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“Water is Another Country”: Waterscapes and the Refugee Crisis

ABSTRACT This article explores the recent resurgence of maritime spaces in the light of refugee crisis. Through a confluence of factual data, theories, and refugee narratives, the article evaluates the role of seas as spaces of transit, analyzing the affects that are generated during the encounter between the sea and the refugees. Two maritime spaces are taken into consideration—the Mediterranean Sea and the Bay of Bengal region—in the context of refugee journeys to Europe and the movement of the Rohingya refugees respectively. The article theorizes the precarity of maritime spaces reflecting the precarity of refugee lives and bodies.

KEYWORDS refugee, Mediterranean, Rohingya, sea, refugee narratives, Bay of Bengal, affects and sea, violence

Introduction

The quoted line in the title is from the Black Canadian author Dionne Brand’s book *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2012, 56), where among other things, the author explores the idea of home, nation, and Blackness in connection with the powerful, traumatizing, “ubiquitous and mute” (56) entity of water.

Maritime spaces have occupied central positions in the worldviews of different cultures, involving a spectrum of ecological, economic, political, and cultural dimensions—be it the projection of oceans as taboo spaces of *Kalapani*¹ prohibiting their crossing in India, or as spaces of trade and economic sustenance to countries like Japan and China, or as

1 *Kalapani* literally means “black water.” It refers to the taboo associated with sea voyage in Hinduism and Indian culture. It was a Hindu religious sanction

spaces hosting the colonial, entrepreneurial, and adventurous enterprise of Europe, or the outlawed spaces of crime of sea raiders and pirates, the vast waterscapes spread across the globe have sustained a multitude of worlds. Most recently, maritime spaces have resurfaced in particularly painful and layered ways in the context of various migrations. The journeys of displaced and dislocated people occupy a place of particular importance due to their transformative potential; they can be life-defining, life-threatening, and have the power to stay in the individual, collective, and social memory for generations. However, these journeys are often neglected due to the emphasis put on the situations before (that triggers the journey) and after (on arrival at the destination) (BenEzer and Zetter 2015). This article looks at the two maritime spaces of the Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal in the light of ongoing forced migration through a confluence of factual figures, theories, and refugee narratives, to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the recent resurgence of the sea in our consciousness. Furthermore, refugees² have been systematically used as figures of transience and absence, their experiences of journey lost behind statistical data of living and dead. This article brings together refugee voices and their experiences of the sea.

Navigating Maritime Spaces

Maritime spaces of the world, to a lesser or greater extent, have been defined by the cultures surrounding them and they have in turn shaped the dynamic identities of the people around them. Waves of scholarly attention have unraveled the historical, political, ecological, and cultural dimensions of these spaces and have established that the sea does not end with its shores but spills, builds, transforms, and stays with the land around it³.

against crossing the seas, stipulating that one supposedly lost one's caste and social respectability by doing so.

- 2 I am aware of the criticism that the term "refugee" has garnered in recent times. However, at the heart of this article are people and their narratives who have been forcefully removed from their homelands and compelled to undertake journeys risking their lives. In such a context, I find refugee an apt term. Other alternatives like "migrant" would be mellow and insufficient to capture the violence, precarity, and lack of rights that are associated with such people.
- 3 See Paul Gilroy's watershed concept of the Black Atlantic, explored in the book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) where he provides a critique of cultural nationalism and explores the connection between slavery and African diasporic cultures through the cultural-political formation, transcending nation and ethnicity.

Due to the overwhelming human activity that has ruled the waters of the two maritime spaces that concern this article, it is imperative to briefly summarize the Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal, delineating their importance to the civilizations surrounding them. Seascapes have been analyzed by scholars and thinkers as rich sites of transnational and intercultural exchange, as geopolitical spaces where borders of the lands are dissolved, and cultural currents travel and converge through languages, music, cuisine, diet, and ideas—this cannot be any more fitting for the Bay and the Mediterranean.

Mediterranean historiography is a scholastically well-attended area. Some of the most comprehensive works, like *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Horden and Purcell 2000), harness anthropology, history, archeology, economics, and geography to exemplify the region’s ever-transforming and diverse environment simultaneously with a constant engagement with Fernand Braudel’s pioneering study of Mediterranean history (1949). David Abulafia’s exploration of the human societies and the movement of goods and people around the Mediterranean titled *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* ([2011] 2019) is a periodic study about the history of the sea and the people who crossed it. Maritime spaces in general and the Mediterranean in particular, following the arguments of Iain Chambers in his seminal book *Mediterranean Crossings* (2008), have been, since eternity, environments harboring forces of waves, storms, winds, tides, and currents serving as means and zones of contact and communication. This is in dissonance with the creation and erection of human-made barriers, borders, and perception, as has happened in the case of the Mediterranean, a space that shares borders with and thus connects Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. Chambers further offers his arguments against homogenizing the Mediterranean and erasing or appropriating the diversities and cultural currents that have inundated its spaces. Evaluating the Mediterranean as “a concept and historical and cultural formation” (2008, 10) which is “imaginatively constructed” (10) by the rich cross-cultural interactions of the civilizations bordering its shores, Chambers asserts that colonial encounters, imperial enterprises, trade, and commerce are inscribed on the space of the Mediterranean and have transformed it into a site of “multiple mediations and memories” (131) with “overlapping territories and intertwined histories” (3), which sits uneasily with the narrow identity politics and provincialism of the nationalisms that plague Europe. Such a postcolonial reading of the Mediterranean successfully detaches it from the Eurocentric notion of the western / European civilization’s exclusive claim over modernity and reminds us that Europe was not always a seat of power, modernity, law, and

democracy, and that Asian, African, and Middle Eastern civilizations were once at the helm of prosperity, power, and progress and still contribute to Europe's advancement. Due to these shared spaces, Europe has benefited greatly from the cross-cultural exchanges, hence the current geographical and political limitations and classifications of these spaces as controlled borderlines between the "developed West" and the "impoverished other" are unjustified and hegemonic. However, intermingled with the narratives of cooperation and exchange lies the notoriety of these spaces as watery graves of refugees. Periodic booms in emigration from African countries to Europe, especially from countries like Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, have caused a spike in attention on the Mediterranean and much of it due to boat tragedies that have caused thousands of people to go missing or die. The Black Mediterranean, following Paul Gilroy's concept and theorization of the Black Atlantic, is a term that is used by scholars, artists, and activists "to describe the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean region. [...] [T]he 'Black Mediterranean' invites us to place the contemporary refugee crisis in the context of Europe's constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery" (Danewid 2017, 1679).

The Bay of Bengal, the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean, geographically surrounded by India (northwest), Bangladesh (north), and Myanmar (east), has been for centuries crucial to both the Asian and the European powers. In the beginning of colonial expansion, the Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese, and English charted its waters and the Bay has been deeply entangled with the economics and politics of the region, carrying across cultural artefacts, foods, relics, indentured laborers, enslaved people, soldiers, and imperialists. Despite having a significantly active and diverse historical status, the Bay, compared to the Mediterranean, remains a less attended area from a historical and cultural studies perspective, although some work has been done on its physical oceanography, hydrography, and biodiversity. The most important and relevant study that has significantly informed the background of this article comes from Sunil Amrith, who in his exhaustive study on the Bay of Bengal *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* (2013) details the diverse history of the region, the massive rise and temporary fall of the maritime space's contribution to the cultural, emotional, political, and economic life of South and Southeast Asia, as well as its current vulnerable situation as a densely populated, ecologically fragile space on earth where powerful nations like India and China wrestle over control of the waters. Summing up the spectrum of activity and movements on the waters of the Bay, Amrith writes:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the connectedness of the Bay of Bengal underwent a change in scale. It was remade as a region at the heart of the global, imperial economy. It was soldered by the force of capital in search of new profits on South Asia’s forest frontiers. It was animated by the power of fossil fuels as steamships made the ocean crossing faster, cheaper, and easier than ever before. It was governed by the imperial laws that both uprooted and immobilized people, locking some communities in place (as “peasants”) while compelling others to travel under contracts of indenture or under the weight of debt. It was shaped, above all, by human labor—and human suffering. (2)

One of the most crucial aspects of the history of the Bay has been migration, which had global impacts. Malaya’s rubber plantation tapped by Tamil workers fed the American automobile industry and Burma became the largest rice exporter of the world (Amrith 2013, 2). Much like the Mediterranean, the Bay also became a space for exchange of ideas and languages:

The port cities of Southeast Asia, where the Bay of Bengal met the South China Sea, were as plural as any on earth, and more so than most. A rich exchange of ideas and languages were the result of transient encounters or cross-cultural relationships. Ethnic conflict and cultural cosmopolitanism coexisted in uneasy balance, a result of this meeting of many Asian diasporas. (3)

The Bay of Bengal has occupied a significant place not only in the history but also in the cultural memory of the region, all the more so due to its current environmental precarity. The Sundarbans mangrove forest is home to 1,136 animal species and 334 types of plants and comprises 35 percent of Bangladesh’s biodiversity. It is home to around four million people who gain their livelihood from the ecosystem of the Sundarbans delta. The Bay and its surrounding regions have regularly featured in the creative literary productions of notable authors like Amitabh Ghosh, who have illuminated the mesmerizing tryst of humans with nature and the Anthropocene and have uncovered cultural resources of the region.

Refugee Migration and the Sea

This section summarizes the state of the two most recent and ongoing refugee movements on sea, one across the Mediterranean and the other at the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, focusing on the key migratory conditions that emerged and grabbed headlines across the world. Death,

human trafficking, and rescuing of refugees have been the three most discussed and debated topics that are common to both migratory instances and spaces. Ours is an increasingly volatile planet riddled with an ongoing pandemic, wars, climate change, and various other instabilities that periodically drive people out of their homelands. Widespread unrest in a number of countries in the Arab world in the form of armed rebellions, military coups, anti-government protests, and uprisings has caused major political, social, and economic instability in the region that triggered a significant refugee exodus. Around 2015–2016 this evacuation reached its peak, with around 5.2 million refugees reaching the European shores. Europe, which became a primary destination of this mass migration, has since then seen a significant influx of people from countries like Libya, Eritrea, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and other areas torn by civil war, violence, and massive human rights abuses. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in its report of this mass movement observed:

[T]here has been a major increase in refugees and refugees taking the “eastern Mediterranean route” from Turkey to Greece. More than 85 per cent of those arriving in Greece are from countries experiencing war and conflict, principally Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. From Greece, most move onwards across the Balkans to western and northern Europe. Italy remains the primary destination for Eritreans, Somalis and other people from sub-Saharan Africa. (UNHCR 2015)

A significant number of arrivals from these regions have been and continue to be by sea due to relative lack of travel restrictions, formalities, and border control. UNHCR reports on January 30, 2019:

Refugees and refugees attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea lost their lives at an alarming rate in 2018, as cuts in search and rescue operations reinforced its position as the world’s deadliest sea crossing. The latest “Desperate Journeys” report, released today by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, says six lives were lost on average every day. An estimated 2,275 died or went missing crossing the Mediterranean in 2018, despite a major drop in the number of arrivals reaching European shores. In total, 139,300 refugees and refugees arrived in Europe, the lowest number in five years.

Within the span of 2018–2022 for example, UNHCR data shows that in 2020 the number of refugees who arrived by sea was 84,961, compared to 7,389 land arrivals (UNHCR 2022). Out of these a significant number of lives were lost in transit. In the process of migration, an estimated number

of more than 20,000 refugees have perished in the waters, especially the Mediterranean. In 2021, more than 114,000 people risked their lives trying to reach Europe by sea; over 3,200 of them are dead or missing. Besides the obvious risk of losing lives in perilous sea voyages, such journeys are also fraught with other risks and difficulties. There have been reports of rampant incidents of human trafficking, smuggling, and other forms of violence against the refugees before they embark on their journeys:

There is extensive evidence of violence—including beatings, kidnappings, forced labour and arbitrary detention—experienced by refugees and refugees along the entirety of their journeys—including within Europe. Many respondents had witnessed death through starvation, violence or drowning. This violence takes place at the hands of smugglers, fellow travellers and agents of the state, including police and border guards. Refugees and migrants are prepared to risk violence and death because they do not believe there any alternatives available to them. (ESRC 2017)

Another discussion that gained momentum simultaneously is the contentious issue of rescuing refugees from the seas. A report that came out in INFOREFUGEES states:

Four NGOs involved in the rescue of refugees experiencing difficulty at sea have issued a statement calling for Italy to stop blocking their ships. The NGOs Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Sea-Watch, Open Arms, and Mediterranea have urged the Italian government to stop blocking their rescue ships in the Mediterranean ahead of the National Day in Remembrance of the Victims of Immigration on October 3. (INFOREFUGEES 2020)

Besides, there have been instances of direct interference with rescuing refugees at sea. Italian authorities confined the refugee rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 4* under an alleged false pretense of an inadequate sewage system among others as a move to prevent civilians carrying out sea rescues in the central Mediterranean (Deutsche Welle 2020). These instances of deliberate prevention of rescuing refugees make news headlines despite the clear directive of “rescue of persons in distress at sea” as mentioned in the SOLAS Convention (International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea). In addition to that, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) obliges state parties to “ensure that assistance [is] provided to any person in distress at sea [...] regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or the circumstances in which that person is found (Chapter 2.1.10) and to [...] provide for their initial medical

or other needs, and deliver them to a place of safety (Chapter 1.3.2)” (UNHCR 2015). However, SAR (search and rescue) at sea has not been the only contentious issue. Overall, there has been a resistance from political parties against sheltering refugees also on land, thereby signifying that the legitimacy of certain bodies is debatable. In an instance that happened in the Rhineland-Palatinate,

Pastors have been under police investigation since 2018, after allowing Sudanese refugees to sleep in church buildings in rural, western Germany. [...] These pastors are among the hundreds of Europeans who have been arrested, investigated, or threatened with prison or fines over the past five years under a range of different laws that rights advocates say are *criminalizing solidarity* with refugees. (Open Democracy 2019, emphasis added)

Italy even went one step ahead and imposed a fine of one million euros for defying a ban on entering Italian waters to land refugees, a move that came when *Sea-Watch 3* Captain Carola Rackete entered the port of Lampedusa to land forty refugees, defying the Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini’s second security and immigration decree (INFOREFUGEES 2019). UN bodies have urged Europe to restart rescuing refugees at the Mediterranean: the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR have called on the EU to implement a series of measures aimed at assisting people trapped in Libya or at risk of dying on the Mediterranean. The suggestions include restarting a program of organized sea rescues (Deutsche Welle 2019). These incidents form a part of the grand narrative of refugee crisis and refocuses on Europe’s centuries-long violent relations with the Global South, fraught with colonialism, slavery, genocide, which forms the core of Europe’s modernity. It also brings into light renewed discussions on European humanism that necessitates the presence and nurturing of the “subhuman other.” Europe’s convenient amnesia about her fascist and colonial past is often reflected in the thought that contemporary forced migration and crisis originates outside Europe while she is the innocent bystander, and that European states have to bear the white man’s burden by showing sympathy and granting refuge to the displaced and dislocated:

This overlooks that the majority of refugees seeking asylum in Europe are coming from countries that until recently were under colonial rule. Libya and Eritrea were Italian colonies until 1947; Somalia was ruled by Italy and Britain until 1960; Syria was a French protectorate under the Mandate System until 1946; Britain invaded and occupied Afghanistan

three times until formal independence in 1919. From the days of colonial conquest and genocide to the economic exploitation under the Mandate System, and recent years’ interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, any serious consideration of what lies behind the surge of refugees into Europe must account for this colonial history and the way in which it continues to structure the present. (Danewid 2017, 1680)

While international heads were turned toward Europe and her dealing with the refugee question, South Asia has been grappling with her share of one of the most difficult refugee migrations since 2017. The conditions of mass migration of Rohingya refugees, who were a Muslim ethnic minority in the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar, also involved some of the common factors, namely massive violence, discrimination, and human rights abuse, forcing thousands of Rohingyas to flee the Rakhine State. The persecution of Rohingyas intensified in 2017 when, according to reports, Myanmar led a campaign against this ethnic group with genocidal intent, unleashing executions and mass rape. A distinct and further complicating aspect of Rohingya migration was their lack of citizenship since 1982,⁴ which makes them one of the largest stateless populations in the world. In 1982 the Burmese dictator U Ne Win, decided to redefine national identity and released a list of 135 recognized ethnic groups to retain Burmese citizenship. Rohingyas did not figure in the list and hence overnight they became outsiders and a target of state-sponsored persecution. UNHCR estimates that more than 742,000 people sought refuge in Bangladesh, and that over a million Rohingya refugees have fled violence in Myanmar in successive waves of displacement since the 1990s. A majority of such stateless people have taken shelter in Bangladesh and Malaysia under extremely harsh and unstable economic and environmental conditions and have been called “the most persecuted minority in the world”⁵ from the United Nations (UNHCR, n.d).

4 In 1974, Burma’s military-run government enacted a new constitution establishing one-party rule. The new Emergency Immigration Act passed in the parliament limited the rights of individuals seen as “foreigners” from Bangladesh, China, and India. Rohingyas fell into this group and their national registration cards were confiscated. In 1978, Burmese militia launched Operation Naga min or Dragon King to register and verify the status of people seen as foreigners, which led to assault and terrorization of the groups. In 1982, the parliament passed a new law that based citizenship on ethnicity and excluded Rohingya and other minority communities. A timeline of the events is available here: <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide/timeline>.

5 See for further details: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/rohingya/>.

Inter-communal violence between the pro-Buddhist Rakhine and the pro-British Muslims in Myanmar dates back to World War II when the Japanese forces invaded the country while it was still under British colonial rule. Scholars claim that Buddhist nationalism gained momentum during the British colonial rule cemented together with anti-Islamic sentiments and the fear that if neighboring Islamic countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia were to attack Myanmar, the Rohingyas would fight against their own country. Sectarian conflict and systematic and repeated massacres and attacks between the two groups have torn and divided the country since the 1940s, while most recently the Myanmar junta forced the Rohingyas to either leave the country or face ethnic cleansing. Scholars have identified not only religious but also political and economic motivation behind such persecution.

As a part of the response to the deadly coronavirus pandemic, many countries in Southeast Asia tightened their borders, which left many fleeing Rohingya refugees stranded at sea, sometimes floating in boats at sea for months with or without any food, water, and other necessary provisions. A report published in the *New York Times* stated:

Hundreds of Rohingya have died trying to get to Malaysia. Some were thrown overboard from overloaded boats when the journeys lengthened because countries refused them safe harbor. Others were buried in mass graves in the jungle when their families could not afford trafficking fees that suddenly increased during the trip, a common tactic by human smugglers to squeeze more money out of the trade. [...] Conditions on the boats have been likened to those of modern day slave ships, with Rohingya women and children packed together so tightly in the darkened hold that they can barely stretch out. (Beech 2020)

While nations shut their borders and recalled their citizens, the statelessness of the Rohingyas and lack of sovereign protection of a state exposed them to new levels of precarity. Malaysia and Bangladesh, which are two of the most preferred destinations of the Rohingya that had previously sheltered them, restricted their borders, citing public health concern due to the ongoing pandemic, while Malaysia repeatedly refused refugee boats, citing pandemic-related economic struggles and scarcity of resources. However, xenophobia fueled by rumors of Rohingyas demanding Malaysian citizenship and overall anti-Rohingya sentiments are also responsible for the country's shutting its doors to the refugees. Malaysia also witnessed an increasing number of threats against activists, reporters, and human rights defenders who spoke against the government policies of rejecting refugees (Khanna 2020, 2), contradicting Malaysia's image as the model destination country, observes Khanna. She writes:

[T]he situation remains grim as Rohingyas living in the country have reported how they live with the mental trauma on a daily basis and face a continual fear of detention and harassment by police making their life worse than that in the refugee camps of Bangladesh. [...] This pandemic has further questioned this image of Malaysia as a model reception state by causing a counter-stream of migration of Rohingyas back to Bangladesh resulting in further boat tragedies. (Khanna 2020, 2)

Forcing refugees to return to Bangladesh is reported simultaneously with forcing refugees to stay at sea. The Indonesian military pushed back boats that ventured into their waters, including vessels carrying Rohingyas. The same procedure was followed by countries like Myanmar and Thailand. The situation had momentarily improved in mid-June 2015 when Myanmar closed its borders and Indonesia and Malaysia allowed refugees at sea to land. However, in 2016–2017, with fresh military attacks on the Rohingyas, mass migration gained a speedy momentum. UNHCR stated that 2020 was the deadliest year for Rohingyas crossing the sea. Reports emerged underlining the precarity of existence of the stateless Rohingyas:

The green and red fishing boat, packed with men, women and children squatting on the deck with only plastic tarps to protect them from the sun, had been turned away by the Malaysian authorities on Wednesday, passengers said. They said that they had been on the boat for three months and that the boat’s captain and crew abandoned them six days ago. Ten passengers died during the voyage, and their bodies were thrown overboard, the passengers said. (Beech 2020)

In terms of death statistics of Rohingyas, estimates are made on a yearly basis and every year hundreds of people die or go missing while crossing the seas.

Seascapes in Refugees’ Narratives

Refugees divided by cultures, societies, and geographical spaces find unity in their tales of persecution, their journeys of suffering, and their longing for a home that is meant to last. There has been a surge in interest in refugee narratives, thereby bringing into existence UK-based projects like *Refugee Tales* (by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group) which is modeled on Chaucer’s pilgrims’ journeys in *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1400) and communicates the experiences and testimonies of refugees. These stories are

narrated⁶ by poets, novelists, and journalists who “create a space in which the stories of those who have been detained can be safely heard, a space in which hospitality is the prevailing discourse and listening becomes an act of welcome.”⁷ Through uses of first-person narratives (a point of departure from *The Canterbury Tales*), other narrative strategies come to the fore, for example in “The Detainee’s Tale,” narrated by Ali Smith (2016), where readers are put into the refugee’s shoes. These narrations address relevant themes like religious persecution, which remains relevant from during Chaucer’s time (“The Man of Law’s Tale”), reconnecting spatial violence with human lives through storytelling. In the wake of the refugee crises, these seascapes have resurfaced, bringing discourses of violence, vulnerability, and resilience with them concerning the lives of humans in transit. Refugee narratives encompass a wide range of genres, from biography, autobiography, graphic narrative, and short fiction, to drama, children’s literatures, and epistolary forms, among others. They can also be single-authored or collaborative. Anna Bernard writes, “unlike the spaces that refugees traverse or in which they are trapped, there are no hard borders between these genres” (Bernard 2020, 66). Refugee narratives revolve around common tropes of the detention center, the prison, the border officials, the shipping container, and have been inspired by the centuries-long traditions of pilgrimage, exile, and migration writing and cannot be “conceived in isolation from the age of mass displacement and statelessness” (66). Bernard further states that the pages of the literature “provides an alternative site for refugees’ claim for recognition and justice, a site where such claims might be received with openness rather than suspicion, and where the readers might be willing to act as an ally rather than a judge” (67).

The three narratives discussed in this article are collaborative projects where the refugees narrated their stories to writers. While two of them are written in autobiographical form, one is a biography. Autobiography, due to its claim to authenticity and truth, is often a fitting and impactful genre to disseminate the pathos and seriousness of refugee narratives. However, when the narrative borrows from memory, and trauma is related to or forms a part of such memory, remembrance and narration can be selective and revised since memory is about how we experience incidents (Smith and Watson 2010, 16). Refugee narratives give voice to the experiences of refugees, who are otherwise not heard and often not

6 Also available as storytelling sessions on YouTube.

7 This quote is from the publisher’s announcement for volume 2 of the *Refugee Tales*. <https://www.refugeetales.org/books>.

trusted. Hence autobiography, which is also associated with intimacy of experience, the personal, and the authoritative way of narrating, offers credibility to the voice of the refugee. What is striking in all their narratives is the straightforward narrative shorn of any literary ornamentation, where incidents are merely documented as they happened. One can safely assume that the main purpose of refugee narratives is to inform; to bring home the horrors of the process of migration. In a general atmosphere of voicelessness, biographies and autobiographies ascribe certain agency to such voices, even though the stories are told to a writer / scriptor, and they reach the readers through mediation. All the three stories addressed in this article belong to the “as told to” style of narration, where the voice of the refugee is captured and written by a professional. Majorly used in the fields of ethnography and journalism, such narrative strategies bring the stories to the readers through an empathically neutral writer, restricted in their interference in the narratives, and the narratives themselves are marked by monologic dominance.

This section focuses on three contemporary narratives which vividly document brief or long transits at sea. All the three narratives discussed in this section are mediated by writers who documented the refugees’ experiences.

The second time Doaa nearly drowned, she was adrift in the center of a hostile sea that had just swallowed the man she loved. She was so cold she couldn’t feel her feet, and so thirsty her tongue had swollen in her mouth. She was so overcome with grief that if not for two tiny babies in her arms, barely alive, she would have let the sea consume her. No land was in sight. Just debris from shipwreck, a few other survivors praying for rescue, and dozens of bloated floating corpses. (Fleming 2017, 6)

This terrifying and violent yet familiar description is from the life of nineteen-year-old Doaa al Zamel, who had a near death experience in the Mediterranean in August 2014 while fleeing from Syria. Doaa currently lives in Sweden and her story is narrated by UNHCR spokesperson and author Melissa Fleming. The book, named *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* (2017), gained immense popularity due to its piercing description of a refugee woman’s life and her harrowing journey of survival. While the book is about a couple’s attempt to leave for Europe from a war-torn Syria, the most overwhelming part of the book is the description of the protagonist Doaa’s five-day-long survival in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean with two little children she was entrusted with by her fellow dying passengers, while people, including her husband, died around her and their

bodies sank and resurfaced. While Doaa is eventually rescued by a ship, the story is about human resolve in the face of extreme adversity.

Gulwali Passarlay's story of his nearly a year-long escapade as a twelve-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Europe is narrated to Nadene Ghouri, and titled *The Lightless Sky: An Afghan Refugee Boy's Journey of Escape to a New Life in Britain* (2015). Finally, *First, They Erased Our Name* (2019) by Habiburrahman (with Sophie Ansel, trans. Andrea Reece) is the story of a Rohingya who fled from Myanmar as a refugee and now lives in Melbourne. Coming from three distinctly different cultural and political backgrounds yet finding a common ground in their narratives of violence, persecution, and escape via the sea, these three documentations unfold a range of themes that are not only defining for refugee narratives but also illuminate the sea as a space where the violence of the land spills into its waters and that offers a strange labyrinth of hope, resilience, life, and often death. Every aspect of these narratives demands attention due to their contribution in delineating the power asymmetries inherent in our societies. However, for the sake of relevance, the discussion will mainly focus on the depiction and role of the sea.

A Hostile Sea that Consumes

Gulwali Passarlay's story follows some familiar tropes of refugee stories, namely life-threatening situations at his homeland, Afghanistan, a lengthy journey spanning Iran, Turkey, and Bulgaria, people smugglers, terrifying violence, imprisonment, escape from prison, a precarious trip on a boat that capsized before reaching the destination, his brush with death, and his eventual arrival in Europe. Even after his arrival, Passarlay survived humiliating conditions with adult asylum seekers, which eventually culminated in a more stable and successful residency in London. Passarlay's account of his journey, as is typical of the genre, carries overwhelmingly within it the themes of violence, vulnerability, and resilience. Violence starts early in his life when his father and grandfather are massacred in a shootout with US troops in Afghanistan, instantly robbing him of the pillars of his family. He and his brother were wanted by the Taliban to become freedom fighters, while the Americans wanted them as spies. After paying a sum of 8,000 US dollars as smuggling fee to a trafficker from Kabul, his mother secures a passage for the two boys out of the war-torn country. In the entire span of his journey, the sea voyage to Italy occupies a decisive part due to the intense emotions of fear and uncertainty that are attached to the seascape in Passarlay's mind, and also because the sea trip

is the last leg of the journey (the shortest though not the least precarious) to arrive in Greece, which has been the destination in Passarlay’s mind. What is noticeable in the description of the sea voyage is a teenager’s first view of the sea and the immediate emergence in his mind of the timeless primal fear of the liquid space in its dark and turbulent form:

[B]efore I died, I contemplated how drowning would feel. It was clear to me now; this was how I would go: away from my mother’s warmth, my father’s strength and my family’s love. The white waves were going to devour me, swallow me whole in their terrify jaws and cast my young body aside to drift down into the cold, black depths. [...] I have heard somewhere that drowning is a peaceful death. Whoever said that hasn’t watched grown men soil themselves with fear aboard an overcrowded, broken-down boat in the middle of a raging Mediterranean storm. We’d eaten what little food and water the captain had on the boat within the first few hours. That had been more than a day ago. Now, fear, nausea and human filth were the only things in abundance. Hope had sunk some time during the endless night, dragging courage down with it. Despair filled my pockets like stones. (2015, 5)

The sea thus emerges as an antithesis to everything that is associated with comfort and security in the author’s mind, the warmth, love, and strength that was foundational to his life. His vivid description of the precarious situation envisions and situates the sea as an animated entity, devouring and swallowing. The intensity of his description clearly transmits the overwhelming fear that the author feels. The drowning metaphors not only connect to his physical body but also signify the death of hope and courage, and the heaviness of despair, which are poignant techniques of embodying and spatializing the fear attributed to the sea. Fear of the sea is intricately associated with the fear of the unknown and is one of most primal of human fears hardwired in our genes due to its evolutionary nature. Across cultures, the sea is also often associated with apocalypse and punishment (the biblical flood). Fear in our current context of crossing seas is intricately associated with violence and the danger of dying. Violence and the sea have been most strongly attached to each other as a trope in the context of the Middle Passage, a route that transported millions of enslaved Africans to their lives of slavery and horror in the Americas. Sowande Mustakeem in her book on the horrors of the Middle Passage notes that in instances like these, where the connection between the sea and human suffering becomes so intense and inseparable that the sea stops being a space and instead turns into “an agent that imposed significant impact on people, further bridging the relationship of man and the sea” (2016, 5). She further speaks of a “climate of terror” in the

world of slavery at sea that unleashed a spectrum of violence on enslaved people “that resulted in mental disorientation, familial and communal separation, malnourishment, lack of sanitation and cleanliness, severe isolation, debilitating diseases, miscarriages, sexual abuse, psychological instability and bearing witness to physical violence committed against kin and shipmates” (2016, 8). Often resonances of the Middle Passage have been found in refugee experiences of the sea. For a teenager like Gulwali, who has never seen a vast body of water, let alone experienced it, this encounter gains existential proportions:

I screamed for my mother, the mother who was far away in Afghanistan. I was a lost little boy, about to meet his death in a cold, foreign sea. Before getting on this boat, I had never even seen the sea before; the only knowledge I had had of it was from pictures in school text books. The reality was beyond the wildest reaches of my imagination. For me, those waves were truly the entrance to the gates of hell. (Passarlay 2015, 9)

In multiple instances the author compares the turbulent sea to hell, which sucked out any relief of escape and instead filled the passengers with anxiety and dread. The sea being a tangible, scary environment coupled with the psychological anxiety of unfamiliarity and not knowing how to swim, creates a contradictory impact on the minds of the refugees, where the dread of the imminent surpasses the happiness and hopefulness of a safe future.

The Rohingya refugee in Habiburahman’s story further solidifies human vulnerability in the face of the power of the waters. On his way from Indonesia to Australia during the last leg of his journey, Habib writes about his experience of being exposed to the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean:

The journey starts auspiciously but, once we are out on the open seas, the Indian Ocean becomes increasingly menacing. After a few days, we find ourselves on raging, stormy seas. Some of the passengers are begging to return to *terra firma*, but there is no way we can turn back. The waves crash incessantly against the hull and splash onto the deck. Soaked to the bone, we cling on desperately to avoid being swept overboard and drowned in the depths of the ocean. The first engine packs up, followed by the second. The boat is spun and tossed about like a compass gone mad, but we eventually manage to get back on course, heading into terrifying walls of waves. The ocean is stronger than us. Driven by an instinct for survival, some of the group try to make a small sail with pieces of fabric. I attempt to read the maps while others try to fix the engines, without success. The men bail

liters of water out of the boat in a stubborn refusal to be swallowed up so easily by the ocean. We spend the night drifting. [...] We are exhausted and starving. I am horribly thirsty. Most of us have already said our final prayers. I have thrown into the sea the few stones that I was carrying in my pockets, in memory of my grandmother and the stories of sailors. (2019, 154–155)

Incidentally, the terrifying journey ends successfully for Habib as his boat is rescued by Australian coastguard authorities. Gulwali and Habib’s stories are about various precarious spaces encompassing the volatile nation, prison, unsurmountable and violent borders, claustrophobic vehicles, rickety boats, and the space of all spaces, the looming large sea. In these narratives, the malevolence of nature—i.e. the turbulent sea, the rugged terrain, and the inclement weather—coincides with the malevolence of human nature—the traffickers, corrupt authorities, human smugglers. The precarity of spaces intersects and coincides with the precarity of refugee lives. When the world’s attention was captured by the tragic death by drowning of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old who along with his mother, father, and brother had boarded a boat to cross the Mediterranean, an important aspect of the news was highlighted: that none of the members of the family knew how to swim, and the mother was petrified to undertake the sea journey but nonetheless went ahead with it, like Doaa did in her journey from Egypt. Precarious spaces make the lives inhabiting them vulnerable. Refugees navigating through such spaces reach the apex of vulnerability where their lives are also rendered disposable. Death by drowning in the sea or being shot while crossing borders or being thrown into prison to rot for an undefined length of time are several ways in which refugee lives are disposed of. Stateless refugees like Habiburrahman and refugees devoid of legal papers become the quintessential example of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life (1995), lives which are just alive and breathing, without any agency or rights. The journeys of refugees run a risk of being perceived as some form of agency, agency that is exercised through their mobility. However, in the context of refugee movements, Kaufmann’s concept of *motility*, which is defined as “the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the domain of mobility and outs this potential to use for his or her activities” (Kaufmann 2019, 37 as quoted in Bromley), becomes more apt. Roger Bromley asserts that “in a residual sense, the displaced have traces of motility but, in most cases, lack any agency, or choice, with which to appropriate anything in the realm of mobility” (2021, 12), and it is this motility that brings refugee lives further toward bare lives (12).

In Judith Butler’s words, such lives are “ungrievable”; “lives regarded as disposable [...] are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled,

injured or lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard [...] their potential loss is no occasion to mourn”⁸ (Butler 2014, 35). Bare lives, ungrievable and disposable, are also deviant/aberrant bodies since the category of refugees and asylum seekers is a deviation from the mainstream ideas of citizenship; thus, the precarious space of the sea becomes a repository for deviant and disposable bodies—bodies *sans* the sanction of nation and citizenship, bodies which carry within themselves the dysfunctionality of societies, and bodies which are forced to embrace danger, a contradictory human behavior. Such a projection of the sea, notes Joseph Pugliese, “delineate[s], specifically and insistently, the spaces inhabited by those marked as deviations from the norm: refugees, asylum seekers and the ‘undocumented’ from the Global South that are branded as ‘unlawful,’ ‘illegal,’ and ‘unauthorized’ because they have failed to go through the ‘proper’ institutional channels in their seeking of asylum” (2009, 672). One is reminded of Australia’s Howard government’s involvement in the 2001 “children overboard” scandal, where it was falsely alleged that seafaring asylum seekers (after sabotaging their vessel) threw children overboard as a ploy to compel the navy to rescue them and secure a passage (Parliament of Australia Website, n.d). Such narratives further indicate a tendency to invest deviant bodies with unnatural and aberrant behavior and determine the sea as the space where they perform such aberrancy.

Sea of Affects

Refugee narratives, like any other form of literature, capture human experiences. These texts capture and express feelings and intensities⁹ that refugee bodies embody in their environments of precarity and unfamiliarity that they come into contact with. There is a certain universalism in such affects, as refugees in their common journey share as well as transfer their affects through moments of fear, resilience, and solidarity. In transit, the refugees form their own imagined communities, bound together by what affect theorists term “forces” and “intensities” (Rogers 2019, 204; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Massumi 2002) that push toward survival. Refugees as protagonists in their own stories encounter such intensities and sensations and transmit them to the readers through rhetorical strategies and the

8 Butler here connects refugee lives with affects of mourning and grieving.

9 The term “intensity” is sometimes used interchangeably with “affect” and can be defined as an individual’s reaction to an encounter.

mood of the texts. Traumatic realities and violence leave their imprint on the psyche, which often makes refugee narratives tales of powerlessness and victimhood, while at the same time containing the power to subvert victimhood through resistance. However, the precarity of the sea has a deep resonance with the emotional and psychological realm of humankind in general and refugees in particular.

Watery spaces have often been associated with emotions, sensations, and intense reactions: the emotional attachments of indigenous people living on their shores, intense encounters of enslaved people who were forced into traversing them, feelings of people who lost their loved ones, and a myriad other reactions. Refugee narratives add to these affective experiences and are powerful case studies of affects in literary narratives. In Passarlay's description of the sea, as quoted in the previous section, the association of seas with chaos, forces of waves beyond control, abundance of death, anxiety, suffering from hunger, exhaustion, and physical brutality, nostalgia for the homeland and longing for the mother, and, more urgently, an insufficiently strong vessel where conditions of claustrophobia and filth are abundant, amply demonstrates the mental conditions of the fleeing people. Fear and anxiety are the two most common feelings in the pages of refugee narratives. Gökariksel and Secor (2018) establish anxiety as the affect that characterizes the encounter with the other, which has the power to disintegrate the self:

Anxiety arises when the subject is confronted with their own constitutional incoherence. In the anxious encounter, the subject experiences the other as a provocateur that threatens to expose the worst: to reveal that the subject does not fully correspond with itself, that there is a disconcerting gap between the subject and the image of its ideal self. Anxiety is an affect of encounter because it always comes from outside [...] [T]he anxious encounter with the other is one that threatens the subject with its own disintegration. (2018, 10)

These texts exemplify how narrative trajectories, specifically in the case of refugee novels, are shaped by the space of the fearsome sea, which becomes more than a space, and instead an entity that has the power to disintegrate the refugee, on both the psychological and the corporeal level. The space of the sea can conjure up all other fears; it becomes the other, threatening to destroy all hopes and plans and epitomizing the culmination of all fears in its depths. Incidentally, since seafaring has been predominantly a masculine affair, there is a consistent and distinct tradition of associating sea voyage narratives with bravery, the indomitable

adventurous spirit of man that eventually and successfully tames the turbulent waves. Refugee narratives offer a stark opposition to this saga of human struggle, even though the resilience of spirit is unmistakably conspicuous. The vast expanse of the sea without a horizon and the land offers no shelter or stability and is a constant reminder of the vulnerability and displacement of refugees; it signifies a place that nullifies human effort. While every human enterprise in general, and for refugees in particular, is directed toward safety and security and keeping inimical and hostile forces at bay, the sea appears as a space that annihilates such an effort.

One can also read the strong reactions of fear, especially among African refugees in Gulwali's boat, in the context of transgenerational trauma. The horrific and powerful experiences of the Middle Passage travel across generations and manifest themselves as dread for the sea, a limitless, dark space that has engulfed so many people. Fear of the sea can also be interpreted as a loss of connection with nature, which citizens of postcolonial societies often manifest due to forceful industrialization and sustained loss of habitat caused by colonialism that has violently detached them from their nature and installed in the minds of people an attachment to concrete (noun) cosmopolitanism in the name of progress. Along with fear, sadness, longing, and anxiety, shame and humiliation find mention on multiple occasions in Passarlay's narrative. Coming from a society and cultural background where social emotions of shame and honor are deeply entrenched, he writes,

Even before the arrival of the Taliban, my family were religiously and culturally conservative in their outlook. We lived by *Pashtunwali*—the strict rules every Pashtun must abide by. The codes primarily govern social etiquette, such as how to treat a guest. Courage is a big part of the Pashtun code too, as is loyalty, and honoring your family and your women. (2015, 29)

However, all sense of honor had to be suspended during his journey. Passarlay's description delineates not only his personal humiliation at the hands of guards and prison officials but also gives a vivid picture of the less-than-human state, and yet again the bare life status of refugees in transit.

I stank. And I was soaked with sweat. I hadn't washed since leaving Iran. That was a whole week ago: one night and day to cross the border, a day with the old man just after entering Turkey, and then five days in the truck. In that week I had climbed mountains, fallen over in mud, ridden a horse for several hours and slept next to a hundred other unwashed bodies. All in the same set of clothes. No wonder I smelled so bad that even I gagged

when I caught a whiff of myself. For Muslims, *being dirty is a great shame*. The reason we take ablution before our five daily prayers is to stand clean before our Creator. Not being able to wash myself was a great source of distress for me, as I’m sure it was for all of the other *human cattle* kept in that vast, damp room. At that moment, I felt *less than human*. (222, emphasis added)

Being reduced to a subhuman entity is a theme that manifests powerfully in Habiburrahman’s narrative as well. However, that status is conferred to Rohingyas during their stay in their ancestral land of Myanmar. Habib, who was just three years old at the time, writes:

I am three years old and am effectively erased from existence. I become a foreigner to my neighbors: they believe that we are Bengali invaders who have entered their country illegally and now threaten to overrun it. They call us *kalars*, a pejorative term expressing scorn and disgust for dark-skinned ethnic groups. In a different time and place, under different circumstances, *kalar* would have meant wog or nigger. The word is like a slap in the face; it undermines us more with each passing day. An outlandish tale takes root by firesides in thatched huts across Burma. They say that because of our physical appearance *we are evil ogres from a faraway land, more animal than human*. (2019, 8, emphasis added)

However, in the worst of conditions, refugees in transit have experienced solidarity, sharing the same fate as the others and experiencing hope in togetherness. Doaa’s story speaks of refugees from Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, and Syria reading the Quran together during their stressful boat journey. Besides sharing food and drinks, they shared their stories. When the boat was capsized by the pirates on sea, leading to the gruesome deaths of most of the passengers, the remaining ones floating on the sea show compassion toward their fellow survivors: “[A]mid the despair, a solidarity emerged among those who were left. People with life jackets moved toward those without them, offering a shoulder to hold on to for a rest. Those with a little food or water shared it. Those whose spirits remained strong comforted and encouraged people who wanted to give up” (Fleming 2017, 256). Doaa eventually saves two small children that she was entrusted with. Trusting strangers with one’s children in the face of imminent death is heartrending on the one hand and on the other is an act of extreme trust and desperation. Furthermore, the floating refugees also prayed together and listened to the Quran in a way of getting some comfort from faith.

Theorizations of affect in refugee narratives reveal what Jamie Rogers calls “‘structures of feeling’ that condition the different realities in which we live” (2019, 202). Such affects reflect the encounter and interaction

between the environment and the body, thereby establishing a network between the bodily, material, cultural, and social world. Refugee narratives firmly establish affects as social and collective and bring to the forefront the effect of spaces and spatial encounters in triggering forces and intensities. That impact is longer lasting than the encounter with temporary spaces of transit such as oceans, but also extends to societies in which the refugees find themselves. Finally, refugee narratives are also effective in offering an alternative discourse to what Sara Ahmed calls the narratives of assumed crisis. Such narratives are formed when hate that circulates in host societies are organized to invent and generate a subject who is “presented as endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but also take the place of the subject” (Ahmed 2004, 117).

Violence and Dislocation at Sea

“Home”

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
[...]
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
[...]

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
[...]

i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
[...]
(Warsan Shire 2011)

The British-born Somali poet Warsan Shire poignantly sums up the violence that characterizes a refugee's homeland. In her poem, the comfortable,

welcoming space of the homeland transforms into an uninhabitable space laced with violence, a space that forces people to leave. Violence lies at the core of any refugee crisis. What originates in their homeland, accompanies the refugees throughout their journeys. Such violence not only defines refugees' lives, but also accompanies their discourse and eventually ends with their dehistoricization. Scholars like Joseph Pugliese, Hakim Abderrezak, and Mariangela Palladino (2020) have delineated the dehumanization and violence that refugees at sea (and their bodies) undergo. *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* describes one such scene of tragic violence on the sea, when the sea devours not only humans but also their hope and spirits:

Approximately one hundred people had initially survived the shipwreck, but as the night wore on, more people would die from cold, exhaustion, and despair. Some who had lost their families gave up, taking off their life jackets and allowing themselves to sink into the sea. At one point Doaa heard desperate shouts as fellow passengers attempted to give hope to one young man who had removed his life jacket. “Don’t do it,” the other survivors pleaded. “Please don’t give up.” But the young man pushed the life jacket away and sank head down into the sea. He was so close to Doaa, she could almost touch him. (Fleming 2017, 161)

The violence of dying a slow death in sea is further burdened by the trauma of witnessing people give up on their lives. Rohingya testimonies of being left adrift in boats at sea for months without food, water, and medication is a narrative of extreme tragic violence. Rejection of refugees by closing down borders and not allowing them to disembark and refoulement, or forcibly returning refugees to their land of persecution, are other forms of violence that these people face often.

Hakim Abderrezak connects the structural and racial violence on refugee bodies with the “anxiety about particular racialized bodies passing through the sieve [of the sea]; finally, as ‘seametry,’ he addresses the irony that a place of flows can also become the world’s largest marine cemetery” (as quoted in Farrier 2020, 354, also see 383–7). Violence at sea can be further contextualized through Joseph Pugliese’s concept of *zoopolitics*, to situate deaths and dehumanization¹⁰ at sea in a biopolitical framework, thereby institutionalizing violence on refugee bodies. He writes,

Zoopolitics, in the context of asylum seeker marine deaths, evidence the lethal effects of that combinatory form that I have elsewhere termed

10 Pugliese further speaks about how Italian fishermen turf corpses back into the sea “as though they were simply an unpalatable part of their catch” (2020, 356).

racio-speciesism, which binds targeted human subjects to the possibility of being killed or being allowed to die with impunity, precisely as though they were non-human animals. I deploy the term racio-speciesism as the subjects of the Global South who have died in their thousands in the Mediterranean are people of color from Africa, Asia, and the Middle-East branded with the racio-speciesist imprimatur of being less than human. (2020, 357)

In their article on the global refugee crisis, J. Craig Jenkins and Susanne Schmeidl sum up the main factors behind such a major boom in the refugee population in the recent years: “a combination of ‘weak’ neo-patrimonial regimes, ethnic and class exclusion, state-building demands for ideological and ethnic homogeneity, competition between rival ethnic groups, economic peripheralization, and political dependence on the major world powers” (1995, 63). Climate change has also had a major impact on the movement of the refugees; the three-year-long drought in Syria in 2007 caused massive displacement when farmers were forced to abandon their lands and move to the cities for employment. Such significant displacement and the ensuing discontent are said to have set off a culminating wave of protests in 2011. These factors have in one way, or another contributed to political violence: “[W]hether it stems from ethnic pogroms, guerilla insurgencies, state terrorism or as a result of international wars and military invasions, political violence has been the common factor in all of these refugee flows” (1995, 72). Large-scale human rights abuse is at the center of these situations, combined with more specific and relevant situations unique to such turbulent societies. However, violence in postcolonial societies can be traced to their colonial pasts. Racial violence practiced through colonialism, genocide, and the slave trade forms the core of European modernity, its very essence, and it is the presence of the subhuman other in the periphery that stabilized and centered European humanism. From this point of view,

[t]he current refugee crisis is a part of Europe’s ongoing encounter with the world that it created through more than 500 years of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery. [...] From the beginning of the Pan-European movement in the 1920s to its institutionalization in the European Economic Community (EEC), European integration was inextricably bound up with the question of Europe’s continued dominance over Africa. (Danewid 2017, 1680)

Violence has manifested in Arab and African societies in many forms. While the body of the nation state has been the site of civil war, political uprisings, and necropolitics, the body of its citizens has been the site of

displacement, deprivation, and allied forms of violence. In some cases, the battered bodies of the citizens merged with the violent necropolitical state, as exemplified in Doaa’s narrative. In Syria, Bashar Al Assad’s government called dissenting protesting citizens “conspirators” pushing an “Israeli agenda”:

Doaa was confused as she watched the broadcast. When Assad was talking about “terrorists,” he was referring to her friends, family, and neighbors? *We are not terrorists!* She thought adamantly. But when it came to the shooting of unarmed demonstrators in Daraa, all Assad would say was that “mistakes” had been made and that “not all the demonstrators were conspirators.” He wouldn’t condemn the acts of brutal repression that were carried out by the security forces. At that moment Doaa realized that the struggle was just beginning and her country was coming apart. (Fleming 2017, 38)

From repression of citizens and killing of dissidents, to stripping citizens of statehood and the authoritarian regime turning against its own people—such societies exemplify the uninhabitable spaces that are filled with violence, which eventually extends to the sea with fleeing people. However, leaving such uninhabitable spaces behind is sometimes only the beginning of more violence. Displacement and dislocation, which are in themselves violent processes, bring refugee lives into a state of suspension. Bromley succinctly summarizes the impact of displacement:

Displacement, in all senses of the word, dominates the experience of asylum seekers as their journey from country to country, crossing borders in search of refuge. Although they are moving in time, in a sense they are out of time as well as out of place, in a state of arrested development, being temporarily arrested in time in the waiting zone, whether it be airport, accommodation center or detention center. When the journeying stops and they find themselves in the waiting zone, they will be infantilized, rendered static and inert, subject to curfews and a behavioral regime of containment that strips them of agency, vice and adulthood: sleeping in bunk beds, barred from alcohol, regulated and reduced to passive dependency and submission. (2021, 65)

Passengers in the Same Boat

The figure of the boat, which has been an integral part of sea voyages and symbolic of adventure, aspiration as well as tragedy and trauma, has become a trope in refugee literature. This cultural artefact has come a long

way from housing and transporting colonial aspirations, to being analyzed as a heterotopic space, “a floating piece of space” (Foucault 1980, 27) and finally becoming an integral part of refugee deaths at sea. While Foucault’s conceptualization of the vessel as heterotopia is “celebratory colonialist,” as Pugliese terms it aptly, his concept of a boat “as a place without a place, that exists by itself, [...] is given over to the infinity of the sea” (1980, 27) somewhat resonates with the unsettling, undetermined, and unending journeys on sea. Boats have resurfaced in this context as a particularly treacherous space, very much like the sea. However, so many refugee narratives give similar accounts of rusty, rickety boats unfit for oceans that re-emphasize the aspect of disposability of refugee lives. Overcrowded boats capsizing in mid-sea, killing everyone on board, have become a regular feature of migration headlines. A substantial part of the fear about crossing the sea is attached to the dilapidated conditions of these vessels that smugglers use to continue with their business. Pugliese in his article explains how boat capsizing tragedies, which are preventable, are not investigated and these disasters are written off as “phantom shipwrecks” (2009, 676), since refugee bodies are termed by him as “bodies of water” (2006, 18) and “literally signified nothing: invisibilized, transparent, they were mere phantoms that could neither represent themselves nor be represented” (676). There have also been narratives of desperate refugees intentionally throwing themselves and their children off their boats in order to be rescued by the navy and the coastguard (referred to earlier in this article), which are often false narratives reflecting racial violence and anxiety in the societies that generate such ideas.

Boats have been described in refugee narratives as one of the uninhabitable spaces, overcrowded, instable, and often rendered uninhabitable due to the stench of long journeys or from refugees soiling themselves out of fear of the sea (Passarlay 2015). Refugees are very often forced to continue with their journeys in these boats due to lack of other options and also because of their dilapidated condition. Doaa’s narrative speaks of such boats being wrongly advertised to lure in more refugees for a dangerous trip:


Doaa felt a chill of panic. She and Bassem had never quite believed that the ship that would take them to Europe would look like the cruise liners that were advertised on some of the smugglers’ Facebook pages, or the “four-star ship” their front man had described to them over the phone. But this boat’s decrepit state was far below their expectations. Its blue paint was peeling and its rims had turned to rust. The apparatus on board for hauling nets made it clear that the boat was a fishing trawler, not a passenger ship. (Fleming 2017, 145)

Additionally, such narratives speak about relationships and solidarity that are forged in the precarious spaces of the boats since human connection provides some relief in an otherwise very stressful journey. People share stories and pray together and hope for a successful culmination of the voyage. A lonesome boat packed with humans floating at sea can symbolize human bonding in the face of inclement nature, full of hopes of survival and a better future. Maritime spaces, despite their power to instill dread in the human heart, will remain as repositories of such hopes.

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