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Narrating Precarious Lives: *Refugee Tales*, *African Titanics*, and *The Year of the Runaways*

Refugees and Narrative Representation

Refugees and asylum seekers are considered by many social commentators to be the zeitgeist of our age, their statelessness and homelessness epitomising the radical unbelonging of all displaced peoples.[1] The exponential rise in the numbers of refugees over the last decade, populations fleeing their homelands in the war torn Middle East or from famine and political crises in African nations, without papers and means of support, and the use of immigration centres for detention without legal recognition of their status and rights as refugees, have attracted widespread media attention and intense public concern.[2] The scale of the migrant exodus and the universalising categories of labels used to discuss the humanitarian crisis means that refugees are inevitably homogenised and stereotyped, perceptions that are reinforced by saturating media images of what is now called the "Black Mediterranean" (Danewid): of desperate flight mainly from Libya, Morocco, and Senegal, upturned boats, drownings and bodies washed up on its shores. Political debate and controversy have raged about the granting of asylum in all European countries of reception, generating responses ranging from revulsion and dismissal, to heightened empathy and ethical concern, to xenophobic racist discourses and generalised fears about overcrowding and national security which cast some refugees in terms of terrorist threat.

A complex cultural terminology has emerged to describe people of such uncertain status, and the labels that are applied, often imprecisely, mean that the very concept of refugee narrative, a term which is widely used of a range of writing about stateless migrants and those involved in illegal movement, carries numerous connotations.[3] The term refugee is used of various migrant types who may also be called asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, sans papiers, sojourners, nomads, detainees, clandestine travellers, political exiles, or stateless people. A refugee, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, is defined in law as someone forced to flee their country because of persecution or threat of violence and who must convince authorities of this level of threat to their life and their unwillingness to seek their country's protection, in order to gain asylum (UNHCR, "What Is a Refugee?"). In considering the range of refugee narratives, the most fundamental is the official, orally delivered version, usually unpublished, told by asylum seekers desperate for refuge or sanctuary who must provide an authentic dimension by using testimony, and so represent their life story as truth telling. Many non-fictions and imaginative fictions by and about refugees are often told in direct contradiction to these narrowly defined, truth-determined narrative structures and the official expectations that channel them. They may be accounts mediated by western sympathisers or refugee activists driven by a sense of ethical responsibility to produce such narratives as a form of political intervention. Novelists, by contrast, may see in the refugee story the potential for heightened pathos, or a literature of ethical engagement based on a more nuanced understanding, and use various narrative devices to represent their precarious subjects through mobile, plural identities and volatile social and political positioning due to their illegality and statelessness. The literary and cultural narratives of asylum create a higher ethical demand than, for example, accounts required for the official machinery of adjudication whereby subjects in detention are deemed worthy of sanctuary. According to Agnes Woolley they can be read as "politicized responses to the condition of

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1 Cf. Thomas Nail: "the twenty-first century will be the age of the migrant" (1); also cf. Maley.

2 The United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that ~~by June 2017~~ at the end of 2020 there were ~~65.6~~82.4 million forcibly displaced people including ~~22.5~~26.7 million refugees (over half of whom are under 18) ~~and 10 million stateless people~~ (UNHCR, "Figures").

3 I use this term to refer to both non-fictional and fictional texts.

statelessness", demanding revision of current asylum practices in light of the "instability and legal contingency of statelessness" (211).

Representations of refugees, asylum seekers, or forced migrants through visual images, documentary accounts and narrative fictions, therefore, both reify and contest the dominant impressions of victims lacking in basic rights or legality and subject to forces beyond their control, living precariously the 'bare lives' of exclusion, and may introduce alternative images of self-agency, endurance, and resilience. The issues of interpretation associated with documentary, testimonial texts and biographical accounts point to the inherent instabilities in imaging refugees and asylum seekers. They emerge from the limited nature of their accounts of minimal survival, a consequence of such disenfranchised subjects' lack of access to representation, the imperatives of truth telling and authentication in accounts by refugees who apply for official status to gain asylum, and the reduced scope of official accounts which may omit circumstantial details, historical perspectives, memories, and reflections. Reporting such narratives through the mediation of western writers, editors or translators, or retelling them inevitably raises questions about the dubious ethics of speaking for the other, or the possibility of representational appropriation, and hence of misinterpretation.

This article examines three recently published narratives by and about refugees which represent a range of fictional types: *Refugee Tales* (2016), edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus, *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) by Abu Bakr Khaal, and *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) by Sunjeev Sahota.[4] It draws for its informing conceptual framework on Judith Butler's theories about the precarity and vulnerability of the displaced human subject outlined in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*?, and in particular the frames of perception that she identifies whereby such subjects are apprehended as precarious. Butler argues that "in the politics of immigration […] certain lives are perceived as lives while others […] fail to assume perceptual form as such" (24), and this axiom underpins these and many other narratives about the haphazard survival and unpredictable existence of the refugee or asylum seeker, as consequences not only of illegal movement. Following Butler's advocation of introducing alternative interpretative frames to interrogate the conventional framing perceptions of lives, and to consider how to apprehend a life (by contrast to those we cannot) (3), I examine the narrative form and aesthetic innovation of these fictions; I consider how they challenge the normative frames that cast some precarious, displaced lives as inauthentic, as "permissible collateral damage" (xviii), as in time of war, for example, or disposable, to illustrate how readerly perceptions are managed and regulated in reassessing the meaning of such lives. Such departures and the variation between different social, political and cultural perspectives of various refugee narratives indirectly contribute to the fluctuating impressions and multiple interpretations of these disenfranchised subjects. Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp note, citing Elke Brüns, that poverty is interpreted according to "discourses of natural law, poverty theory, economics, political philosophy and religion" as well as the "images and interpretative frames [that] are circulating and have circulated" (7n9; Brüns 8-9). In fictional texts any number of contemporary discourses may influence existing perceptual frames and revise common perceptions, as for example, in moving beyond mono-dimensional official perspectives visible in the struggle to gain asylum and access citizenship, or polarised media representations of refugees as either victim figures or threats – even while raising problems about the wider reception of such narratives.

Refugee Writing, Precarity and Ethical Engagement

Butler has advocated a new critical humanism, based on the vulnerability of the precarious subject and the ethical obligations we should feel for such suffering, arguing that one of the marks of life being recognised as human is the grievability at its loss; life matters when "the apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of a precarious life" (15). In terms of the

[4] This article is a revised and expanded version of my "Narratives of Flight and Arrival: Abu Bakr Khaal's *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015)".

representation of lives in fictional and non-fictional terms questions such as whether humanness is not an inalienable right elicit a moral response from readers. Do the lives of such disenfranchised populations matter as "grievable, as worthy of protection as belonging to subjects with rights that ought to be honoured" (41), or do they slip from recognition? As Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard comment, this reshaping of the category of being human takes the form of a growing concern with "how humans live and what they live for" (7n2, citing Schwarz 3). Butler's new humanism, based on grief, relationality, and bodily vulnerability calls for a non-violent progressive politics of co-vulnerability that draws on Western solidarity with dispossessed subjects. It has been widely influential in Western theory and instrumental in shaping critical approaches to writing about vulnerable subjects such as refugees.[5] For example, Butler's concept of frames of perception, and the politics of seeing that she promotes, have been deployed by Jago Morrison in studying the 21st-century novel in which he defines a turn to precarity: the ethical and affective responses of readers to vulnerability, death and violence are regulated by particular frameworks of perception in ways reminiscent of Dickens's treatment of poverty in the 19th century.

The recent backlash to Butler's work on violence, grief and mourning, namely that her call for a new humanism means that other positions are occluded by "a veil of ignorance" (Danewid 1676) or "white amnesia" (1681, citing Hesse), foregrounds a more activist approach in reading refugee narratives than responses dominated by empathy and ethical awareness. Butler has been accused of universalising the human subject, predicated as a "wounded and injured, but essentially innocent western subject" (Thobani 135), as interchangeable with the victimised subject who is mourned, while her mandate for empathetic engagement and ethical responsibility is seen by her critics as marginalising the systemic nature of precarity and its roots in colonialism; her Western orientation, that is, ignores the postcolonial project of responding to historical situations of oppression, inequity and injustice as likely causes of today's migrant exodus. These arguments in favour of a politically active response also appear in critical discourses on and about refugees, asylum seekers and other disenfranchised people, in particular those focusing on the historical dimension of cultural identities to explain the risks of becoming stateless, or on the Human Rights questions involved in crossing a border, and moving beyond the categories of citizenship, when the subject's humanity becomes ontological (Sandten; Pedwell; Khorana).

In the global marketplace refugee narratives command a range of positions and play a significant role in the ongoing social and political controversy catalysed by the contradictory opinions and responses to refugees both across national borders and within the nation state. The politics of reception appear, for example, in the way that narratives of victimhood have been promoted and reified by pro-refugee activists to draw attention to the dehumanising treatment of refugees in detention centres, and to challenge xenophobic representations of them as ungrievable because ethically non-recognised. *Refugee Tales*, one of the texts under discussion, belongs to a genre of refugee writing consisting of advocacy-based story collections whose authors, editors and publishers contribute to mediating migrant voices that might otherwise be inaccessible, to bring them to the attention of a wider public: for example, from Australia is Rosie Scott's and Thomas Keneally's collection *A Country Too Far: Writings on Asylum Seekers* (2013); there is also Lucy Popescu's *A Country of Refuge: An Anthology of Writing on Asylum Seekers* (2016), and *Breach*, edited by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes (2016). Some genres are guaranteed success precisely because of their commodification of precarity, and strategic command of empathy in the Western marketplace. For example, the boy refugee narrative, a now fashionable form of fictionalised biography, has proliferated because it is used as a strategy of self-fashioning that may gain Western support for the author or first person narrator in his flight to search for a new life. But such empathetic, compassionate responses are also criticised as fleeting and transient, protecting Western viewers and readers from acknowledging the intransigence of inequality, injustice and persecution. As Carolyn Pedwell points out, they seem to be the correct response, "framed as a 'solution' to a very wide range of ills and instrumental to building cross-cultural and transnational justice" (x). But Western recipients of refugee accounts may

[5] Cf., for example, Cecile Sandten.

strike ‘the limits of empathy’ when confronting scenes of trauma by turning them back on themselves rather than seeing refugees as subjects with agency. These responses do not cross over into the realm of responsibility or of political engagement. Sukhmani Khorana, writing of the reception in Australia where refugees are being detained indefinitely in offshore detention centres like Nauru and Manus Islands in order to enforce its ‘Pacific Solution’, identifies this tension:

> The evocation of empathy in refugee-themed narratives is sometimes accompanied by a depoliticisation of systemic issues. This occurs by shifting responsibility onto the feelings of the ethical citizen rather than the imperative international obligations and/or the power imbalance in regional relations. (305)

Nevertheless, types of refugee writing such as short stories, novels and fictionalised biographies that present multiple, coexisting, and directly competing perspectives may engage the reader on more than the single level implied by an affective response. Expanded insights are made possible through cultural and social contextualisation, as well as multiple viewpoints provided by overlapping narratives, and greater interiorisation in representing subjects of dispossession than is possible with media or other non-fictional accounts. By providing more diverse positions and angles of vision, defining contradictions within precarious situations through alternative or sub-narratives, and by assigning the refugee more complex roles than the stereotypical victim one, as being either incorporated into existing social constructs or, as a force for change, resisting institutional or political frameworks, imaginative fictions can expand readers’ insights and range of potential responses, encouraging more nuanced approaches and perspectives.

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I suggest that the more historically and culturally informed fictional writing on refugees aims to elicit a range of responses, posing the textual challenge to readers’ interpretative frameworks and inviting postcolonial critique of historic injustice, inequality, or discrimination which underlies the material conditions of many illegal migrants or refugees, and so catalysing a determination for socio-political change. Morrison urges readers to question the habitual frames of perception and the affective dynamics by which their responses to vulnerability, death and violence are regulated, and develop alternative critical responses such as motivation towards social politicisation (28).

The challenge for imaginative fiction is in expanding the single life and narrative voice of documentaries, biographies and testimonials into broader social, political and historical contexts in which alternative points of view may be represented, and in encouraging multi-directional readings and multiple perceptions of the refugee character. The three narratives discussed here are selected as representative types of such writing available in today’s global marketplace: from the politically engaged, Western-mediated stories of *Refugee Narratives*, to the semi-autobiographical first person fiction about the flight from the Global South of *African Titanics*, to the more generically recognisable novel of migration, *The Year of the Runaways*, which balances departures with arrivals. All three are indicative of the innovativeness and variation in the form and aesthetics of the core refugee narrative, which blends self-representation and testimony as is commonly found in autobiography or life writing. They show how such a precarious life is accountable or grievable under the pressure of illegality, when lived outside social and civic structures – and, as I shall argue, they control and regulate readers’ responses by challenging habitual frames of perception, ranging from empathy to an ethical responsibility, to resistance and political engagement.

Most overtly political and polemical in its exhortation to a political readerly engagement is *Refugee Tales*, a collection of stories which draws attention to the practice of indefinite detention, a feature of UK Immigration policy. A collaboration between refugees or asylum seekers and a group of British writers and people who work with refugees, it originated in a walking project organised by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group from 13-21 June 2015. The stories arise from the Western mediators’ or writers’ engagement with a refugee or detainee, or someone involved in their journey, such as a lorry driver or lawyer. Abu Bakr Khaal’s novel *African Titanics* is about the flight of a group of so-called “travellers” from Eritrea, who journey along different routes through the desert and across the Mediterranean in successive attempts to reach Europe. The words of a drowned poet/singer become testimony to and commemoration of an entire generation that has fled – and

whose fates are mostly unrecorded. Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* is not, strictly-speaking, a refugee narrative; instead it resembles the familiar Indian diaspora novel about incorporation into the new society. It weaves together narratives of three illegal migrants from India who flee to the UK in 2003, showing their tensions and struggles during their crucial first year when, lacking recourse to official support structures, exposure, deportation, or imprisonment are all possible.

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Mediated, Collective Story-Telling in *Refugee Tales*

This collection of stories is a political intervention, an explicit challenge to the contemporary law of detainment in the UK whereby people can be held in confinement indefinitely in Immigration Removal Centres. In the Afterword, editor David Herd calls for an end to this practice (133; cf. Muir). A production of two humanitarian organisations, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help, the collection illustrates fiction's agency as a mode of cultural production when conceived as a form of collective action or shared communal space, here between migrants, artists and critics. In assembling real life stories that combine reportage and literary responses to the stories of migrants, refugees and detainees into a fictional framework with the aim of challenging non-humanitarian practices, it resembles other advocacy-based story collections in which refugee stories are gathered and published as an act of solidarity.

Told from the multiple perspectives of detainees and the professionals and humanitarian groups concerned for their welfare, the narratives highlight the risks already taken, the losses endured, and the suffering incurred by a system of detention and the threat of deportation. Endorsing the value of story-telling as a collective engagement is the framing of *Refugee Tales* through its intertextual relationship to the foundational English tale-telling collection, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, the walking project along ancient pathways across the Weald of Kent in June 2015, in which the collection has its origins, retraced the route taken by Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims in the 14th century along the North Downs Way to Canterbury, here now seen as a "deeply national space" from which such illegal arrivals are usually kept from view (Herd and Pincus 138). The telling of tales based round the various roles and types, such as "Unaccompanied Minor", "Visitor", "Friend", "Deportee", or "Refugee", draws on the structure of Chaucer's text as a literary template. Intertextual echoes of particular stories in *The Canterbury Tales* appear throughout, in particular of "The Man of Law's Tale" (in which an Italian princess is taken to Syria and then sent to Northumbria where she is falsely accused of a crime), but most strategically in the Prologue in which the challenge to indefinite detention is launched. The words of Chaucer's narrator in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* reappear in a radical political idiom articulating an oppositional agenda: "That people present/Reject the terms/Of a debate that criminalises/Human movement" (v); while Chaucer's famous invocation to spring, about how nature quickens the spirit and energises the human instincts, encouraging people to go on pilgrimages, is now revised to embody the new political energies that aim to reject the official stories in favour of those that have been buried or ignored: "So priketh hem nature/Not believing the stories/Our officials tell./Because we know too much/About what goes unsaid" (vi).

In its mediating of refugees' stories by Western voices the collection handles inconsistently the ethics of representation, of speaking for the other, making this problematic because not necessarily faithful to their experience. In some stories the instinct to articulate and solicit feelings of pity and concern comes at the expense of encouraging a more political response; instead, stereotypical elements, implied by the titles of the stories, reinforce habitual frames of perception. Ali Smith, author of a powerful piece called "The Detainee's Tale", has been criticised for overtly manipulating narrative conventions in order to arouse ready empathy for emotional effect, overriding the voice of the detainee; in being more about her own experience it adds to "the voicelessness of the voiceless" (Braun). This management of public perception in narratives of advocacy that aim to rouse compassion towards refugees on account of their degrading treatment by official forces is a common response. It has led to controversy in Australia, for example, where there has been angry

condemnation of indefinite detention in the camps on Nauru and Manus islands by humanitarian groups. Some see this public reaction as participating in the "politics of pity", and assimilating the suffering of others, rather than striving to effect any socio-political change (Khorana 305). Yet Smith's superimposed voice works to further the collection's aim of advocating an end to detention: the detainee's plight would be less arresting if given in his own words alone. It contributes to the collection's deliberate disjunctions of tone and approach, reflecting a range of writers' responses – a heterogeneity traceable to its model, the *Canterbury Tales*, in which each teller, identified by their vocation, presents a radically different notion of story-telling.

The Afterword also presents the refugees' and asylum seekers' collective response that stresses the greater benefits of a collaboration despite the risk of being represented disproportionately, because of their wish for anonymity, and for some account of their suffering: "[I]t was a relief that the tale was being told, though […] they could not […] be the person who told it. […] they were relieved that the account was being passed on" (Herd and Pincus 142). As in similar collections like *A Country Too Far*, the collectivity of voices emerges from a common activity and ideology, here the walk on which the stories were told. This shared space is where the refugees' liminal voices and stories become audible; one aim of the collection as a political intervention is to value such confessional moments among other perspectives. Smith's story can be compared, for example, to a more 'authentic', affective story (keyed to Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale") about a refugee from Syria, whose body language betrays the viscerally painful experience of telling, and hence reliving, his narrative of suffering and loss: "He holds his upper arms and rocks back and forth" (4).

The welfare group of asylum seekers, detainees and refugees mixed with an artistic community is motivated by a shared awareness of human life as grievable, and the vulnerable individual whose story is being retold is ~~identified as~~ metonymic of the attempt, signified by the real life walking project: to establish what Butler calls the "interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment" (19). The telling of stories provides a dynamic of co-responsibility as the detainees' and asylum seekers' situation is collectively addressed; it offers an alternative sense of belonging informed by the image of travel and movement on a micro-scale – which, Herd claims in the Afterword, creates a parallel with the collapse of the Calais camp which occurred at the time of the project – thus giving greater presence to and understanding of the metaphor of space that is central to the migrant experience (134, 142). The editors' polemic incites readers to adopt a more pro-active stance in engaging with refugees and detainees and to protest against the practice of indefinite detention.

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The Poetics of Risk: *African Titanics*

Written in Arabic in 2008 by an Eritrean writer now living in Denmark, and translated into English in 2014, *African Titanics* is closely correlated to the current 21st-century refugee crisis, as a representative account of an entire generation mobilising itself to seek a new life in Europe, and it tells of their vicissitudes in trying to reach this Shangri-La, which include life-threatening encounters with bandits and leaking boats, as well as official rejection upon arrival. Recounting the exodus of boat people from North and East Africa to the Mediterranean, it is written in a semi-realist style as a first-person narrative interspersed with stories, songs and legends. In this blend of written narrative and eyewitness, oral testimony the novel has some resemblance to the familiar autobiographical refugee tale.

However, from the outset the narrator, Abdar, asserts control over the narrative, and stresses the discrepancy between fact and fiction by highlighting the power of rumour, stories and language to delude and deceive; in preferring fiction to fact or truth, he elevates his role of artist as tale spinner. Abdar contributes to the volatile discourses of witchcraft and sorcery that circulate in the Eritrean society to which he belongs, enhancing the untold benefits of migration, and he becomes 'converted' from scepticism to addiction to this powerful force:

> 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 and sounding a magnificent bell […]. It was a pandemic. A plague. […] Dong, dong, dong pealed the bell, calling one and all to its promised paradise. (Khaal 3)

As Korte and Zipp point out, "poverty is […] a 'collateral' motif in much literature dealing with migration" (3), and poverty provides a powerful reason to migrate along with the limited social capability in the homelands of Africa. Indeed, this explains the willingness of an entire generation to put their lives at risk in *African Titanics*, for the people are seduced by the lure of material wealth – the flash car and beautiful woman. But there is no indication that these motivations can be traced to historical problems of Eritrea's colonisation or to famine, or other forms of deprivation due to long-term mismanagement, and hence little opportunity for developing postcolonial critique or positions in order to challenge the dominant reading position which is based on empathy.

Instead, the compulsion to flee the homeland is represented in terms of superstition and myth-making, and attributed to the black arts, a demonic force in the form of rumour fostering false hopes. The real dangers of migration – the losses at sea – are blurred and ignored in the flow of gossip, rumour, "strange and wonderful stories" (Khaal 6). The novel's title, referring to the most famous, apparently unsinkable boat *The Titanic*, alludes to the migrants' untrustworthy boats, otherwise called "The Doomed" (15, 41, 61), and the text records that the sinking of these vessels and the drownings are often met by public uncertainty and incredulity. Just as the problematic conditions of life in Eritrea are overlooked in these colliding and impressionistic perspectives, the narrator and his Eritrean community have little knowledge of the West, which becomes equated with an aspiration rather than a reality. Symptomatic of this disconnection from Western society is that they see themselves as "travellers", not as refugees, until they see the media reports from satellite Italian channels, broadcasting images of shipwrecks and drowned corpses (59).

At one with this community in his willing suspension of disbelief, Abdar falls victim to his own rhetoric in becoming convinced, in a moment of revelation, that the power of song will overcome that of sorcery and witchcraft. He refocuses the exodus through his own conversion to the "migration bug", anticipating the novel's later commemoration through song of a doomed generation (6). His false premise – that by becoming a traveller he will defeat witchcraft with the power of song – hardly justifies his failed flight to Europe with others from Eritrea, Liberia, the Sudan and Somalia. This framework of perception occludes the apprehension of a precarious life and the valuing of life as worthy of protection that in Butler's terms is an ethical response to such an apprehension, and so distances the Western reader from any response based on a sense of obligation or concern. The narrator values the superior power of song for its romantic enhancement of flight, yet it differs only in kind from the magical power of the sorcerer which he claims to overrule.

In this context the figure of Malouk, an artist who travels with his guitar, and whose powers of music and song make him instantly legendary after he sinks to a watery grave in one of the capsized boats, may be a mirror image of the narrator himself. Malouk's appearance in the novel causes a change of mood signified by a shift in typographical form. The narrator partly appropriates his identity by writing down Malouk's songs and stories on behalf of the collective to give voice to the tragic loss of life. This implies some hierarchy in the grievability of life, as the deceased singer becomes valued through testimony and memory while false rumours that he has been sighted make his loss felt all the more widely. The importance of Malouk as a commentator and recorder is also aesthetically and artistically represented through the use of italicised stories and poems set into the narrative told by Abdar. These lyrical sections, expressing sadness mixed with bravura at the fates of those who have departed and are not heard of again, have a memorialising function; this is reinforced in the novel's concluding lament for those who have perished:

> 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. (Khaal 122)

In writing down Malouk’s words in the conclusion the narrator confirms his belief in song’s power to overcome sorcery, rather than showing that art has enabled him to break the spell that sorcery (or the lure of migration) casts.

The final lament demands an affective response, one of empathy rather than ethical concern or determination towards political change. It is anticipated by evidence of the developing bonds between the travellers, the culmination of many affective moments and incidents in which their physical vulnerability is painfully evoked; for example, in the non-spaces that they occupy in the shadowy world of illicit travel across the Sahara desert or the Mediterranean: in unseaworthy vessels, crowded trucks, the smuggler’s den or prison. The characters are increasingly represented as fragile, as victims of smugglers who are generally unreliable, dishonest, and out of control, due to unpredictable forces like rival bandits, unseaworthy boats, or harsh weather conditions. An affective thematic appears as illness and death take their toll; there are signs of co-caring and responsibility: even the smugglers and bandits are moved by the visible decline of some of the travellers, and they take to hospital a Kurdish woman who falls ill in the smuggler’s den.

Focalising the novel’s memorialising function are the emotional responses of one of the women, called Terhas, and Abdar when they encounter the marks and words of those who have gone before and have now disappeared. They read out the inscriptions written in different languages in the smuggler’s den, either as letters or as notes scrawled on the walls, intended for those who come after: “‘If this letter reaches you, I beg you will not feel sad or fearful for me. Please do not shed any of your precious tears on my account’”; “ ‘Where will you take me, oh fleeting hours?’ read one beautifully written message in Tigre […] signed ‘Anonymous’”; “‘How can the journey from shore to shore be so very difficult? It seems so simple on the maps,’ a French hand had written just a few days earlier”; “‘Forgive me, my dear Hamouddi,’ came another message in Arabic. When I translated it to Terhas tears welled in her eyes […]: ‘maybe it was her son?’” (Khaal 45-47). These traces and relics of past journeys, disclosed by the written fragments, testify to the disappeared, to lost lives or unknown fates. Abdar’s and Terhas’s affective responses to these hinted-at, untold stories are a stalking horse for the reader. Reading out the words of those whose fates are unknown brings both characters and readers to a threshold of recognition and memory, just as Malouk’s poem, cited at the end, provides some closure to the suffering the story records. This emotive dimension counteracts the self-determining framework provided by the narrator, enabling the novel to fulfil one of the demands of testimony – that is, to overturn the perception that such lives will be forgotten because not regarded as materially grievable (hence valuable), and to overcome their victim subaltern status by recuperating them (Butler 25).

Migration and Precarity in *The Year of the Runaways*

Butler’s humanism and call for an international politics of mourning based on suffering and vulnerable humanity is appropriate for a reading of *African Titanics*, in which solidarity in the commemorative act is solicited throughout, but Sunjeev Sahota’s *The Year of the Runaways*, by contrast, solicits a sceptical, politically aware response, and, like *Refugee Tales*, its distancing mechanisms contribute to a reading along the lines of a political intervention. The novel attributes the illegal migration of its characters to social crises, and domestic and financial problems typical of the developing and developed worlds; although these reflect current inequalities of socioeconomic status and gender and class/caste discrimination in India, their historical origins might be traced to colonial conditions of oppression and injustice. ~~It also points to differences between the~~These appear in the novel’s two time frames, the late 1970s, ~~the decade in which it is set, and the present global~~

~~time in which it is written~~ covering the characters' early lives in India, and 2003, the year of their arrival in the UK, ~~where~~ and an era when increased mobility ~~points to~~ reflects the widening gap between rich and poor, caused by neoliberal global capitalism, alongside t~~he more usual~~h historically-based ~~sources~~ causes of famine, civil war or persecution. The novel's contemporary setting, from winter 2003 to autumn 2004, also belongs to a period when the Home Office under Theresa May was making conditions more difficult for immigrants to the UK (Jones 2015). *African Titanics* represents its fleeing population as susceptible to the urge to move at any cost, without identifying the reason or asking why, and unable to manage risk and mitigate disaster. *The Year of the Runaways* takes a wider overview by linking poverty and the socioeconomic disadvantage of ~~Indian~~ communities in India and the Indian diaspora in England to more than one concept of precarity and one historical, political cause. Present-day precariousness is revealed as a pervasive condition, not just economically conditioned and hence aligned with poverty, but also a general state of unease due to psychological, cultural and domestic insecurity. The novel's transnational, transcultural frameworks and dualistic time frame of pre- and post-migration reference the multiple class, caste, and geographical demographies of India and its English diaspora. This structure suggests that precaritisation and insecurity are powerfully present and persistent in many lives of those who move between nations and social systems.

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In both novels narrative framing can be identified with what Butler calls "the politics of moral responsiveness" (41) at the social failure to meet some or all of the basic conditions for survival: "shelter, work, food, medical care, legal status" (13). But there are significant differences. In *African Titanics*, there is no argument or debate about whether these rights exist or should be guaranteed, thus inspiring an affective rather than a moral response. In *The Year of the Runaways*, such privation is weighed up in the cost of illegal movement; it is spelt out to the migrants upon arrival in the UK and reinforced throughout the novel, as they are invited to question their course of action. They could return to India, as Tochi, a Dalit, is advised by an Indian co-worker: "'Take my advice and go back now. Before there's nothing to go back for and you're stuck here'" (Sahota 89). Like the warning represented by the heartfelt messages of farewell on the walls of the smuggler's den in *African Titanics*, these perspectives on individual choice challenge readers' perceptions of what constitutes a "grievable" life. The undimmed faith in flight is questioned by those who have gone before in Abu Bakr Khaal's novel, but it is too late for the protagonists who read their messages to recalculate the risk to their lives.

The Year of the Runaways is closer to the novel of migration, whereas *African Titanics* resembles other refugee accounts such as those published in *Refugee Tales*, and they differ in their attitudes towards departure and movement. In the novel of migration, management, planning and support underpin the financial contracts that are entered into, negotiations with facilitators and transporters, and arrangements for the migrants on arrival in the host land, whereas in the refugee novel such systems are arbitrary, even non-existent. Unlike *African Titanics*, where travel ends in failure and a return to base, and *Refugee Tales*, in which refugees and detainees live in Immigrant Detention Centres in forced suspension, unable to move on with their lives, *The Year of the Runaways* shows the painful but ultimately successful mechanisms for arrival and then settlement in the host society. By contrast to the refugee narratives, this novel details the intricate negotiations required for departure. The black market of people smuggling ensures safe passage to England, through the purchase, with the requisite extortionate fees, of travel and other documents to guarantee entry: a fake student visa for one of the migrants, Avtar, and a fake marriage certificate for his friend, Randeep. Both young men receive hospitality from relations already settled in the UK upon arrival, although they cannot rely on this source of support, and turn to the Indian diaspora network for illegal work.

The novel's condemnation of global poverty and subalternity continues with a close-up examination of the system of illegal, subaltern labour in the UK which denies security and a work-based identity, keeping the labourers in thrall to the black market. The three men – Tochi, Randeep and Avtar – obsessively hoard their meagre earnings because of financial commitments to money lenders, family or the illegal bride in her flat. They suffer this adversity and abandonment because of the fear of being deported, and because labour, however poorly paid, is a means to gain residency,

citizenship, or sufficient wealth to return to India and start over again, as Tochi, who has lost all his family in a casteist attack, eventually manages to do. In *African Titanics*, by contrast, systemic poverty and lack of opportunity mean that travel is a desperate resort, becoming a way of life. Accordingly, no plans are laid down, decisions are arbitrary, money is traded only for passage out, labour has little place in the scheme of things, and the chances of a better life exist only in an imagined future. The absence of voice or resistant utterance is indicative of what is seen as the lack of rhetorical space for stateless subjects rendering them "statementless" (Morton 232, citing Young Ah-Gottlieb 34).

Sahota's novel, like Abu Bakr Khaal's, shows how conditions of adversity and risk generate vulnerability and relations of responsibility, but with the difference that these become unstable: the material hardships of survival during the first year in the new land undermine expectations of support and goodwill with rivalry and conflict. Whereas in *African Titanics* the fellow travellers reinforce ties of loyalty under their life-threatening circumstances, and in *Refugee Tales* bonds between detainees and welfare groups create a humanitarian bulwark against the asylum system's heavy officialdom, in *The Year of the Runaways* insecurity of employment with no rights of social protection, and threats of poverty, debt, and deportation render relations of caring and support more arbitrary, as they are threatened by violence and abandonment. The three men sharing temporary occupation in the bleak environs of Sheffield question their ties and loyalties, as Sahota's depiction of privation illustrates the reduced quality of life. There is scepticism about the value of family affections, an overriding rationale for their migration to England; to Randeep's question Avtar replies:

> '[I]t's not work that makes us leave home and come here. It's love. Love for our families. […] Do you think that's true?' […] 'We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We're doing our duty. And it's shit.' (7)

The men, especially Avtar and Randeep, maintain relations of co-protection, often turning in moments of need to the diaspora community's centre of religious practice, the Sikh temple, or Gurdwara. Yet the ties are fragile, as indigence creates ruthlessness. The Dalit Tochi steals Avtar's second job; in return Avtar, when his debtors finally come after him threatening to kill his family in India, steals Tochi's savings to pay them off. The familiar distinctions of class and caste also break down in the diaspora, and the ability to mask ethnic identity leads to further conflict, as Tochi discovers when a wealthy Hindu family considers him as a suitable match for their daughter, then turn against him when they find out about his Dalit status.

Precarity also relates to the differential distribution of resources playing out into the political struggle between wealthy and marginal groups. Sahota addresses the injustice that the subaltern group is more routinely exposed to high levels of precarity, and his novel challenges economic differences and class inequality, and overturns the assumption that wealth and social status are ultimate markers of value. Symptoms of precaritisation, what Guy Standing notes as drifting, a loss of purpose, alienation from labour, "anomic, uncertain and desperate […] behaviour" (23), occur among the affluent elite, displaced migrants who have prospered in the diaspora. Dr Cheema, a wealthy Indian businessman who works with newly arrived international students at the university at which Avtar is enrolled, suffers a psychological, existential crisis when he feels that his new belonging in the host society involves sacrifice of all that is familiar. Feeling alienated in England, he sees in the indigent working class migrant who, in his eyes, represents a greater authenticity of being, a positive counterpart to his own spiritual losses, dispossession and nostalgia for the homeland. Meeting the illegal student Avtar makes him aware of his alienation, precipitating a crisis of cultural identity and a desire for security beyond the family and workplace: "'We don't belong here. It's not our home. […] You've helped me realize that. People like you'" (Sahota 317). Dr Cheema's urgent need for greater rootedness overrides his class and wealth, effecting a shift in the relative positions of authority between the two men; here poverty marks "an ethic of authenticity" (During 59). The younger, impoverished student, by contrast, is oblivious to Cheema's state of desolation and criticises the material values that give rise to spiritual losses: "What decadence this belonging rubbish was, what

time the rich must have if they could sit around and weave great worries out of such threadbare things" (Sahota 316). Yet even in the novel's epilogue, set ten years later, when Randeep and Avtar are comfortably settled in suburban lives with their families, they are seen as subject to similar psychological stresses of incomplete belonging, of anxiety and insecurity, suggesting that precarity manifests in more interior ways even after financial and other forms of privation are overcome (Kennedy 287-88).

Conclusion: Precarious Lives and Frameworks of Perception

The comparison of the different frameworks of perception provided by three fictions began with the fundamental contrasts in their representations of precarity, between the dramas of asylum and detainment in *Refugee Tales*, life-endangering flight in *African Titanics*, and the hardships of arrival in *The Year of the Runaways*. The levels to which the reader's affective, ethical and political responses are mobilised vary according to how life in each is apprehended and valued as precarious. In *Refugee Tales*, the value of life is mediated by the Western interpreter, writer, or mediator, against markers such as freedom of movement, human rights and the dignity of the subject. In *African Titanics* life is easily expunged, and the well-attested tradition of testimony testifies to and memorialises this vulnerability, although the first person narrator's mendacious claim that Malouk's stories and poems will enable his art to outwit the sources of tragic loss of life in sorcery destabilises the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. The added level of fictionality is reinforced by retellings of folktale and legend suggestive of a rich local culture in the face of non-existent state support and limited historical knowledge, further adding to the novel's memorialising function and affective dimension. *The Year of the Runaways* constantly mobilises an ethical awareness that overrides an affective response. Sahota demonstrates sympathy for all three characters in their struggle to preserve some integrity under life-threatening circumstances, and to survive at the cost of acting appropriately, but the novel's scepticism about the ideologies and value systems in which they are trapped solicits in the reader some desire for social change. In this light, the abrupt change of fortunes in the novel's Epilogue, in which all three characters have ordered their lives into comfortable domesticity, suggests a wish to rise above the level of privation, and to show the value of investment in hardship. The novel has attracted readers, and its being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 suggests that Western readers may be sustaining a global demand for such third-world success stories that naturalise the problematic process of relocation and so shed an outsider light on Western society (Bystrom 395). Yet the defamiliarisation of society in *African Titanics* and *Refugee Tales*, the emphasis on the irreducible humanity of refugees and the questions of social justice, equality and Human Rights that these arouse, are likely to solicit a more instantaneous empathetic response, albeit tempered by an ethical awareness of how the narrators in both texts are exploiting the boundary between art and life to mobilise it.

The confusing reversals and disruptions of the larger social pattern of the Indian diaspora community in *The Year of the Runaways*, the absence of any coherent social structure at all in *African Titanics*, and the system of detention that comprises the background of *Refugee Tales*, illustrate the extreme marginality of refugees as social actors. This is reinforced in the formal shape of all three as texts about movement and spatiality. The rhythm of Abdar's journeys is mirrored in the narrative form and dominates the novel's aesthetic structure, the characters' real and imagined journeys between England and India in *The Year of the Runaways* inform that novel's aesthetics, and each story told in *Refugee Tales* is cognisant of the journeys made to reach England, overlaid by the motif of the walking tour shared by the welfare characters and the artistic community. The refugee groups and diaspora communities of these novels make them literary templates for how forced exile and flight undermine social hierarchies, revealing gaps in the global political and economic system as mobile subjects point to cracks and alternative spaces in the social structure. As narratives about movement caused by the extremity of individual hope, they challenge and extend readers' habitual frames of perception that are conditioned by affective documentary and media accounts of refugees.

The stress on the flow of experience at the expense of history, the urge to survive in adversity, and the ongoing revaluation of ties of belonging comprise new ethical and political dimensions in these narratives about illegality, statelessness and migrancy.

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