On the Move

On the Move:
The Journey of Refugees
in New Literatures in English

Edited by

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré and Helga Ramsey-Kurz

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FOREWORD

CHOICES

A SHORT STORY BY CHIKA UNIGWE

The thing about this place, Prosperous begins, is that there are too many choices. It gets people confused. But this is not really what she wants to say. She wants to say something else, but it is easier, safer to speak of being bombarded with choices in Europe.

True, her friends nod, helping her to shell the melon seeds her mother-in-law sent from Nigeria through someone who has recently returned.

Why did this woman send you unpeeled *egusi* sef? Oge had complained. She could have had it peeled and ground at so little cost. Who sends unpeeled *egusi* to someone abroad?

True, Prosperous said. But this place changes you. It...spoils you. Back home, we wouldn't have thought anything of peeling melon seeds. This is a place of choices and convenience. Then she had added the bit about too many choices.

Yes, we would have shelled them, Oge says. And back home we would have handpicked the stones out of rice, but this is not back home, is it?

Back home you'd have many hands to help. You'd have had a multitude of maids. If we hadn't come, you'd have had to do this all alone. As if you didn't have enough to do already.

The egusi "tics" as the shell comes off them to reveal tender, white seeds. The three women are in Prosperous's kitchen. Their husbands are in the sitting room arguing over football. The Nigerian under 17 team are playing the Swiss team and more than once, the men have sworn that the boys on the Nigerian team look like fathers. I swear, Prosperous hears her

husband's voice rising above the rest. I swear, not one of these "boys" is a day younger than thirty. The other men laugh. He hasn't lost that. The ability to make people laugh. Wherever Agu is, someone once said, you're sure to hear laughter. Prosperous did not tell whoever it was that when it was just she and Agu alone at home, they did not laugh that much.

The women are not interested in the match. They would rather sit in the kitchen and chat with Prosperous, share whatever news they have, and exclaim as they still do over the wonders of this world which never really becomes theirs no matter how long they stay.

Take, for example, religion, Prosperous continues. She has not really been paying attention to Oge. It is hard enough for her concentrating on not letting the wrong words rush out. Back home, people are either believers or heathen. Believers or infidels, if one was in the north. She had not known it was possible to be anything other than those. Here, she has met humanists, atheists (whom she has been told are different from unbelievers) but she can no longer remember how, witches (but not like the witches back home who were to be feared and who turned to bats at night, but normal looking women who posed for photographs in lifestyle magazines like *Flair* and *Libelle*). You could be anything but not heathen.

So how come there are no heathens here? She asked Joke once, but Joke did not understand her. Heathen? What is that? Is that African?

Joke's name is a joke. That's Prosperous's private pun. The first time she saw it spelt, she said, That's a Yoruba name, but Joke had said, No. It's pronounced YOH-KE. The stress is on the Yoh. Very Flemish.

That is how Joke explains everything. It's very Flemish. Macaroni with ham and cheese, which she encourages Prosperous to try, is very Flemish. The white wine she offers her is very Flemish. Her loneliness is very Flemish.

Back home, she wouldn't call Joke by name. She would call her Madam. Joke is older than she is and she is Joke's cleaner. Emptying and lining bins. Folding and putting the laundry away. In Nigeria, she had had a proper job. She had told Joke once when she asked her what she did before coming here that she worked in a bank. You clean a bank too? Joke asked and Prosperous, not wanting to think of a life that was already gone, just

shook her head and said nothing. She did not want to break down in front of this woman. She did not want pity. Not Joke's. Not anyone's.

Joke is a humanist which means she believes in the human spirit. And what if the human spirit is evil? She asked Joke once. The human spirit is essentially good, Joke replied. Circumstances make them bad. She did not understand what Joke meant nor was she sure Joke completely understood what she herself meant either. Some people are born bad, and neither circumstance nor environment can account for their badness. That's what her mother always said. Otherwise, how could you account for some of the wicked things people did? She wanted to ask Joke what she thought of slave trade, of colonisation. If she knew that in the Congo, King Leopold had his men chop off the limbs of workers who underperformed? The day her Congolese friend told her this, she had dreamt of being ambushed by amputated legs and hands. When she woke up shaking, and her husband had asked her what the problem was, asked her why she had screamed out in her sleep and she told him, he had thought she was still being haunted by the religious riots they had escaped from in Nigeria. He had held her in his arms and gently rocked her so that, for a while, she forgot the dream, forgot where she was and all the other things that kept her awake at night. He had taken her to an untroubled place where she was gently rocked by a merciful tide. The day they escaped, they had seen a charred corpse sizzling by the roadside. For days, she had refused to eat anything, that image expanding and filling her head so that there was no escaping it. Everyone said they were lucky to get away alive. She and Agu could have so easily been corpses by a roadside.

Prosperous also thinks that humanist means that you have to love animals. Perhaps more than you love everything else because Joke often says her dog (which she dresses up in the winter) is the best friend she has ever had. When she came into work yesterday, Joke sat her down and told her about the festival in Nepal (or is it Malaysia?) where thousands of animals are killed as purification sacrifice. That's cruelty to animals, Joke said. Why don't they use plants? Maybe their gods are not vegetarian, Prosperous said. Maybe their gods require animals. They must have blood.

Then their gods are cruel too, Joke said. I hope the animal rights people create enough of a ruckus to get this barbaric custom banned.

And what would their gods feed on then?

I don't care, Joke said, pouring herself a glass of sparkly wine. I do not believe in gods. They do this in Africa too? Kill innocent animals and sacrifice them to some gods? Her "gods" is high-pitched and comes out sounding like "guts".

Did you hear about the Belgian woman who was on house arrest in Cuba? Oge asks. She was on TV yesterday. With her Cuban husband and their son.

No, Prosperous says. She never watches Belgian TV. Oge does. She used to be married to a Belgian man before they divorced and she went home and found an Igbo man. She said she learnt to watch Belgian TV from her ex. Of all of the Nigerians Prosperous knows, Oge is the one who speaks the best Flemish and Prosperous marvels at the way her "g" is so perfectly guttural, that sound she can never make and when she tries, it sounds like she is trying to cough up phlegm. It comes from below the throat, Oge told her once, trying to teach her. The only thing below my throat I care about is my stomach, Prosperous said and both women had rolled with laughter.

Well, so this woman was sentenced to house arrest for manslaughter.

Who did she kill? Anwuli asks.

I don't know. I think a cyclist. Anyway, she comes back to Belgium after three years and talks about how she missed her parents, and her country and her *frietjes met mayo*!

Three years only? Anwuli asks and the women burst into laughter. Anwuli has not been back in eight years. Prosperous in five, during which time her father died and her niece got married. Three years does not sound long enough to miss anything.

Prosperous is the first to stop laughing. House arrest is no joke oo, sha, she says.

Hm, Anwuli says. What do we have here if not house arrests too? At least you two have jobs and can leave the house. I have nowhere to go except when Mike and I come here. Our children do not go anywhere, so it's lucky they have each other, otherwise they would have run mad.

This loneliness, it's very Flemish, Prosperous says and the women laugh again. Then Prosperous says, But now their grandmother is visiting, isn't she Anwuli?

Yes oo. But it's always his family. His sister came two years ago. Now it's his mother. When I ask when my family can come and visit he shows me our bank account and reminds me of the mansion we are building back home. I want to ask him what use the mansion is going to be to us, while we live here.

At least you have visitors from home, Prosperous says. Her voice sounds far away and it is not certain what she is thinking of. It looks like she might start to cry. She is eager to change the subject. How are your children? She asks Oge.

They are fine. Big girls now. Emma has breasts to fill a C cup. I don't know from whom they've inherited such breasts.

Certainly not from you, Prosperous laughs. Not with your tiny tiny breasts. They look like udala fruits. The clamp around her chest has loosened. She can breathe easy again.

The three women laugh. The friends often tease Oge for her lack of breasts. Not very African, Prosperous says, mimicking Joke's voice again. One of the men comes in from the sitting room to ask for another bottle of beer. Darling, Oge says. How's the match?

Disappointing, he answers. Those young Swiss boys are wiping the floor with our boys. He accepts a bottle from Prosperous and returns to the sitting room.

You have a good man, Prosperous says. There is a hint of envy in her voice. Oge's husband is a bit of a legend in their circle. It has been said that someone has seen him dusting the house. He cooks! Anwuli announces. Ha! Imagine my husband cooking. He'll knock everything down!

Your husbands are good too, Oge responds. We are all lucky. There are many women with worse.

Yes, Anwuli says. I wish he'd cook like yours though! She laughs.

Prosperous does not say a word. She gathers the shelled egusi into a tray and pours it into a grinder. The sound it makes as she empties the tray is like that of a firecracker just about to go off. Krrrkrrrkrrr. These women are her best friends, she thinks, and yet she cannot tell them. She must talk of other things so that the words she does not wish to say do not tumble out of her mouth. She thinks of Joke instead and of what she said about animals.

You know Joke, the woman I clean for? She thinks people should not kill animals.

Anwuli hisses. That Joke has never known hunger. Only people who have never known hunger can talk like that.

She says it's immoral, Oge says. She wants to tell her friends about the fear that keeps her hostage, making her unable to leave her bed; the fear that trails her as she catches a bus to work and dances between her feet while she cleans, almost causing her to trip over. It has been there since her father died. She says, We had a neighbor in Enugu who had a dog called Spaniel. They thought they were *oyibo*, the way they spoilt this animal, eh! The daughter of the woman told me once that Spaniel would not eat any food left for it on the floor, it had to be in its bowl. She told me how they had dog biscuits and powdered milk especially for the dog. One day, Spaniel bit a visitor, someone important, a chief or something, who had come to see the man of the house. Ha! Before you could say *Pita na Pol*, the woman had bundled off Spaniel and given it to their gateman.

Ah Ah? What did they want the gateman to do with the dog? Oge asks leaning over the kitchen sink as she washes her hands.

Ha! Prosperous says, the gateman was Calabar. Spaniel went into his pepper soup that night.

404 special! Oge laughs, drying her hands on her denim trousers.

Do you blame the poor man? Anwuli asks. It would be like giving an Igbo man a goat.

The woman regretted it later *sha*. Her daughter said she cried for many days that she missed Spaniel. She even fired the gateman for eating the dog!

But that's unfair, Oge hisses. What did she want the man to do? Hang on to the dog as a pet? Crazy woman!

But that's how the rich treat the poor. There's nothing fair about it, Anwuli says. The women fall silent, reflecting on what Anwuli has just said.

Are you ladies ready to eat? Prosperous asks, usurping the silence. She is afraid of what the silence would conjure and wants to fill it with words, with stories. Nothing meaningful. She will not tell of the scar on her back. Hot water. When they make love Agu traces its pattern (like the map of the world, he says) and kisses it, his lips soft. She tries very hard not to flinch because if he sees her flinch, then he would think she has not forgiven him. And she has, has she not? He has said over and over again how sorry he is. Every time he sees it, he is remorseful. And besides, he had not known the water was that hot. And she had made him really angry, so in a way it was her fault too. She should never have talked back to him the way she had, in front of their friends. No man wanted to be made to look like he was not in control of his family.

She accepts her fault. Accepts his regret. There is nothing new in the pattern. As it has happened before, so shall it happen again. She cannot help herself sometimes. And he cannot help being the way he has become. But this is new: this fear that holds her. That she would die here. That she would be buried in this strange country. Her friends would think her foolish if she said that. And then they would probe and probe until they untie her tongue and she begins to tell them things she would rather leave unsaid. She does not want her tongue to run unchecked like a waterfall like it did the day her oldest friend, Mary, called from Nigeria and she forgot herself and her friend's own pain and unburdened herself. You are lucky, her friend had chided her. At least you have a husband. Mary, chasing forty and unmarried. How thoughtless of her. Mary had told her half-serious and half in jest, Keep an eye out for an oyibo man for me oo. I hear they don't mind old girls. She has given up hope of being someone's wife back home in Enugu. At her age, she is effectively off the shelf. She jokes often that no man would take her now for free. My father asks me why no man is coming to ask for my hand and I remind him of all the boys he chased away when I was young. When she laughs, her laughter grates. Her laughter reminded Prosperous of a bottle cover being scratched against a wall. She could not stand it and so she made up an excuse and quickly hung up.

Prosperous does not say that she feels caged. Like one of those chickens bought at Christmas and fattened in a cage until its owner was ready to feast on it. She is growing fat: her upper arms flap when she lifts them to hug her friends. Her wrists are thick. Her thighs rub against each other when she walks so that she has to rub talcum powder on them to keep them from chaffing. When she looks in the mirror, she sees her mother's face staring back at her, complete with the double chin. She is starting to look like her mother after six children. Prosperous is yet to have a single one.

There is rice and stew, she tells Oge and Anwuli unnecessarily as the women know their way around the tiny kitchen and have already dished out food for themselves. Anwuli is watching her. Pros, she says. Pros, are you okay?

I feel like a chicken, Prosperous says. It is out before she can stop it. She wants to stuff the words back into her mouth, gargle them around her mouth and then swallow them.

Anwuli says, What? She sounds slightly alarmed. Then she laughs. Her voice is amused when she says, For a moment there I thought you meant you felt like a chicken, you know, like you actually felt like a kwa kwa chicken, not that you wanted to eat chicken!

And the three women laugh. Over their rice and stew and fried chicken wings.

INTRODUCTION

THE JOURNEY OF REFUGEES

GEETHA GANAPATHY-DORÉ
UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS 13

Refugee Blues

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew:
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

—W. H. Auden

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said lamented that "it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history."[1] Though the fall of the Berlin Wall might be seen as a date marking the end of the postcolonial era and the beginning of a globalized perception in which migrants' lives are integrated as ethnoscape in the space of the nation, internal or external displacement of refugees continues. These refugees are victims of climate change, ethnic cleansing, armed conflict, family, religious or state repression, real estate or rehabilitation projects, or merely poverty and hunger.

The study of the journey of refugees has several dimensions - literary, ethical, economic, political, sociocultural and legal. The journey of refugees sheds a different light on the postcolonial theme of the meaning of home and the plight of homelessness. Currently the general contention

is that postcolonial studies have lived out their historical purpose and that our construction of knowledge has to move out of the critical frame of postcolonial studies to explore new grounds such as queering, greening, representations of and concern for the animal,[2] indeed even the posthuman, in order to take into account the technological mutations and globalized outlook that have come into being. However, it must be noted that the journey of refugees is a topic that is both age old and at the top of the agenda of several contemporary issues.

If exile from paradise and wandering are common patterns of the history of humanity in several civilizations, the disengagement of the West from its former colonies and more than half a century of postcolonial nationhood have not brought about the much awaited stability and peace. More and more people are on the move in their efforts to integrate the circuits of capital. Unfortunately most of them only manage to get either relegated to the margins of nation states or dehumanized by the machine of profit. While some manage to survive and thrive, others die. The refugees are looked upon by the nation states they flee as threatening their sovereignty and by the states that host them as a challenge to their cultural identity. Their tales are parables for the future citizens of the world. Academics have an ethical duty to record these geographical movements which are also moments in history in order to avoid forgetting and falsification of history.

From the point of view of international law, the refugees acquired a status thanks to the refugee regime set up in 1921 by the League of Nations. In 1948, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency sought to help refugees "whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict."[3] The 1951 Geneva convention, drafted in response to the humanitarian crisis created by the Second World War, defines the refugee as "a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."[4] UNRWA later extended its services to the refugees of the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict who took shelter in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the descendants in the male line of earlier Palestinian refugees, whether they were in refugee camps or not.[5] The plight of women and children was, thus, indirectly foregrounded.

The 1967 UN Protocol further extended the definition of the refugee to include persons who had fled war or other violence in their home country.[6] The Organization of African Unity gave the term a different twist in 1969 by characterizing as refugees those who fled their country "due to acts of external aggression, occupation, domination by foreign powers or serious disturbances of public order."[7] While the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees stated that "in no case shall a refugee be transferred to a third country against his will,"[8] recent case law in the Court of Justice of the European Union involving EU's Dublin II regulations which uphold the principle of the first safe country for asylum seekers highlights the conflict between the rights of Member States to have conclusive presumptions and the burden of rebutting those presumptions that lies on the individual asylum seeker.[9] Whatever the documents the refugees carry (ranging from the Nansen passport and Certificate of eligibility of the past to the Certificate of Identity (or "alien's passport"), the "Refugee Travel Document" and the United Nations laissez-passer of the present),[10] they symbolically embody problematic borders rather than freedom of movement and challenge the constitutive insidedness and stability of national identities.

Like the pariah who was used as a scapegoat to structure the traditional Indian society, or the disenfranchised homeless who act as foils to the domiciled citizens of the nation state, the refugee is the postnational figure who serves to expose the vacuity of the rootless cosmopolitanism of the bourgeois bohemians and the disempowerment of the United Nations in an increasingly globalized world. The journey of refugees has mostly had a tragic[11] (cf. The 1914 Komagata Maru incident in Canada which foreshadowed the fate of the boatpeople elsewhere) and at times a comical impact (cf. The fake twenty-three member strong Srilankan Handball team that arrived in Germany in 2004 only to cross over to France and seek asylum in Italy. Uberto Pasolini made a movie in 2008 called *Machan* based on this incident). At a time when anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric is gaining ground in some Western countries and the pressure to renegotiate the Schengen Agreement has been voiced in the wake of the Arab Revolution, the subject is topical. The incidents on the island of Lampedusa paradoxically crystallize European Union's humanitarian reflex and hospitality on the one hand, and on the other, the panic of not being able to welcome and integrate these refugees and their cultural difference, giving thus rise to unprecedented legal gimmicks and strategies of border control.

This collection of essays focuses on the specificities of the refugee experience in new literatures in English independently of form (poem,

short story, novel) and explores the topic from several angles: physical and psychological trauma, identity, human rights, hospitality, discrimination, while not excluding parallels between examples from the past and the predicament of the present. The opening essay by Petra Tournay-Theodotou on Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* introduces us to new aspects of the refugee question. Ali writes back to former MP Kenneth Baker and Prime Minister Tony Blair, who tried to correct the perception that Britain is a welcoming hotel or an open house for refugees, by ironically depicting the seamy side of a kitchen run by an English chef as a mock United Nations. When hospitality rimes with hostility, echoing Derridian "hostipitality", bodies become commodified and reveal the fault lines of race and sex in the conception of national identity. Xeno-racism based on economic reasons raises its ugly head and refugees are reduced to living like rats underground, as British values like decency and fair play are flouted by Britain's own subjects. Gabe, the chef who is torn between his dying father and the bare life that his Eastern European protégée Lena leads, is obliged to search for his self.

Helga Ramsey-Kurz's close reading of the fragmented text of the Canadian writer Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* as a narrative of holocaust memory distinguishes it from several hypermediated cultural constructions of the Shoah. According to her, this novelistic text pays attention to the non-verbal and the meaning that preexists in concrete matter. Just as nature remembers, the body wants to carry on whatever the torment. For the refugee who has to start anew in a *terra nullius*, the true country is the foreign language, an alphabet without memory that sustains his life impulse. The encounter between the fugitive Jacob and the Greek archeologist Athos, who finds and nurtures him, is an archetypal narrative of human life and a testament to enduring humanity as opposed to the anti-matter of Nazi policies. All lucky human beings find regeneration through love. There are similarities between Helga Ramsey-Kurz's essay and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's (infra) because Michaels and Sivanandan deal with the responsibility of the living with regard to the dead and portray women characters as sacrificial muses or nurturing helpmates in the drama of refugees.

Marta Cariello's analysis of the poetics of exile and displacement in the poetry of the American writer of Palestinian descent, Nathalie Handal, portrays her as the guest who always questions her host. For the refugee poet, Cariello writes, home "becomes memory, the memory of loss, or memory acquired from somebody else; the memory of the poet's parents, the memory of their memory". Like Anne Michaels, the materiality of language proves useful to Handal as she uses it to build a "polyglot

testament" "to embody a mobile and multiple home", leading to the "construction of a transnational (and translational) "we"." Her discourse of "counternational solidarity through the transvaluation of national belonging" is a sign of resistance to dominant power. Refugees live in lives not in places, and in that sense, their lives resemble that of the rain which delivers the past in every place of the present. Handal may be said to have taken one poetic step ahead of Rushdie who conceived journeying itself as home.[12]

Stavros Stavrou Karayanni proposes a stunningly original approach to new writing in Cyprus by invoking Aphrodite as a migrant goddess of promise and possibility come from the Orient. This rather lyrical attempt to resist autoexoticization through a creative re-embodiment of the significance of the goddess is drawn both from the Turkish Cypriot poet Gür Genç's depiction of the island as a garbage tip of love and the Greek Cypriot poet Stephanos Stephanides's admonition to use nostalgia as a critique of the present to enable the future. Stavros Karayanni thus looks at individual modes of embodying refugee pain in Cyprus. The Turkish Cypriot writer Mehmet Yaşin offers the reader a postmodern and alternative embodiment of himself as a character (Misail Oskarus) in his novel through the eyes of the Wednesday Hag. The Palestinian writer Lisa Suhair Majaj inserts Hanneh in the intimacy of the reader's life as a person whom he or she has met so that she comes to represent a home. When the short story evokes her death, it is as if the reader has lost his or her own home, and thus his or her identification with the refugees' loss of home and their longing for it becomes all the more intense. Stavros Karayanni's article shows how the mercantile empire meets its economic refugees in the contact zone of Cyprus. Two women poets, Aydin Mehmet Ali and Niki Marangou, evoke the presence of South Asian domestic servants in Nicosia. Thus, "under the shade of trees force migrated by the Empire botanists", "domestic workers from Sri Lanka lay down their scarves and eat together." Whether the palm trees remind them of their country or not, the dazzling smiles of these women represent the triumph of life over pain.

Major writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa feature in Jean-Marie Soungoua's comprehensive survey of Nigerian Civil War literature around the Biafran secession. Referring to other novelists such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Maxwell Nwagboso, I.N.C. Aniebo, Nathan Nkala, Chukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Sebastian Obechukwu Mezu, Elechi Amadi, Isidore Okpewho, Jean-Marie Soungoua first concentrates on the difference between the figure of the returnee and the refugee. Then he presents the movement of the masses who lose their sense of time and place on their road to hell. Desperate victims of the

forces of history and military repression, these women and men lose their dignity in horrible conditions and are reduced to an animal like status. Indeed their deformed and emaciated bodies make them the living dead. A picture of the refugee camp emerges which is akin to that of a concentration camp or a prison or a lunatic asylum. One disturbing central image is that of the hunger stricken refugee mother and child, which ironically mirrors and at the same time obliterates the Renaissance portraits of Child Jesus and Virgin Mary that one gets to see in the museums of the West. We come across situations similar to those encountered in the Nigerian civil war in the Indo-Pakistani as well as Sri Lankan contexts studied in this volume.

Federico Fabris's article draws on Gertrude Stein's celebration of the creative potential of silence for modernist prose and offers a pragmatic reading of silence in the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah's refugee novel *By the Sea* and two more of his other novels, *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* in order to unravel the complex relation between silence and agency in Gurnah's fiction. Silence is indeed an intersubjective art in Gurnah, for it enables the existence of not only individual memory but also collective mourning. The representation of refugee and migrant silences in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels helps challenge the pragmatic assumptions of the "refugee discourse". The encoding of pragmatic agency within silence's ambiguous narrative stance, argues Federico Fabris, brings to view the rational communicative assumptions that underlie rigid distinctions made between migrants and refugees in legal terminology.

Evelyne Hanquart-Turner returns to what Sara Suleri has identified as the founding myth of both India and Pakistan, i.e. perpetual partition.[13] The impact of Partition on communities but also on family and individual lives has been dealt with by many a writer in the subcontinent in other Indian languages[14] and through the cinematic medium as well.[15] However, the fate of refugees, who have been lucky enough to survive, but unable to resume full, normal lives elsewhere because they had been irretrievably scathed by their experience, is a recurrent theme in many of even the most recent pieces of fiction in English produced in India. The refugee figure came to prominence first in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. Some refugees find themselves thrown on the roads and pavements of the metropolis because of the Pakistan-Bangladesh war; some others appear as economic refugees, as in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He who Rides a Tiger* or climate refugees as in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Evelyne Hanquart-Turner examines in particular the narrative modes and the psychogeneology at work in Nayantara Sahgal's short story "Martand", Shashi Deshpande's "Mother India" and Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel

What the Body Remembers and Manju Kapoor's *Home*. In her overview, the refugee narrative emerges as a significant strand in Indo-English fiction written by women.

Annie Cottier's essay on Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* as a settler narrative contrasts with and completes Evelyne Hanquart-Turner's study. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, a complex network of tidal waterways meandering around the islands that harbour the world's largest mangrove forest and are home to the Royal Bengal tiger. The novel discusses the conservation of the area which puts into jeopardy the interests of refugees from East Bengal who have settled there illegally. They are forcefully evicted from Morichjhãpi. Many of them are killed in the process. An old notebook from the past written by Nirmal, the retired schoolmaster on the island Lusibari, brings to life the story and the plight of the settlers, their plans and the community they built as well as the story of their brutal eviction. Nirmal's notebook is read by Kanai, his nephew, who remembers Nirmal telling him about the nineteenth century settlers who tried to follow the call of Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman who envisioned an egalitarian society in the Sundarbans. This story within the story interweaves the remembered past and the witnessed present. Through this narrative strategy, sustains Annie Cottier, Ghosh links the politics and poetics of environment to the price paid in terms of human rights, as nature is perceived to be threatening the people and threatened by them in turn.

Geetha Ganapathy Doré deals with the internal and outward journeys of Sri Lankan refugees most whom Tamil in her article on Jean Arasanayagam's Short Stories and Ambalavaner Sivanandan's Novel. Oscillating in form between travel writing, autobiography and fiction, these narratives provide a typology of refugee journeys. The politics of racial discrimination and geographical displacement practiced by the postcolonial government in Sri Lanka, by way of setting right the inequalities inherited from the Empire, resulted in a bloody civil war. Civilians, especially women and children, were the primary victims of this armed struggle. The initiatory journeys of refugees leading to either rebirth or death question both the ethics of the Western market economy that allows for transnational movement of labour without ensuring their political rights and the fate of the postwar framework of human and humanitarian rights in the postcommunist and postnational[16] world order.

G. Sujatha and Vinod Kumar's article proposes to highlight the uniqueness of the issue of the "Eelam Refugees of Sri Lanka" as expressed in their post-civil war poetic expressions. The assassination of India's former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi radically altered the perception of the

Eelam Refugees by the Indian government and the global community thereby affecting the nature of the perception of the armed conflict and the issues of identity, ethnicity, language, culture and land. This has forced the refugees to give up their "Eelam identity" and embrace the new identity of "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees." Attempts to preserve the Eelam ethnic identity are burdened with militancy, resulting in the increase of state surveillance. A mixture of victimhood, burden of militancy and a sense of guilt constitute the new subjectivity of these Sri Lankan Tamil poets (Sivaramani, R. Muraleeswaran, Vilvaratnam and V. I. S. Jayapalan). Such complexity and helplessness are found not only in their works but also in the works of the pro-Eelam Tamil writers from Tamil Nadu (Ravikumar).[17] Whatever their angst, their discourse remains self-reflexive and self-critical.

The ten articles presented here give a full fledged picture of the dire circumstances that trigger the movement of refugees and the duress of their physical and mental journeys. Counting on the hospitality of strangers for food and shelter, building a counternational solidarity and transnational identity, they cope with the hostility of people and places by using either silence to powerfully voice their agency or language as ultimate refuge. This is how they try to keep the life force in their maimed and benumbed bodies alive. Their hope consists in finding a home to house their selves and family, in preserving their dignity in the form of the right to work and in getting empowerment in the form of civil and political rights thanks to the support from another national community.

Europe does not offer that safe passage to life anymore and feels threatened by terrorism and economic downturn. The countless deaths of refugees casually presented as countable numbers should not diminish our sensitivity to their distress. Hospitality is correlated with the idea of infinite and unconditional reception, according to Derrida. "Hospitality is culture itself, not simply one ethic among others", he contends.[18] He views ethics as coexisting with hospitality. Hence his appeal to the cities to welcome the homeless and the rightless. "The law of hospitality seems to dictate that absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty. Just hospitality breaks with hospitality as right" at the risk of the host becoming "the hostage"[19] of the guest. In order to remain true to the Jewish Christian roots of its humanist heritage, Europe needs to change its laws so as to render the refugee blues so poignantly voiced by W. H. Auden obsolete by offering a ground for re-imagined refugee joys.

Notes

[1] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 332.
[2] The French Grand Palais is currently offering an exhibition on "Beauté animale."
[3] http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=86, accessed April 30, 2012.
[4] http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html, accessed April 30, 2012.
[5] http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=87, accessed April 30, 2012.
[6] See UNHCR website pages quoted above.
[7] OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, http://www.achpr.org/english/_info/refugee_en.html, accessed April 30, 2012.
[8] www.unhcr.org/basics/BASICS/45dc19084.pdf, accessed April 30, 2012.
[9] Judgement of 21 December 2011 in the joined Cases C-411/10 and C-493/10, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:62010CJ0411:EN:HTML, accessed April 30, 2012.
[10] http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home, accessed April 30, 2012.
[11]The French writer of Indian Origin Shumona Sinha, who had worked at the OFPRA (Office Français de Protection de Refugiés) as a Bengali interpreter, has published a novel entitled *Assommons les pauvres* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 2011). She underscores the tragic irony of the refugees having to lie and concoct a different story from what really happened to them in order to get political asylum.
[12] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), 94.
[13] Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 204.
[14] For partition narratives in Hindi or Urdu, see Bodh Prakash, *Writing Partition, Aesthetics and Ideology in Hindi and Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2009).
[15] Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
[16] See Nivedita Menon, "Thinking through the postnation," in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elleke Boemer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (New York; Routledge, 2011), 316-333.
[17] Writing from the subcontinent in other languages throws useful light on what are considered to be the blind spots of postcolonial studies. Hence the inclusion of this article on contemporary Tamil poems from Sri Lanka with English translations provided.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, translated by Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 2005), 16.
[19] Jacques Derrida, *On Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond,* translated by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25 & 107.

CHAPTER ONE

FORTRESS BRITAIN: HOSPITALITY AND THE CRISIS OF (NATIONAL) IDENTITY IN MONICA ALI'S *IN THE KITCHEN*

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"The significance of Yuri's death is that it is insignificant. That is why it is so troubling."
—Monica Ali, *In the Kitchen.*

"We are the people you do not see."
—Stephen Frears, *Dirty Pretty Things.*

Monica Ali's third novel *In the Kitchen* (2009) takes up the issue of contemporary migration to Britain and the reception of these "strangers" by the host country; a reception, which is more hostile and inhospitable than congenial. While the novel is peopled with migrants and refugees mainly from poor Eastern European, African and Asian countries, the story's protagonist is Gabriel Lightfoot, the English chef de cuisine at the formerly venerable Imperial Hotel in London, who presides over "a United Nations task force" (97) working in his kitchen. Through this choice of narrative perspective, *In the Kitchen* not only represents the migrants' experience and their exploitation by Britain, but simultaneously provides a commentary on the current state of the nation. The novel's focus is hence on close encounters with "strangers" which, in this case, occur predominantly in the contact zones of the kitchen and of the hotel.

In this article, I discuss Monica Ali's novel in light of the current debate surrounding Britain's attitude towards refugees, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers and the resulting emergence of "xeno-racism" (Sivanandan, 2001: 2). This new form of racism is not restricted to persons of a darker complexion, but extends to the newer category of impoverished

and displaced whites. Xeno-racism is no longer based on biological difference, but on economic and cultural difference, with "poverty" as the new spectre. Ambalavaner Sivanandan provides the following oft-quoted definition of xeno-racism:

> It is a racism that is not just directed at those with darker skins, from the former colonial countries, but at the newer categories of the displaced and dispossessed whites, who are beating at Europe's doors, the Europe that displaced them in the first place. It is racism in substance but xeno in form – a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white. It is xeno-racism" (2001: 2).

Yosefa Loshitzky furthermore describes xeno-racism as clearly "located within the economic sphere", as a "movement away from biological and cultural racism to an economic racism" (2006: 631). Predicated upon this new conceptualization of racism, the discussion will, in particular, revolve around issues such as personal and national identity, the semiotics and politics of space, the concepts of hospitality and proximity to strangers, the commodification of human labour, "old" versus "new" migrants and a (re)evaluation of Britishness among others.

In the Kitchen tells the story of Gabriel Lightfoot, whose life begins to unravel when one of the illegal kitchen porters, Yuri, a former engineer from the Ukraine, is found dead in the hotel's basement where he and a girl called Lena, a trafficked sex-worker from Moldava, had been living illegally. Following Gabe's decision to offer Lena refuge in his flat and the beginning of an obsessive intimate affair with her, his long term relationship with his girlfriend Charlie–"Best of British" (26)–breaks up. Meanwhile, Gabe takes several journeys back to his desolate hometown - a former milling town in Lancashire, where his father is dying of cancer, his grandmother is suffering from senile dementia and his divorced sister Jenny is struggling to bring up two teenage children. As Gabriel's mental and physical health is increasingly deteriorating, he discovers that the restaurant manager is involved in a plot of trafficking women and in supplying cheap workslaves for his brother's onion farm, run as an illegal, exploitative labour camp. When Lena disappears after Gabriel–who by that time is in a state of severe psychosis–has given her a substantial amount of money, he accidentally ends up on the farm himself and by sharing the migrants' experience, comes out almost fully restored. The novel ends on the hopeful note of his possible reunion with Charlie.

In using the phrase "Fortress Britain" in the title of my article, I am deliberately referring to Tony Blair, who, in 2004, proclaimed that "we will neither be *fortress* Britain, nor will we be an *open house.*" As early as

1995 MP Kenneth Baker had said that "Britain is a sovereign nation, not a hotel" (in Hayter, 2004: 60-61). With their implied suggestions of beleaguerment or siege (as suggested by "fortress"), and of a too accommodating hospitality or indeed even fear of its abuse by the guests (as suggested by "open house" and "hotel"), all three of these metaphors of the nation concisely capture the anxieties and insecurities surrounding Britain's stance in the impassioned debate on migration while at the same time raising the issue of what it means to be British. Against the background of this debate, the locations chosen by Ali–the hotel, the kitchen, the subterranean store rooms, London, and a decaying northern English milling town–acquire significant metonymic potential as reflections of Britain's changing face.

As many critics before me have observed, the hotel setting is very rewarding[1] in terms of an inquiry into the issue of hospitality, a topic which according to Jacques Derrida "focuses on what is today most concretely urgent and the most proper for the articulation of a political ethics" (Derrida: 2000). First of all, the hotel serves as a signifier of fleeting encounters and commodified hospitality and becomes as such a mere simulacrum of genuine and unconditional hospitality. In the novel, the hotel is a place of poignant antithesis where the global, mobile, and affluent elites and the global, mobile and impoverished "invisibles" intersect.[2]

At the same time, the hotel functions as the most obvious emblem of the nation. The Imperial Hotel with its strong resonance of Empire "was a product of the Victorian age" (13); it "had a history" (20). But after the hotel's "long half-century of decline" (21) the attempt to "restore the Imperial's former glory" (21) failed and it was only when the "PanContinental Hotel Co. . . . had purchased the Imperial . . . a couple of years ago" that there was hope for "rebirth and renewal" (21). This glimpse of hope is however followed by the realization that "the Imperial would never be truly great again" (23). These descriptions of the hotel are clearly reflections of the nostalgia for Britain's former glory, the loss of Empire and the sad awareness that things will never be the same again. Added to this sense of dissolution of Britain as a political entity, is the recognition of its declining economic power in the context of multinational corporate organizations.

Behind the screen of the fading old world lies the underworld of illegal workers, asylum seekers and immigrants, the people who clean up and provide the necessary services (mostly in agriculture, construction and catering) desperately needed to keep the economy alive. Following Michel de Certeau, "[t]he ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below",

below the thresholds at which visibility begins. . . . These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen" (1984: 103). This subterranean world is not only captured in the spatial metaphor of the kitchen–which is at one point referred to as the hotel's "underworld" (131)–but most poignantly in Yuri's dwelling in the cellar or "'the catacombs', as they were known" (10). The catacombs, i.e., an underground ossuary or cemetery, are not only an immediate reference to death, but also to living there as one of the "undesirable aliens" (Burnett and Whyte, 2004: 2) as identified by the Home Office, in Yuri's case. They also evoke the connotation of a living dead person or even of the live burial of "that" which is not acceptable and has to be interred and remain hidden from view. The fact that Yuri's room was located right adjacent to the rubbish chutes (11) suggests by extension that here dwells human waste, that here dwells a disposable life. The well-meant comment by Oona, Gabriel's Caribbean sous-chef, "that poor ting, living down there like a little old rat" (10) unwittingly summarizes Yuri's condition as sub-human, and as indistinguishable from that of an animal, and an abominable one at that.[3]

When it turns out that Yuri's death has "only" been the result of a self-inflicted unfortunate accident and not the result of a racially motivated hate crime, the hotel manager is only too happy to completely dismiss any –especially emotional–involvement in the death of this human being: "It's a sad, sad accident, we are terribly, terribly sad, but we are not sorry–we're not sorry because it's not our fault, and if you're sorry it'll cost you a mil–and they can stick that in the paper as well" (39). Following the verdict of accidental death, Gabriel confronts the manager with the question "Don't give a toss, do you? . . . So what if somebody died." (289). When he goes on to ask for industrial compensation as an act of charity (289), the manager can only respond with spite and derision: "Why don't you consecrate the catacombs? Turn them into a bloody shrine" (289). In other words, Yuri's life is only valued in so far as he is of use to his employer or, at least, does not cost him any money in damages or taint his reputation. Ultimately, the figure of the refugee or illegal immigrant becomes a "site for the limits of . . . hospitality and welcoming" (Gibson, 2006: 696). Yuri's fate thus constitutes a prime example of contemporary Britain's (or Europe's for that matter) "crude economy of exploitation" (2006: Foster, 690). The death of this individual, and the differing responses to this loss of human life, furthermore raise the issue of who can be counted as human or whose lives can be counted as lives–or even more directly put: "Who has the right to live and who does not?" In her book *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006), Judith

Butler makes the following distinction about the mourning of certain peoples:

> Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death (xiv-xv).

From this perspective, Yuri's death is, as Nikolai, the Ukrainian porter and former doctor says so concisely, "insignificant" (365) because in the world in which we live "there will always be more Yuris struggling to exist" (295).

In the context of the struggle for survival Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the notion of "bare life", a term originally introduced by Walter Benjamin in his "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" (Critique of Violence) seem to be of immediate relevance to the discussion at hand (Agamben, 1998). Deprived of any political status, the refugee or illegal immigrant is excluded from any form of political life and is as such conceptualized as "bare life", that is merely existent life, non-human, without qualities, a mere being alive, which is distinguished from *bios*, a politically and morally qualified life, a real human life, or in other words a life that matters. With their legal and political status suspended, lives such as Yuri's are precisely lives that do not matter.

However, to Gabriel, this life or rather this death matters very much: "When he looked back, he felt that the death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart" (1). With this overt reference to Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1921) and Chinua Achebe's later appropriation of the idea for the title of his novel "Things Fall Apart" (1958), Ali sets the scene for the novel's central concerns of an individual, socio-political and economic decline and identity crisis. Following Yuri's death, Gabriel is haunted by the deceased's ghost in recurrent nightmares abounding in images of disintegration and putrefaction, a veritable invasion of the corporeal[5], in which he is forced to revisit the scene of Yuri's death. He takes responsibility for what happened and struggles with Nikolai's cynical, yet tragically realistic remark that "The significance of Yuri's death . . . is that it is insignificant" (365). However, for Gabriel Yuri becomes human precisely in the act of death, or put differently, he comes to fully *recognize* the Ukrainian's humanity in death. In *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler talks about the "struggle for recognition" (2006: 43) in the Hegelian sense which

> requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but we are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition (2006: 43/44).

Gabriel's almost complete physical and mental disintegration and his eventual tentative re-integration brought about through empathy and engagement can furthermore be linked to Hegel's discussion of the relation between death and the "becoming subject". In Achille Mmembe's analysis of this idea

> the human being truly *becomes a subject*–that is, separated from the animal –in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity). . . . To uphold the work of death is precisely how Hegel defines the life of the Spirit. The life of the Spirit, […] is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment (Mmembe, 2003: 14).

This connection between death and the life of the spirit is supported by Gabriel's name–which is a direct allusion to the archangel Gabriel, who is commonly associated with intuition, emotions and the subconscious–and is corroborated by several references to his emerging "angelic"nature.[6] The suggestion, therefore, seems to be that it is not only Yuri's humanity which is paradoxically validated in his death, but that it is also Gabriel who, in this encounter, validates his own humanity and, if you will, spirituality, by assuming responsibility. Furthermore, in my reading, Gabe's identity crisis and psycho-pathology reflect the identity crisis of the nation, which, like the hotel, has lost its sense of self. "If the Imperial was a person, thought Gabe, you would say here is someone who does not know who she is" (23). Even though Butler is critical of setting up "easy analogies between the formation of the individual and the formation . . . of state-centered political cultures" (45), she nevertheless allows for the following analogy:

> But when we are speaking about the "subject" we are not always speaking about an individual: we are speaking about a model for agency and intelligibility, one that is very often based on notions of sovereign power.