of precarity and uncertainty- psychological insecurity, fragility, personal risk, family consequences -- among the middle classes of the diaspora community.

Poverty and precarity are today identified with failures in the socioeconomic processes conditions of globalisation, causing deprivation, exclusion , and reducing

capability. Precarity, identified by Judith Butler as a 'politically induced notion' (2009 Frames of War- 26) , caused by inaction within the political/economic system, usually supported by nation states, leaves human lives vulnerable and at risk of physical impairment (poverty, disease, political violence). Butler also argues that precarity and these new vulnerabilities are beginning to reshape the cultural category of being human-- and one of the marks of life being recognised as human is grievability at its loss. Both novels address this question of 'humanness' by acknowledging that certain lives are vulnerable, and hence grievable – although many slip from recognition, below the threshold of perception (Jago 15), with correspondingly diminished life claims. Secondly they show that recognising the precariousness of life , especially that one's life is always in the hands of others, creates awareness of co-vulnerability- it implies a relationship of interdependence with and responsibility towards others.

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### **Abu Bakr Kaal, *Africa Titanicus***

In *Africa Titanicus*, the deteriorating situation in Eritrea due to socioeconomic deprivation, and lack of state support is described through images of bewitchment and magic, that recall Conrad's darkest Africa. The West is far removed in every sense (epistemological, ontological) -- a point to aspire towards rather than a reality (the characters do not realise they are refugees, referring to themselves as 'travellers' until they arrive in Italy with its TV mediated reports) . Volatile discourses about migration, of witchcraft and magic, circulate in the society to which the first person narrator Abdar, belongs, as he outlines his 'conversion' from a sceptic about migration to being an addict

Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell sweeping everything along in its wake... I and many others beside me, attributed it all to the works of a dark

sorcerer, emerging from the mists of the unknown... It was a pandemic , a plague,  
And not a single young soul was left untouched.

The real dangers of migration – the losses at sea – are blurred and ignored in the flows of gossip, rumour, ‘strange and wonderful stories’. The title which alludes to the sinking of apparently unsinkable boats – encapsulates that fact that the drownings are juxtaposed to public disbelief and incredulity. The narrator is scornful of the ‘dangerous lure’ of migration with its familiar bounty: the beautiful lady and flashy car. But he becomes hooked when he discovers that migration is associated with the transformative power of art (pertain indirectly to the writing of the novel). His susceptibility to destabilisations of reality appear when he reads a story about an uncle who aims to persuade his nephew out of the ‘migration bug’ – but as the nephew anxiously asks for verification of the reports that local boats had sunk, the uncle drinks more wine, and decides to encourage his nephew to stay at home and become a farmer, by singing the Song of Joy, the song sung by the first man on earth when he sees woman for the first time. Through this song, (which the story adds is categorised by folklorists as Africa’s earliest musical and narrative heritage), the narrator is introduced to what he calls ‘the rich world of the imagination’ and becomes convinced that the ‘power of song can overcome sorcery’. He ‘proves’ this in the very next chapter when he pretends he is a sorcerer with his arts of rhetoric and seduces ‘with my own ridiculous rant’ a witch ‘who has the most enchanting eyes of any witch that ever lived’ (20).

This revelation of the narrator’s appears to be a moment of recognition (anagnorisis) –which can be influential in forming ethical understanding (see van Bever Donker) ‘ a moment of disruption and transformation where the character’s understanding of the world is altered, rearranged, in order to make more space for the other’ (27) –but

that it is a false recognition – in terms of Levinas it is prompted by an image of reality – and leads to irresponsibility because it draws attention away from a fluid and living relation to being. As Vincent Bever Van Donker says (26) ‘we exchange the living image for one that is static and becomes an evasion of reality’, the narrator henceforth is seduced by the lure of migration because it is now, to his mind, inextricable from art. This false inference provides a validating framework for the human tragedy of his story about his failed flight with others from Eritrea to the Mediterranean. But as his decision makes him ignore the real risk to life involved - the lure of song is in the end as reprehensible as that of ‘the sorcerer’ – both render life precarious. Yet the novel confirms that art has a role to play, for song can give voice to tragic loss by speaking on behalf of the collective. This implies a hierarchy among border subjects, as the singer’s life becomes valued more than those around him and his loss felt more keenly.

Khaal’s narrative strategy is to project the disjunction between reality and art typographically by italicising the inset stories and poems to which the narrator attributes cultural value, for these give an added dimension of meaning to the terrible losses that the narrative records. The book ends with the verses of Malouk, his hero-as –victim, who sinks to a watery grave in one of the capsized boats, but who rapidly becomes a mythological figure after his death, being sighted in various towns, and perpetuating the myth/legend that surrounded his ancestor Malouk I who also died. In writing down and concluding with the words/song of this tragic figure, the narrator confirms his belief in art’s power to overcoming sorcery (which he attributes the mass urge to migrate). This is Malouk’s lament for the collective lives of those who have perished in the attempt. QUOTE 122

To all the pounding hearts  
In feverish boats  
I will cut

Through these paths  
With my own liberated heart  
And tell my soul  
To shout of your silenced deaths  
And fill palms of dust with morning dew  
And song

In this novel whose social settings are the shady world of illicit movement, the refugees -- apart from the narrator, Malouk and one woman who struggles to comprehend the tragedies she witnesses-- are stereotyped as vulnerable victims; and bandits/smugglers as unreliable, dishonest, incompetent, out of control. But an affective thematic appears-- illness and death are daily events, and there are signs of co-caring and responsibility even among smugglers and bandits (one woman is taken hospital), The anonymity of lives, of those who slip from sight is noted in the emotional responses of Terhar and Abdar to the inscriptions of past refugees written on the walls and in their letters left behind in the rooms of the smugglers den, for those who come after (45-47). Khaal's narrative strategy of using inset stories in his first person account, extends to providing traces and relics of the past. The written fragments are evidence of lost lives or unknown fates, and they anticipate the memorialising function of the conclusion. The story is out of reach for most Western readers, but the characters' affective responses and recognition of co-vulnerability through reading the story fragments, are a stalking horse for our emotions just as Malouk's poem, cited at the end, provides some closure to the suffering the story records.

**Sunjeev Sahota, *Year of the Runaways* (2014)**

In comparing these novels I note the differences in narrative treatment between representing life as loss --a priori - (in *African Titanics*), and life in multiple social contexts as impoverished, precarious but able to be valued and sustained with the appropriate life skills (not necessarily official resources) (in Sahota's). Sahota uses transnational frames of

location - India and England-- and a dualistic time frame (before and after migration), although the title refers to the year after the arrival of three illegal immigrants in England. This structure allows the reader to engage with the adverse circumstances that cause each character to leave India, to develop an affective response, and evaluate their handling of privation away from family and home. The possibility of a return to India recurs throughout the novel, demanding some response, or reassessment of their decision – one of the characters is told upon arrival by an Indian co-worker that he is a fool to think that earning the money he hopes to is sufficient reason to stay: ‘Take my advice and go back now. Before there’s nothing to go back for and you’re stuck here’ (PAGE) . In stressing these options, of remaining or returning- the novel points to the range of ethical considerations informing our current understanding of precarity in relation to migration: the right to a better life, expectations of education and employment, the representation of a more complex subjectivity, self agency, the desire and option of return to the homeland and so on.

Adversity, poverty and reduced choice are all tolerated by the refugees in this novel because of their illegal status and the fear of exposure that haunts them. They endure these conditions - exacerbated by their financial commitments (to moneylenders, family and to the fake marriage partner) - as a provisional necessity in order to gain residency, citizenship, or profit enough to return India. This stress on the place of poverty in the scheme of migration, and hoped for economic progression and material betterment (usually including relatives and dependencies) , also shows the differences between migrant and refugee novel of Abu Bakr Khaal where no such schema exists.

Sahota’s picture of the interrelationships between the three young men living in temporary illegal occupation in the bleak environs of Sheffield, also gives a deeper insight

than Khaal's novel is able to, into how precarity affects interpersonal relations and forms of responsibility towards each other, as the divisions between abandonment or support, caring or violence become more arbitrary. Family loyalties and affection, one reason for coming to England, is questioned.

'Its not work that makes us leave home and come here. Its love, Love for our families.[...] Do you think that's true'?

'We come here for the same reason that our people do anything, Duty, We're doing our duty, And its shit' [PAGE]

In order to manage marginal living conditions in a diaspora community where the sole source of support is the centre of religious practice, the Sikh temple or Gurdwara, - relations of co-protection are maintained, especially between two of the migrants, Avtar an illegal student visa, and Randeep (on a fake visa marriage). Yet indigence forces them to become ruthless and they also turn against each other; Tochi, a Dalit, steals the second job of Avtar, the migrant posing as a student on a temporary visa; in return Avtar, when his debtors finally come after him threatening to kill his family in India, breaks into Tochi's room and steals all his savings to pay them off.

Jenny Lawn writes that 'Precarity relates to the differential distribution of resources necessary to sustain life, and plays out into the political struggle between dominant and marginal groups' and Sahota also challenges economic injustice/class inequality based on wealth and privilege. In the diaspora community many previous categories (education and employment) and social distinctions are erased-- and in two sub plots he shows precarity as a condition of the affluent elite that undermines wealth and social status as markers of individual value. Dr Cheema, a wealthy Indian business man experiences psychological vulnerability when it comes to constructing new belonging in the host society. Alienated in England, he finds in the material want of the working-class illegal migrant a symbol of his



own spiritual losses: dispossession from the homeland and nostalgia for the past. Meeting the illegal student, Avtar makes him aware of his alienation: he says 'They don't understand. We don't belong here, It's not our home. You helped me realise that. People like you'. (317) The urgent need for national belonging overrides class and wealth effecting a shift in the positions of authority between the two men. The younger, impoverished man levels a critique at the older man's material values rather than appreciate the desolation of the soul: 'What decadence this belonging rubbish was what time the rich must have if they could sit round and weave such worries out of such threadbare things' (316).

The other subplot of the novel shows how economic and individual insecurity, far from constraining the new freedoms that are possible in the diaspora, underlie the urge to seek freedom. The pious, middle class British Sikh, Narinder who turns down a safe middle class arranged marriage, and run away from her family in Sheffield to help out Randeep- one of the refugees, so that he can get a marriage visa, illustrates the increased class mobilisation and the new types of motivation that precarity triggers (witness Brexit) . Idealistic Narinder wants to do good but she also valorises precarity by taking a risk and bidding for freedom from her family. Yet she remains in thrall to family expectations and ultimately returns home to look after her father when her mother dies , turning down the prospect of a love match and so losing the chance for personal happiness (the novel implies)

## **CONCLUSION**

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My comparison of these novels and their different interpretative frameworks of perception suggests that the further away from the heat and intensity of migration-as-flight the novel or account is the better we, as Western readers can form an ethical response to the

predicament of refugees and asylum seekers. There is greater social context and interiority of characterisation in *The Year of the Runaways* than in *African Titanics*. Sahota's characters make choices, and aware of a moral code sometimes rise above their blighted situations in ways that are familiar to us - Indeed as readers we might be seen as playing a role in creating and sustaining a global demand for third world success stories like this that naturalise 'an ambiguous process of incorporation' (Kerry Bystrom 2008, 'The Novel and Human Rights', *Journal of Human Rights*, 7 (45) (2008) 395). Yet the defamiliarisation of society in *African Titanics*, the emphasis on the irreducible humanness of desperate refugees and the questions of social justice, equality and Human Rights their tragedy arouses in western readers, might solicit a more instantaneous empathetic response and ethical awareness than the success story of *The Year of the Runaways*.

As a diaspora novel, *The Year of the Runaways* is also closer to the classic realist novel in which social mobility is informed by the twin values of money/wealth and romance/marriage- showing as well significant differences. Indian cultural and social values are reasserted within the diaspora community (including caste essentialisms as Tochi is discriminated against for being a Dalit) as appears in Dr Cheema's mourning for the lost homeland, despite his wealth and Narinder's return to her family putting loyal and filial piety above the prospect of love . These confusing reversals and disruptions of the larger social pattern anchored in class differences and marriage, and the absence of any coherent social structure at all in *African Titanics*, reflect the extreme marginality of refugees as social participants - these insecurities and losses caused by displacement come to dominate their narrative and aesthetic structures. In conclusion the refugee groups and diaspora communities of these novels make them literary templates for how precarity and poverty undermine social hierarchies, pointing to how gaps in the global political and economic

system and failures in dealing with border subjects in turn cause cracks in the social structure. In fact stress on the flow of experience at the expense of history, and reaffirmation of fundamental familial and national structures of belonging might well make them relevant as narratives of today's post-truth mainstream world where recent events suggest 'the collapse of faith in the rational ordering of society' [ newspaper]

