

Traumatic Movements:
A study on Refugee Displacement and Trauma in Contemporary Literature

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Introduction

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 shore¹

Warsan Shire's representation of refugees in her poem *Home* (n.d.) is incredibly accurate. She encapsulates the atrocities that refugees survive, when the safe comfort of their homes change to an inferno of catastrophes and she articulates the xenophobic resistance they endure in their new country. The pathos in Shire's poem is powerful and her message is unmistakable. Her use of the second person point of view is inevitably compelling, and her way of addressing the reader is efficacious: "you have to understand,/ that no one puts their children in a boat/ unless the water is safer than the land" (Shire, n.d.). Through this, she addresses the western lack of sympathy and the primal instinct to do absolutely everything to save one's children. Moreover, she demonstrates that the precarious journey to the Global North is still less dangerous than staying. In the beginning Shire explicitly states the poem's message: "you only leave home/ when home won't let you stay" (Shire, n.d.). This simplistic sentiment directly addressed to the reader is a proclamation: that a refugee does not flee unless it is the refugee's only option.

Within a space of eight stanzas of varying length, Shire escorts the reader through the unimaginable horrors a refugee faces. She explicitly states the horrors in the native country, on the travel and in the resettlement country; both to state the terrific character of these horrors, but also to say that just as unimaginable it is for the western reader, equally unimaginable was it for those it happened to. In other words; what happened to the refugees happened to human beings just like you. Shire's message is a proclamation to the reader, to take notice and to understand and imagine the life altering experience it would be to "forget pride/ your survival is more important" (Shire, n.d.). Fundamentally, Shire's message justifies the scope of present thesis, as it will be evident that while her representation may be unique, it is not singular.

In recent years, discourses in the western public sphere have changed markedly. Increasing police violence against black people and a rising call for more equality across the spectrum for both women and trans people have sparked the beginnings of what might be called a second civil rights

¹ Shire, Warsan (n.d.)

movement particularly in America. One glaring omission is obvious in the activist community in recent years—refugees. The warfare in Middle Eastern countries and several revolutions following the Arab Spring have caused increasing turmoil and created a large amount of displaced persons who find themselves in completely foreign areas with different cultural and social norms. In an interview on the UNHCR website, a Syrian refugee discusses the impact of the narratives created in the public sphere around refugees: “‘The real crisis right now is that the media and politicians are focusing only on negative examples,’ Maskoun says. ‘Refugees are not the crisis. This is the crisis’” (“Refugees are not the crisis”, n.d.). It is not surprising to us that the refugee problem has not received the same popular attention, as they represent an actual Other, and so they are aliens in their resettlement country. Before moving any further, we should perhaps explore this position in greater detail.

As we write as Danish citizens on refugees, we cannot help but be influenced by the immediacy of our own country’s recent change in discourse and position on the refugee area. Gripsrud, Hovden and Mjelde (2017) published a paper in relation to refugee discourse, outlining the Scandinavian and European media’s coverage of the current refugee situation that the increasing turmoil in the Middle East and Syria in particular has created. Findings showed that Denmark in particular had a stronger emphasis on the security and economical threat posed by the refugees compared to their Scandinavian counterparts who had a broader focus on humanitarian issues. According to Lynda Mannik (2016), there is a tendency to perceive contemporary refugees differently than those of World War II, as they are often referred to in discourses of tides, waves, and flood, which have created mainstream discrimination and lack of empathy (4). Refugees were subsequently framed in the Danish media to represent a serious threat to the safety of the population and a wide range of amendments to legal scripture were added to help manage the sudden influx of refugees. Throughout, we aim to not use the word ‘refugee crisis’, as the word ‘crisis’ markedly changes the discourse presented and seen in the optic of Denmark, the amount of refugees and asylum-seekers are not nearly enough to warrant the word ‘crisis’. Nicol Savinetti (2016) correctly identifies how the Danish position on refugees is in stark contrast to the values that Denmark has tried to be the frontrunner of since World War II. She even argues that “attempts to silence voices from and beyond the camps destabilizes society and is harmful to Denmark's international reputation for democracy, freedom of speech and consensus” (n.p.), and within the discourse already established, this silencing is wide-spread. Furthermore, a majority of the discourse is

focused on the refugees as they first arrive, instead of giving space to discuss how they should be treated and helped.

Refugees are a particular group of the population that often experience extreme traumatic circumstances including death, war, and loss. This position is often ignored or pushed aside in favour of focusing on their impact on our society. What is often diminished is the horrific experiences that have forced this group of people to leave everything behind in search of safety (Gripsrud, Hovden and Mjelde, 2017). As the media constructs these images of refugees as invasive, it becomes even more relevant to turn to literature. Literature has always provided a prism through which to understand society and in the case of refugees that is no different. To that end, we have found a series of novels that all deal with a refugee narrative where humanity and identity create the narrative. The need for representing refugees in a personalised way is great if we should want to steer away from the generalised narrative of the refugees as one singular invasive body on the Global North equilibrium. Present study then has in scope the following concerns regarding refugee literature: How is refugee trauma represented and treated in contemporary literature and how do the traumatic experiences suffered by refugees impact their resettlement? Furthermore, what cultural and societal implications do the representations of refugee trauma carry? From our preliminary understanding of trauma and refugees, we hypothesise that the individuals we will meet in the literature will be deeply affected by their trauma to the point where they need extensive help to reintegrate themselves into the new resettlement country. Through an exploration of trauma and refugees we seek to answer some of these questions and provide an insight into the contemporary refugee experience and how the representations of these experiences can provide a starting point for establishing more nuanced discussion in the public sphere.

Methodology

Before proceeding any further, we should consider a few key aspects of dealing with refugee literature and trauma. Firstly, we would like to implement a certain understanding of the word *refugee*, to avoid any misunderstandings that could come up otherwise. A migrant in the general understanding is a person who travels away from their native country to some other destination that may be either close or far away, both in cultural and in literal distance. What provides a distinctive definition for the refugee is mainly the circumstances and the degree of choice in the displacement. Following the word's etymology, it comes from the word *refuge* meaning 'hiding place', and so a refugee is a person seeking a hiding place in one way or another. The reasons for seeking refuge can

be several, but they usually take some form of violent experience in their native country; they may be political enemies or simply civilians trying to avoid death in bloody civil wars or ethnic cleansings. The designation of the refugee status is also a legal matter; the UNHCR's definition goes:

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. ("What is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning | USA for UNHCR", 2018)

In our working definition of the word *refugee*, one should understand it as someone experiencing a geographic displacement that sends them across borders to a new and different culture. Defining refugee status in literature has proven to be difficult to many writers, who correctly consider migration as multifaceted (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Akhtar, 1995; Simich & Andermann, 2014). A defining trait that most agree on is that refugees take exilic status, and as such do not have the same opportunities to return home, which can drastically alter their experience both when they leave home and also staying in the new country. One way of determining the difference between the refugee and a migrant is *forced migration* versus *voluntary migration*. The voluntary migration is often prepared ahead of time, which allows for the migrant to expect the changes coming, whereas the forced migrant is forced out of their home and compelled to abandon important items of both monetary and cultural importance. We also define the refugee with help from Egon Kunz' model where he builds upon the classic push-pull model of migration. He introduces a third factor, pressure, to explain the pressures from war, social or political discrimination, and other dangers that might pressure the refugee into an acute flight (Kunz, 1981). A refugee cannot go into flight based on conventional push-factors such as poor economic standing as a migrant may, but will instead be affected by pressures.

Another aspect that should be handled here is the choice of literature, both nonfiction and fiction. Firstly, the fiction chosen for this study has to fit certain characteristics: the novel must be about a refugee and refugee life as defined above; the novel must have some form of connection to the pre-displacement, either through flashbacks or as part of the chronological narrative; the novel must be published after the turn of the millennia; lastly, the novel must contain characters from what we define as the Global South and relocate to the Global North. The term Global South is a

new, emerging term in postcolonial studies replacing the Cold War designation of the ‘Third World’ to the populations inhabiting “low-and middle-income [nations] that are in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean” (Mitlin & Satterthwaithe, 2013). The opposite is the Global North, which includes countries that previously belonged to the ‘First World’ and the ‘Second World’. The novels chosen consist of a mixed origin, where some authors can be identified as belonging to these same populous groups being examined (Mengestu, 2007; Hamid, 2017), and others provide examination from a Western perspective (Eggers, 2006; Cleave, 2008). Mengestu writes as an Ethiopian-American, who has spent notable time writing about conflicts in Africa for magazines and news outlets. Hamid is often ascribed to be a cosmopolitan writer, since he has spent his life in a multitude of different cultures and surroundings, and all of these inform the position from which he writes. *What is the What* is a particularly interesting case as it is written by an American writer, but has been developed as an auto-biography in cooperation with Valentino Achak Deng, whose experiences form the basis for the novel. Lastly, Cleave is a journalist-turned-author, who has studied psychology, and so his perspective on the human psyche is especially interesting.

Secondly, the non-fiction literature consists of a broad range of psychoanalytic literature (Freud, 1920; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; El-Shaarawi, 2015), clinical psychology and sociology literature (van der Kolk, Weisaeth & van der Hart, 1996; Richardson, 2002; Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006; Simich & Andermann, 2014), and literary and cultural criticism (Tal, 1996; Vickroy, 2002; Mandel, 2006; Balaev, 2012). These and additional sources assist in working with trauma, as trauma studies inherently function in an interdisciplinary space and should be understood from several different perspectives. Worth mentioning is Felman and Laub (1992) and Caruth (1996), who authored seminal texts in the intersection between psychoanalysis and literary theory.

Considering trauma, the focus for the analysis revolves around the traumatised characters in the novel, with the added criteria that the focus is put on the refugee subject and their relation to the rest of the characters. Due to the nature of displacement, place and setting also play a large role in these analyses, as we use place to consider trauma generation. The analyses use classic terminology in trauma studies such as repetition, witnessing, and the unspeakable to explore the traumatised subject and how their traumas are manifested through the literature. One last, but major, analysis vehicle emerged during research, with the theory of resilience also discussed in detail later in the theory section. Considering the refugee subject as resilient allows for the analysis to consider the impact of traumatic experiences on the individual, and provides a framework for humanising the refugee experience. The study will begin by outlining these theoretical areas before turning to the

fiction, where in-depth analyses will be provided on a book-by-book basis. While many of the considerations in the analyses will be similar, they should still be able to exist as independent analyses, and as such they will not follow a set schematic, but instead offer a chronology that is sensible to the individual novel. Following the analyses, the study will discuss the different findings comparatively, providing additional insight into the refugee experience, and attempt to provide a collective outcome of the analyses. The discussion will encompass an outline of the relationship between author and reader seen in a broader context. Next, the discussion will consider other aspects of trauma, including temporariness and rightlessness as well as a consideration of structural trauma. Lastly, the discussion will consider aspects of healing theory and the relation to the novels in the corpus before discussing new perspectives through which to read refugee texts.

Theory

What is trauma theory?

Trauma theory is a theoretical discipline originating from Freudian psychoanalysis early in the 20th century. In Freud's work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he introduces several central concepts of trauma theory, including the metaphor of the shield: "We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (1920: 29). In Freud's view, the mind is protected by a membrane keeping control of the stimulus, but if a stimulus passes through the membrane, it directly affects the mind. This is Freud's way of relating the word trauma to its origin as a word for bodily wounds, where Freud introduces it as a wound on the mind's protective shield.

Freud then introduces the concept of *traumatic neurosis* to describe the condition of First World War veterans. He proposes an issue with these traumatised individuals relating to a repetition of the traumatising events, or an attempt to fully avoid them (1920: 13). While Freud recognises that this early theory of trauma and the shell shock theory are not identical, they bear similar traits, and the understanding of shell shock and the psyche provides an early insight into theories of psychological trauma. Considering trauma also led Freud to produce an essay on symptoms relating to trauma, leading to a shorter essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) that discusses the two different states of grief and loss. Freud assigns mourning as a natural state which gradually disappears over time following a loss. Melancholia is also a state of grief following a loss, but Freud (1917) argues that mourning is a disconnection from the world, whereas melancholia is a

disconnection from oneself (246). As should be evident from the following, and in particular Cathy Caruth's work, trauma might cause a melancholic experience that seems to adhere to the rules stipulated about trauma as something not yet experienced.

In 1939, Kardiner developed a new understanding of trauma building on what he had learned from Freud. Van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart (1996) noted how Kardiner observed certain people reacting to unwanted input: "Sometimes patients' fixation on the trauma would take the form of dissociative fugue states. For example, triggered by a sensory stimulus, a patient might lash out, employing language suggestive of his trying to defend himself during a military assault" (58). Kardiner's lessons and understanding of physiological responses to a psychical problem persisted and made a group of American psychiatrists look at *somatic therapies*. In the wake of the second World War, a new group for study emerged that has since 'enjoyed' much attention from the community, a group called concentration camp survivors. Many studies pointed to the same diagnostics that has since been included under the umbrella term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as well as enduring personality changes.

For many, the culminating point of the research done throughout the 20th century was in 1980, when PTSD was first introduced into the vocabulary of the American Psychology Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (3rd ed.; DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) as a result of intensive studies on "'rape trauma syndrome'" by Burgess and Holstrom, "noting that the terrifying flashbacks and nightmares seen in these women resembled the traumatic neuroses of war" (van der Kolk et. al., 1996: 61). This combined with the increasing patient group of traumatised soldiers in the wake of the Vietnam War forced the APA to try and define these issues. While the APA was busy working on a trauma definition to help diagnose war veterans and rape victims, refugees emerged for some scholars as a central object of study for trauma studies. In a refugee perspective, one vital contributor is Vamik Volkan, who, being a refugee himself, identified certain struggles that could cause trauma in refugees, especially once they had arrived at their destination. One major theory Volkan (2017) supplied the field with was the idea of a "linking object", identifying these as a major coping mechanism:

The woman picked up a stone next to the damaged car and put it in her purse. This stone became her last-minute linking object. Sometimes linking objects are 'selected' later, after an individual becomes a perennial mourner,

but once an item truly evolves as a linking object, the perennial mourner experiences it as 'magical'. (21)²

All refugees experience loss to some degree, whether it be family members through death or the loss of a home through displacement. Another struggle Volkan (2017) felt could prove traumatic is the experience of language in a foreign country: “For adult immigrants, the age factor makes the task far more difficult, and they may never succeed in acquiring the ‘music’ (accent, rhythm) of the new tongue” (7). Losing the connection to language causes immense stress in the refugee and can ultimately lead to increased traumatisation.

Trauma studies had established itself as a central force in clinical psychiatry, and slowly garnered the attention of other disciplines. In the 1990’s, cultural and literary critics started writing on the subject of trauma theory in the intersection between clinical psychiatry and cultural theory. Cathy Caruth’s theory is recognised as the origin for most of modern literary trauma theory. She is clearly inspired by Freud’s writings, and points toward the same metaphor of trauma as a bodily wound (Caruth, 1996). She expands on the theory of trauma, saying: “If the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized thus engage Freud’s interest, it is because they bear witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” (1996: 60). For Caruth, trauma should no longer only be associated with injury, but also as a by-product of survival.

In Caruth’s work *Unclaimed Experience* she attempts to develop a starting theory for working with trauma theory outside the clinical field. In her discussion with philosophers’ texts, she positions a few key concepts as central to a cultural and literary trauma theory. Her concepts are borrowed and sometimes slightly altered from psychoanalysis, but generally these concepts are transferred quite seamlessly. One central concept is *latency*: “The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth, 1996: 17). Latency signifies a delay in comprehension and in the absorption of events into the brain’s memory. Latency of experience becomes the cause of *repetition*, the second major concept tied to Caruth’s idea of trauma. Early notions of repetition were mentioned in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud made a link between traumatic experiences and a repetition of events, either in reality or unconsciously. Caruth (1996) describes the “repetition of traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight [as] a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply

² Note that while these considerations are cited from a contemporary source, they have their origin in 1981 with Volkan’s book *Linking Objects and Linking Phenomena*

be seen or what can be known” (92). The central argument of Caruth’s theory is that trauma induces a condition in which the individual has not fully experienced the trauma and as such will continue to search for a *true experience* through repetition.

Moving from Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub add and elaborate on Caruth’s theory, specifically offering a way to have a *true experience* through their concept of witnessing. They have developed their theory of witnessing from Freud’s methodology in his clinical treatments and experiments, posthumously dubbed the Freudian talking cure:

Freud creates the revolutionized clinical dimension of the *psychoanalytic dialogue*, an unprecedented kind of dialogue in which the doctor’s testimony does not substitute itself for the patient’s testimony, but *resonates with it*, because, as Freud discovers, *it takes two to witness the unconscious*.

(Felman and Laub, 1992: 15, *original italics*)

Their argument follows Caruth’s causality, coming to the conclusion that any traumatised individual will “look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 57). The process of recovering the traumatic experience becomes a testimony in which the witness retells their story, but simultaneously experiences it for the first time.

Witnessing proves absolutely central to the theory of testimony, as witnessing is the central act in Felman and Laub’s theory of trauma. An interesting point that they raise is that witnessing does not stop at the point of impact, but instead continues in the following process. As such, the traumatised victim is the witness, but the recipient of the testimonial becomes a secondary witness after the actual event. This is especially evident in an account Felman gives on a course she taught. Felman’s account describes how the impact of the testimony causes the witnesses of the testimony to somehow take upon themselves similar pains. The testimonies led to the class spiralling into a collective crisis of existence and testimony itself, as they got increasingly preoccupied with the mediation of their own experience. In this example, Felman also aptly shows how Caruth’s idea of *latency* works in practice, as the students did not comprehend the trauma they had gone through until later. There is of course a difference between the students’ 24 hour delay and the 35 year long delay of the Holocaust testimony featured in Felman’s class.

This idea of witnessing expands on the normal denotation of witnessing as seeing something in real time while it is happening. Laub argues that there are three levels to witnessing. Firstly, the witness can be a “witness to oneself” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 75), experiencing the event first

hand; secondly, when the first-level witness testifies, that testimony requires an interviewer—or a witness. Lastly, someone can either live—or by watching a taping back—experience the testimony process, thereby becoming a witness of the third level as exemplified in Felman's class. These levels are imperative to understanding the nature of trauma testimony, as they inform Laub's following point that "the survivors [of the Holocaust] did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive" (78). Furthermore, these levels can also explain why and how white authors like Dave Eggers or Chris Cleave can write authentic fiction about the refugee experience. Both authors have, previously to writing their fictions, spent time around refugees that bear a striking similarity to the subjects in their works. Laub's theoretical standpoint leads him to conclude that the second witnessing allows the primary witness to survive "through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life" (1992: 87). While there is definitely merit to Laub's point, his view on trauma and the traumatic experience might be rooted in a lack of vocabulary to properly inform his statements. The vocabulary will be further elaborated with the matter of the unspeakable and the traumatic experience later in this section. Following this brief introduction to the field of trauma theory, we should next look at the specifics of traumatised refugees.

Traumatised refugees

The study of trauma has been conducted for a long time, with the more formalised, medical viewpoint we recognise from contemporary psychiatry stemming from the mid-19th century onward. The formal scholarship of refugees and their traumatic experiences did not take off until the end of WWII, where the community "published reports of the acute and long term psychosocial adjustment of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany" (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 224). The devastating events of the concentration camps and the dislocation of millions as a result of a war-torn Europe gave room to study this population group in-depth. Some professionals developed a thesis of "'concentration camp syndrome' characterized by insomnia, fatigue, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and depression" (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 228). Studies began acknowledging patterns, finding that the traumatic refugee experience could be "divid[ed ...] into pre-flight, flight, and reception periods" (231). This division will be explored more in-depth in the next chapter.

After the Jewish refugees, the next major event that spawned another wave of studies was the Vietnam War, which brought a massive influx of Southeast Asian populations into the Global North. These studies were conducted in the same period as the APA defined the condition PTSD as mentioned earlier. They found that PTSD as a disorder was much more prevalent in the population groups that had experienced war and violence, linking the disorder directly to these experiences (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995). The second wave of studies also opened discussions of sociocultural importance, as the refugee waves from Southeast Asia held different cultural norms of family and society. These issues have also spawned concern of identifying and generalising refugee experiences, with scholars arguing “that each refugee movement should be examined in its own context and that [...] refugee mental health over time in a specific social or cultural setting cannot be absolutely generalized” (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 231). Refugees have been a staple of this world since countries started interacting with each other and modern warfare commenced. Over the past 30 years, the situation has escalated as the world becomes more accessible to a larger segment of the population and especially following the regression of the Global North colonies—giving space to internal conflicts and turmoil—which have spurred a range of conflicts in previously occupied countries.

This recent development has led to new issues regarding refugees in general and refugee trauma in particular. One of the growing issues is the distinction between a refugee who is displaced to a new country and settles permanently, and the refugee who is displaced and settles in a refugee camp. The refugee camps are “‘temporary’ settlements which may not be so temporary after all” (Sanyal, 2011: 63) and the issue of time and permanence is one that can bring on a whole new dimension to refugee trauma. While conditions in a new host country may not always be amicable to the refugee (this is discussed in the next section), the refugee camps present a different situation for refugees where they cannot attempt to rebuild a new life for themselves. Sanyal’s (2011) research shows how squatters in Calcutta rebuilt an existence: “[...] soon after having their neighbourhoods formalised and achieving moderate economic success within Indian society, the memory of being a refugee has been pushed to the background” (78), which supports the notion of extended traumatisation in refugee camps and temporary sites. In addition to the uncertainty of life, violence and abuse—both sexual and non-sexual—are common occurrences in refugee camps, further escalating the traumatic experience, particularly for females (Wachter, Horn, Friis et. al, 2017). Furthermore, most of the refugees in these camps already suffer from trauma, in concurrence

with experiences of war, torture and death, which may be particular to every individual, but they also contain a shared general experience of loss.

Aside from what we may refer to as traumatic experiences in refugee camps, the peculiarity of these social constructions are vital to consider as well. As stated, their temporary nature often turns out to be more permanent, and refugees may spend several years in one before they receive a chance of resettlement. Because of their temporary nature, the camps only offer the most necessary medical aid, food and shelter, and the larger ones also some sort of schooling for the kids. Metaphorically speaking, refugee camps may be regarded as some sort of limbo, where the individuals may be without a job, a family, and other identity-creating traits. Moreover, as these camps are situated in rural areas, far away from local communities, there is little interaction with the outside world (Bariagaber, 2006: 82), and the refugees may experience a lack of connection to their identity. Further, the social construction within these camps is complex: some are there alone, fighting for individual survival; others in family-like units, fighting for survival of all of them; and some, yet again, convene in communities of similar religious and spiritual beliefs (Bariagaber, 2006: 85). This complexity is important to bear in mind when dealing with traumatisation, as refugees may experience individual loss or traumatising events that do not affect the grouping he finds himself in, which ultimately foster unique refugee experiences.

Inevitably, the refugee camp and its construction is significant in delineating the refugees' process. However, there is a long route from a refugee's home before he finds himself in a refugee camp, and this defines the individual refugee experience as well. In centralising the flight as a part of the refugee's individual experience, we also allow the thesis to look at particular refugee experiences and releases refugees from tired tropes of waves, tides, and other generalising metaphors. It is reasonable, if not safe to assume, that individuals who constitute a group of refugees are not equal socially. Kunz (1981) is a scholar in refugee studies who has done extensive work on theories to distinct refugee's experiences, and for the benefit of this he divides refugees into subgenres. Majority-identified refugees, who to a great extent familiarise themselves with their nation, but not with the sitting government; the event-alienated refugees, often a religious or racial minority who is discriminated and rejected by the majority of the nation³; and the self-alienated refugee, who feel ideologically estranged from his nation, and thus leaves (1981: 43). Commonly, the majority-identified and event-alienated refugees are individuals in a refugee group who flee suddenly as a result of wars, revolutionary fights and sudden changes, from which these individuals

³ A prime example is the persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich

feel threatened of their security. Moreover, they form groupings during their flight, and is further characterised by fleeing reluctantly and spontaneously, as the only solution left (1981: 44). Within these groupings, different dynamics drive the internal relations. Kunz exemplifies this through the feeling of guilt, where some will be occupied with the guilt of leaving their family and friends in their native country. This may further enhance a strong ambition to reach, flourish, and succeed in the host country (1981: 46). Because these groupings are composed of individuals, they have a varied sense of guilt owing to their prior individual experiences.

For a more thorough understanding of our literature we find it vital to be aware of a distinction between traumatic experiences. This is to say that a refugee escaping from his home country may suffer traumatic experiences with the group he becomes a part of on the journey. However, he may also suffer from traumatic experiences of a more personal character, for example a deceased child. Nyman (2017) theorises this in terms of refugee identity, which in his view should be perceived as identity in transit. Thus, as the refugee is in transit, so is his identity: “[...] neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (20). At one point he is preoccupied with the world he may have left behind, the next he is exposed to life-threatening circumstances, or experiencing liminal identity because of a near permanent state of residing in a refugee camp. It can be said that the identity of the refugee is constructed through movement, and needs to adapt to traumatising situations, whether that is death or survival. To further emphasise this, another aspect is the construction of the refugee as an individual. In this manner, we are compelled to look at the literature as individual refugee stories, to shed light on the individual character and his story, and not the entire group of refugees. Obviously, this also encompasses the role of the refugee in the group dynamic of refugees, however the focus is on the character in the depiction of the unique traumatising refugee experience (Nyman, 2017: 81), as well as the awareness of interplays and interrelations in the refugee grouping.

A harrowing journey

When discussing refugees and trauma, there are certain factors that should be mentioned in order to comprehend the refugee experience. Refugees represent a group in the population that endure overwhelming traumatic experiences. In many instances, refugees are “subjects living in and with terror as an element structurally incorporated in their everyday, and to the processes by which terror exercises itself in their lives, whether it is perpetrated by state or non-state actors” (Perera and Traverso, 2011: 2). All of the experiences we will outline and meet in the literary portion of this

project will revolve around some form of war or violence existing in the native country from which the refugee then seeks asylum in other areas of the world.

In the following, the refugee crisis attached to the turmoil in the Yugoslavia region is used as a way to exemplify how refugees can be exposed to traumatic experiences. According to Hannah Arendt (1943), refugees went from fleeing “because of some act committed or some political opinion [...]” and now they have become “so unfortunate to arrive in a new country without means” (110); without having caused any offense, they have become victims instead of actors. Refugees have become homeless drifters of the world, searching for a place to settle down. Not belonging can have devastating consequences and those consequences are a part of the purpose for this study: “Knowing that one has a place in the world may be a fundamental requirement for security and identity. The experiences of displacement and exile are traumatic events in themselves” (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 84).

There are three distinct phases of trauma, which all provide insight into the refugee experience. First is the pre-displacement phase, the home that is violently assaulted; next is the displacement phase where the refugee will flee their country and the journey towards safe haven can itself provide the refugee with traumatic experiences. Lastly is the post-displacement phase, the experience of now living in a new country as a refugee, a status often pervaded with feelings of non-belonging. Sanyal (2011) describes this situation: “Privacy was a luxury no one could afford and women in particular were affected by this as they were often harassed, were tricked into or compelled to engage in prostitution in order to survive” (66). Albeit Sanyal’s description here is limited to the experience of refugee camps, the same issues of harassment and the powerlessness to defend themselves in foreign territories are not restricted to the refugee camp experience.

While there might exist a misconception that many native countries might not be desirable to live in, many will express sentiments of appreciation for the place pre-war: “Life then was remembered nostalgically, as ‘*the beautiful life*’ or ‘*the perfect life*,’ one filled with family, close friends, travel, and a more relaxed lifestyle than they have found in America” (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 46). Rationally, from a Western perspective, many of the characters in the fictions of this paper would have a ‘better’ life in their post-displacement country, but because of cultural differences, a feeling of alienation, and non-capitalistic and monetary considerations, Western societies can provide a poor living experience for refugees. The pre-displacement traumas consist in our scope of the topic primarily from consequences of war, whether that be loss, physical injury or

witnessing atrocities first-hand. These experiences can affect the individuals both short-term and long-term:

Acute responses, chronic patterns, and recovery phases are unique to each individual, although trauma often has long-term effects. People deal with events that are painful and incorporate them as a part of their life experience, over time, to make a healthy adjustment. (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 83)

In the midst of the transition from pre-displacement to displacement the individual will naturally generate adrenaline and other hormones that will stop them from being directly affected by their newly acquired traumas, but as will be evident later, once the effects from the fight-or-flight response disappears, these traumas will begin to intrude on the individual.

Once the displacement phase has begun, descriptions from Bosnian refugees in the 1990's can serve as an example for a general idea of displacement where a great amount of refugees "recall a sense of bewilderment at the disintegration of order, stability, and normalcy. Many left their homes in a rush, not taking very much in the way of clothing or belongings, believing [that they would return...]" (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 62). The displacement phase mainly has two different trajectories, both of which can be equally harrowing, but also two very different experiences. The first is the direct transit from native country to the host country. The second is the transit that involves countries of first asylum where "many refugees experience a sense of being in limbo" (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 85). This place is in most cases temporary settlements such as refugee camps. The displacement phase is vital to understand the development of trauma and how to process these traumas. Temporary sites of accommodation such as these can cause the refugee subject to lose hope: "What is particularly intolerable about this vernacular violence is that it destroys the hope that there might be the possibility to occupy another space—the civic—that is not generative of trauma and violence" (Pugliese, 2009: 156). In the same manner that a boat or other means of transit have a temporariness about them, so does the concept of refugee camps and these can have the same implications when considering transit. The transit place can then also be a place that generates traumatic experiences in the refugee, further complicating their mental health status: "Keller strongly argues that the trauma of flight produces residual psychological states in refugees that will affect their health for years to come" (George, 2012: 432).

The last phase is the post-displacement phase, or the resettlement phase, where the refugees have found their final destination and is now faced with the monumental task of rebuilding their

lives. There is a distinct possibility that these individuals will be faced with culture shock or a disappointment of the situation in their new lives. The interview respondents in Coughlan & Owens-Manley (2006) describe their arrival in Utica, NY with a sense of surprise over the state of the place they were sent to:

‘An old van was parked in front of the entrance. Its body was rusted, dirty with lots of holes in it. What is this? Where are the big buildings? Where are people in suits and ties? Where are limousines? This cannot be America!’
(97, sic)

The initial impact and perhaps disappointment of expectations is followed by a much bigger problem area, namely reception. Especially following the increasing attention to terrorism, localised primarily around the Middle-Eastern countries, the Western societies have become more closed off and hostile towards the Other: "At first, the migrants were alarmed by the degree of xenophobia shown by locals and the lack of solidarity and compassion" (Sitas, 2013: 280). This xenophobia comes from a long range of factors, but most importantly a fear of the unknown and a worry "about competition in the labor market" (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006: 101). The refugees are often faced with issues of belonging to the society because of cultural-, religious-, and language barriers that separate the refugee from their resettlement country. These issues can develop into more traumatic experiences if the refugee does not overcome these challenges and subsequently gets ostracised from their local community.

When refugees arrive in their host countries and start settling, they are slowly required to begin life anew after many disruptions. But for many, the situation that arises is an uneasiness with the new way of life they have been afforded. To return to the tales of the Bosnian refugees in the 1990's, Coughlan and Owens-Manley (2006) report how many talked about and wanted a 'normal life' but many found it hard to adjust to the new culture and the new life: "Life here is different than in Bosnia. Here life is faster, I feel lost and I don't have time for baby" (128, sic). Sometimes, refugees also arrive and are suddenly forced into different life dynamics because of loss of family and friends whom they could depend on. Pain et. al. (2014) describe an example of a 28-year-old man who fled to Canada. He had been spoiled at home before fleeing, so he had never learned to cook and it gave him much psychological stress, which seemed to affect him even more than the losses he had experienced. This exemplifies that even the most 'normal' of situations can become overwhelming for a refugee who might not have the right tools to deal with these new challenges. To a Global North citizen these problems might sound trivial, but they can hurt the entire adaptation

process for the refugee and can cause stress that may have consequences for the other traumatic memories they endure.

In the prism of psychoanalysis, the post-displacement phase has interesting repercussions for individuation processes. Salman Akhtar (1995) uses the phrase *third individuation* in relation to refugee and immigration: “The term *third individuation* should therefore be seen as denoting an adult life reorganization of identity, a potential reworking of earlier consolidations in this regard, and a semi-playful extension of a useful psychoanalytic metaphor” (1053, *original italics*). The metaphor in question is the equation between the developmental processes—the separation-individuation that happens in children’s early development—and the identity crisis that can be triggered by a displacement. Akhtar breaks the psychological outcomes for immigrants down into a multitude of different factors, some important ones being: Length of stay in the host country, the degree of choice, magnitude of cultural differences, and the opportunity to go back. Akhtar points out several times how these factors can be altered or have a different impact when the immigrant is a refugee or an exile rather than a voluntary migrant. He also argues for a splitting of identities that can occur in immigrants, which can then affect the assimilation of the immigrant: “[Splitting] colors the immigrant’s feelings about his two lands and his two self-representations. The country of origin is idealized, the new culture devalued [...] The next day it is the reverse” (Akhtar, 1995: 1058-1059). The optimal solution for the two self-representations is to merge and develop one whole identity based on a bi-cultural foundation. A complete synthesis of the two selves will also help to avoid nationalistic tendencies in regards to the homeland and in contrast will also avoid a full renunciation of all the original culture from the native country.

The Trauma of Rightlessness

The anthology *The Future of Trauma Theory* dedicates a chapter to investigate the link between trauma studies and refugee studies. Stonebridge combines the two studies in a theory that encompasses how refugees are traumatised by their inability to speak and society’s rejection of their human rights. Her foundations are al Assad’s poem *Asylum*, and in particular the verse “I am sewing my lips together/ that which you are denying us/ we should never have/ to ask for/” (al Assad, 2002), and the abovementioned essay *We Refugees* by Arendt. Here, the loss of language is in focus when Arendt states the following: “We lost our language [...], the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings” (Arendt, 1943: 110). Loss of language is not a new concept to trauma studies, and we will elaborate on that concept later. In al

Assad's poem, despite the rather metaphoric description of sewing one's lips together, it is not only the ability to talk that is lost, but also the right to talk - and with that the right to be human (Stonebridge 2014: 114). Stonebridge argues that the trauma of refugees should resist the "reality we do not, and possibly cannot, know [nor make a] simple claim about understanding, nor advocating a return to a moment before the trauma" (Stonebridge, 2014: 118). Instead she suggests that the trauma of refugees also should be perceived as a trauma of rightlessness, which society often disregards, and thus lack a fundamental brick in the understanding of traumatic experiences of refugees in general, and the trauma of rightlessness in particular. Even though human rights are permanent, and de jure apply to all human beings, the strangeness of a refugee does de facto condemn him as rightless. Ultimately, the ability to demand the rights of humanity comes in question in the conditions of a refugee's native country, in the refugee camp, and in the host country: "Human rights do not travel with human persons [... this is the message] from the refugees. [...] 'That which you are denying us' turns out to be the very thing we question" (Stonebridge, 2014: 123).

Resilience

Following chapter has in its aim to delineate the theoretical foundation for the psychological term *resilience*. Resilience is at the state of defining itself as the concept of resilience in migrants and refugees, since researchers have gradually started to delineate the concept of resilience within immigrants and refugees. As present thesis focuses on the refugees' traumatic experience, it will solely focus on resilience in refugees, albeit the difference might be insignificant. Being a term defined and used within the field of psychology, we find it necessary to delineate the term within its actual field, and to treat that definition rigidly. Obviously, as we are dealing with a literary thesis, we cannot use the length that a thorough description of such a complex term requires, and thus we limit it to the well-recognised (amongst his peers) psychologist Glenn E. Richardson's definitions of resilience (Fletcher & Sakar, 2013: 17).

Richardson's *Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency* is first of all—as the term itself—a reaction to a postmodernist trend within psychology, where the entire field's paradigm gradually accepted an approach less problem-oriented and more strength-oriented. The theory encapsulates three waves of conceptualising resilience. The first wave originates with the phenomenological identification of what outer and inner factors are present in individuals who thrive in adversity contrary to those who do not; the factors (among others) are self-esteem, self-efficacy, and support

systems. Many other personal qualities have been ascribed to be resilient, and the first wave contributed to assert the qualities that have had a measured effect in helping people recover from hardship. What is most significant to take from the first wave is its focus on nurturing personal strengths (Richardson, 2002: 310).

The second wave should be perceived as more process-oriented, as resilience here is defined as the individual coping with adversity in a manner that strengthens the factors from wave one; a process of either re-integration or disruption. The resiliency model (Richardson, 2002, 311) depicts this; any individual has a set of protective factors (referred to in wave one), that seeks to stabilise after some sort of adversity happens. This is to protect the *biopsychospiritual homeostasis*—the point in life where an individual has adapted mentally, physically and spiritually to the given situation—thus what we may perceive as ‘in balance’. Several times in life this may be disrupted by changes in the individual’s life (new job, marriage, sudden unemployment, etc.), which have potential for development. Ultimately the individual will begin the reintegration process. This has four outcomes: to reintegrate resiliently; to return to the former biopsychospiritual homeostasis; to reintegrate with loss; or to reintegrate dysfunctionally. Resilient reintegration is the process that recognises and nurtures resilient qualities to cope with the stressor and return to biopsychospiritual homeostasis. The essence of trying to return to the former biopsychospiritual homeostasis is to heal and overcome the change, however this is not possible with losses or physically moving to another place. The third one; to reintegrate with loss encapsulates relinquishing a dream or motivation because of the demands of adversity. The last one—a dysfunctional reintegration—results in destructive behaviour and the individual needs therapy to reintegrate (Richardson, 2002: 312).

The third wave investigates the motivational forces and creation of experiences that nurture the ability to utilise these forces for self-actualisation. Being slightly more complex than the two others, it is the ability to recognise and use strength to “resiliently reintegrate from disruptions” (Richardson, 2002: 308). Because of its complexity, lack of rigid theoretical framework and multifaceted construction, third wave resiliency has been included in a vast academic sphere, which has brought a versatile and complex understanding of what resilience is (Richardson, 2002: 313).

Significantly, resilience as a process may happen in a matter of seconds when individuals encounter and adapt to new pieces of information, or years when dealing with traumatic events, as it also applies to groups of people like a family and community as well as an individual (Richardson, 2002: 312). Though Richardson’s theoretical framework is recognised and accepted, it has a few critical points to be aware of. First of all, because the idea behind the theory is linear, it

will only take one event into account whereas the individual often encounters multiple stimuli simultaneously. Secondly, the model is biased towards a coping-oriented process; open to criticism because there is a notable focus on a distinction between coping and resilience in the field (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013: 17).

As mentioned, definitions of *resilience* come in great numbers and various forms, and reading through some of them⁴, though diverse, they share a foundation where the concepts of adversity and positive adaptation echo through. A few examples of these are:

The process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances; The personal qualities that enables one to thrive in the face of adversity; The ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event such as a the death of a close relation or a violent of life-threatening situation to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning, as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions; An individual's stability or quick recovery (or even growth) under significant adverse conditions. (13)

Thus, it seems that both adversity and positive adaptation are present. Another complexity arises here as adversity can be defined both to be minor life altering events, or great misfortunes and traumatic experiences. The scholar using the term needs to define what adversity refers to. Although both terms are relevant to the comprehension of resilience, they will give the analyst different outcomes.

Similarly, positive adaptation may be problematic as it is often defined from a Western viewpoint and neglects other cultural ways of perceiving positive adaptation. This demonstrates how resilience may be socioculturally contextualised and constructed, thus sensitive to a scholar's critical judgement when using the terms. What should be noted here is that resilience is neither *only* a characteristic quality nor a process. Even though psychologists recognise that certain traits are present in individuals who develop psychological resilience, there is no specific combination of exact characteristics of resilience, which is why cultural and literary studies are required to have the following in mind when utilising the term: "we [Fletcher & Sarker] argue that protective and promotive factors should be considered in relation to their specific function" (2013: 15).

⁴ Fletcher & Sarkar provide a thorough list of definitions

Furthermore, it is important to conceive resilience as a process—resilience changes when the situational adversity does.

As is often the case with complex terms, resilience is often confused with other similar concepts, especially recovery. Recovery is the “temporary period of psychopathology followed by gradual restoration to healthy levels of functioning, whereas resilience refers to the ability of individuals to maintain normal levels of functioning” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013: 16). Thus, recovery requires a therapeutic professional, and signifies the healing of some sort of disruption of normal life, e.g. stress or depression, whilst persons who exhibit resilience continue with their normal way of life and require no treatment. Because of Richardson’s influential model, coping and resilience are easily confused, but there is an important distinction between the terms; resilience is exhibited through its influence on evaluating prior to a response to an adversity, while coping is the response to and resolution of the stressor (Fletcher & Sakar, 2013: 16).

Resilience in Refugees

After a short, albeit concise, introduction to the theoretical framework of the psychological term *resilience*, the following chapter has in its scope to elucidate the term in a more cultural aspect. Recently, psychologists have recognised the value of an interference by cultural studies to understand resilience in refugees in particular. The anthology *Refuge and Resilience* (Simich & Andermann, 2014) investigates this connection. Psychologist Wade E. Pickren contributes to the understanding of resilience in refugees with the perception that the human individual usually possesses powers far greater than he uses and behaves below his possible maximum (Pickren, 2014: 9). Thus, human resourcefulness is much more powerful than we think, and this is increasingly recognised theoretically. Thus, Pickren (2014) ultimately defines resilience as the following, which is not much unlike the definitions that has been encountered priorly:

Resilience can only be defined in context. That is, it is a process rather than a static phenomenon. While many definitions have been offered, it became generally agreed by researchers that resilience refers to ‘patterns of desirable behaviour in situations where adaptive functioning or development have been significantly threatened by adverse experiences’. (17)

Recently, resilience was related to refugees because scholars started to perceive it as a cultural concept that can operate outside psychology. Moreover, there has also been a rise in resilience literature, constructed through narratives revolving around thriving and growing after a

traumatic experience (Pickren, 2014: 18). Scholars in cultural studies recognise that the media and the general perception of refugees are often marked by negative prejudice, and because of that, scholars of resilience studies recognise the need to look at the strength of refugees instead; how they after loss, displacement, and traumatisation still manage to thrive in their host country. Moreover, there is a general idea that the challenges refugees meet have important implications on understanding resilience among refugees (Pickren, 2014: 19).

Resilience in refugees continues to intrigue scholars in the Western world. It is peculiar how individuals, who have endured atrocities of violence, abuse, rape, and lengthy oversea travels in small and overcrowded boats, face a new and different culture, and despite all its new codes and demands, actually seem to thrive. Obviously, this is not the case for everyone, as there is a significant amount of traumatised refugees coming to the Global North, however it is striking that survivors from experiences as such may not suffer from the mental disorders that one might suspect them to (Beiser, 2014: 76). The aim of the following is to demonstrate a few theories of how refugees are able to exhibit resilience in a larger degree than non-refugees, and will ultimately assist the thesis in the understanding and analysis of refugee literature.

One such concept is what psychologist Morton Beiser refers to as time splitting. Not unfamiliar to the discipline of cultural and literary studies, it is highly relevant to utilise. Briefly, time splitting is the concept of placing one's focus on something in the past, present or future; and by this it can cause damage to the mind or promote resiliency. Beiser claims that because refugees have a tendency to focus only on the present—simply because experiences have taught them not to think about either the past or the future—they find a way to accept their situation. There is a tendency to think that this only applies to short or medium termed refugees, as long term refugees may evolve depressive symptoms from traumatic, unrepresented experiences or severe homesickness, as time splitting may draw them back to a time in the past, where the refugee was in a state of biopsychospiritual homeostasis (Beiser, 2014: 77-78).

Beiser includes another significant source that seems relevant in promoting resilience in refugees: social sources of resilience. Concludingly, he demonstrates the importance of having a *like-ethnic* community as a bridge-builder to the new society: “the language, institution and patterns of social interaction with the ethnic enclave provide a bridge between present and past, and a sense of continuity that affirm the value of one's historical identity within a radically new environment” (Beiser, 2014: 81). Simply, social connection is important as a source of resilience, and this can be conceptualised in three forms: “bonding (with family and co-ethnics), bridging (connections with

other communities) and linking (institutions of society and the state)” (Beiser, 2014: 81). Especially the first two are relevant as they nurture the individual’s understanding of self (and cultural self) in a host country with a rather different culture. Moreover, a community may be beneficial for integration and finding a job as a soft transition phase from the native culture to the host culture, and all these ultimately work as a source of resilience. However, there is one significant disadvantage to social sources of resilience, as like-ethnic communities may work against integration (Beiser, 2014: 82).

As Pickren states, resilience has evolved a contextualised perception after its merge with more cultural oriented psychologists. The following will demonstrate a theory that seeks to make sense of refugee resilience that respect cross-cultural factors (Vasilevska, 2014: 169). The theory consists of four principles. Firstly, *decentrality*, which changes the focus from the individual to the environmental context; under what circumstances are the individual faced with adversity? Secondly, *complexity* is the recognition of the difficulties of adaptation; if one does not have a settlement, it is more difficult to find employment - and increasingly difficult if one does not know the language of the host country. Thirdly, *atypicality* is the sometimes necessary rejection of the dichotomous view of factors of resilience. Ungar writes “researching resilience as a process requires less focus on predetermined outcomes to judge the success of growth trajectories and more emphasis on understanding the functionality of behaviour when alternative pathways are blocked” (Ungar, 2011: 8). Lastly, *cultural relativity*, which may be most significant to resilience. If scholars are supposed to understand what motivates a particular behaviour, they must understand the value it has in the individual’s culture. When this is omitted, it is because cultural practices of the host country are taken as normative: “cultural relativity in this case is not about assigning value to behaviours, but rather about recognizing that different values exist” (Vasilevska, 2014: 169), thus it is possible to ascribe resilience to more varied character traits than those discovered in the Western clinical practice.

The Trope of the Unspeakable

The following chapter will return to the topic of trauma theory, and engage with a critical reaction towards the established field of trauma studies. Michelle Balaev published her work *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012), only a few decades after Caruth’s seminal work. Balaev expresses criticism against the homogenous perception of trauma in literary criticism, claiming that it still relies on the Freudian notion of such. The field of psychology supports this as it has evolved its

theoretical framework of trauma to be much more multifaceted than that of literary criticism (Balaev, 2012: 3). The reliance on the Freudian notion of trauma—an experience or event that the mind is unable to perceive—has created a field founded in an essentialist discourse of unperceived stimuli.

As a consequence of this essentialist discourse, the kernel of trauma in literary studies fixates to the trope of the unspeakable, primarily reinforced by Caruth's focus on the unknowable and unrepresentable when she argues:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on. (Caruth, 1996: 4 *original italics*)

Kalí Tal, highly influenced by Caruth, explicitly claims that the traumatic experience cannot be linguistically accurate, which ultimately cries out for the urgency of a recreation of the traumatic event in narration. In *Worlds of Hurt*, Tal argues that “accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ conception” (1996: 15), stating the unrepresentability of trauma. Caruth and Tal agree on the unassimilable nature of trauma and its incorporation in mind and memory, as well as the important role and effect narration has when trying to integrate the experience in the self and create order in the chaotic mind.

Referring to the trope of the unspeakable, Balaev's claim completely rejects the prevailing idea of trauma as unspeakable. She instead argues that the unspeakability should be understood “less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies” (Balaev, 2012: 19). A prerequisite to this is Balaev's perception of the role of the protagonist, which is elaborated in the next paragraph. Nevertheless, the trope of the unspeakable is exemplified through silence, which is often used in trauma narratives. Silence comes to represent that the traumatic experience is too horrible to narrate. However, Balaev starts a trend that perceives silence as a rhetorical device; a carefully thought out move made by the author in reluctance of telling, and instead letting the reader imagine the horrible and traumatising event of the character. By this, the unspeakability—the silence—has little to do with the unrepresentability of a trauma and much to do with a rhetorical strategy (2012: 20). Ultimately, Balaev states that there is a fundamental difference between what is difficult to express and what is impossible to represent. Though she does not claim that all traumatic experiences are representable, she does assert that when comprehension of trauma struggles, it is because of cultural codifications and not fundamental unrepresentability.

Laurie Vickroy supports Balaev's view and adds that writers of trauma fiction have evolved a versatile spectrum of narrative strategies that represent the conflicted access to the content, which include "[...] textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and focus on visual and affective states" (Vickroy, 2002: 29). Another narrative strategy is a vivid use of symbolism and metaphors, which obviously arose from Freud's early musings on trauma theory, in particular his reading of his grandson's *fort/da* spool game, as a representation of his mother's leaving and returning (Freud, 1920: 15). Symbolic language either displays the traumas when they are indisputable, the bodily wounds as symbols of the traumatic experience on the survivor, or contributes to describe in a dream-like way, where the traumatic language expresses not meaning but feelings (Vickroy, 2002: 32).

Naomi Mandel (2006) positions herself more radically in her work *Against the Unspeakable*, which regards the trope of the unspeakable insufficient based on a number of claims ultimately supporting Balaev's claim concerning unrepresentability. For Mandel, the trope of unspeakability has a few critical points. For example, if one claims an atrocity to be unspeakable, other atrocities cannot be:

The rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehension, representation, and thought on the one hand, and a differential gesture toward atrocity, horror, trauma and pain on the other. Stemming from a long and illustrious history of the limits of representation, the unspeakable has taken on a range of guises, from the sacred to the sublime. (Mandel, 2006: 4)

Thus, a comparison between atrocities is constructed, verifying one as more horrible than the other, which in Mandel's view is critical as it also implies that 'your catastrophe is less horrible than ours'. Another problem is that when we speak of the unspeakable we need a response, while the unspeakable is in itself a response to a traumatic experience (Mandel, 2006: 5). Mandel's views are further elaborated through the voice of Barry Stampfl. Interdisciplinary trauma scholars have had a tradition of referring to trauma's unspeakability as its *raison d'être*, however it is the moment of the traumatic experience that creates the trauma. By extension, if we think of the unspeakable as a trope—a certain way of speaking about trauma—we can easily argue "that the unspeakable is always already (paradoxically) part of a universe of discourse, a form of signification" (Stampfl, 2014: 25).

The Potentials of Pluralism

Balaev's contribution to the field is twofold; on one hand she offers extensive criticism of the existing paradigm of the unspeakable in literary trauma studies, on the other, she comments on how literary scholars should perceive trauma theory and utilise it in analysing trauma literature. Her foundation is her model of pluralism, where she rejects the essentialist discourse of trauma, and focuses of multiple literary aspects, which introduces a literary framework with the protagonist, place and language in focus. Balaev argues that literary trauma studies have neglected the role of the protagonist, who (as always in literature) has a primary role in narrating events that affects the individual and the collective:

The experience of the suffering, no matter how private the experience, is situated in relations to the context of a culture that ascribes different value to the experience [and] it follows that the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society. (Balaev, 2012: 17)

The protagonist is then a crucial component in the demonstration of both the personal traumatic experience, and the individual perception of trauma in a culture or place. Keeping this in mind, the literary scholar is allowed to analyse trauma in literature that move further than the pathological paradigm that Caruth focuses on (Balaev, 2012: 18).

Another concept Balaev includes in her paradigm of analysing trauma narratives is that of place which should be regarded as the "silent second character, for it is the geographic location, cultural influence, and historical moment that merge to define the value of trauma for the individual and community" (Balaev, 2012: xv). By perceiving place as a second character, it will automatically position itself as a relational concept to the characters, and offer contextual factors and social dimensions in the examination of traumas in literature (Balaev, 2012: 38). As a symbol, place may activate a range of connotations that assist the reader in perceiving the characters' traumatic experiences. Because of this, and the geographical value for the characters, it holds a strong position for understanding the trauma whether it is an expression of loss, suffering or belonging. Moreover, place represents and emphasizes the protagonist's traumatic experience within the cultural codifications of the narrative, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the suffering, proving it indispensable for Balaev's pluralistic model. To recapitulate: "place therefore becomes vital to representations of trauma because the physical place of suffering and remembrance of loss becomes an identifiable source to explicate the multiple meanings of the event and the specificity of emotional responses" (Balaev, 2012: 39)

While Balaev distinctively conceptualises trauma theory in three categories: place, protagonist, and unspeakability as a rhetorical device, Laurie Vickroy (2002) focuses on the relation the author establishes between the reader and the characters in the traumatic representation (xii). Obviously, this also stems from the idea that the traumatic representation fails if the traumatic experience is not conveyed convincingly (Tal, 1996: 21). Vickroy's theoretical framework also encapsulates the traumatic narrative as a genre and the problems and responsibilities the genre encounters, and she sums up the aim of such to be threefold. One significant aim for the trauma narrative is to reshape the cultural memory. As a consequence of that, the narratives are often both concerned with man-made situations that cause traumatic experiences; such as war or abuse, but also how specific structures (for example political) have the power to perpetrate insidious traumas (Vickroy, 2002: 14). Secondly, she emphasises that whilst collective repression may bring temporary comfort, it will result in further chaos naming further victimization or unresolved anguish which creates not only a "loss of self-confidence, but also a loss of confidence in the social and cultural structures that are supposed to create order and safety" (Vickroy, 2002: 13). Thirdly, Vickroy supports Felman and Laub's (1992) theory of testimony when she states the material aspect of literary representations of traumas. If fewer victims report assaults because they fear being discredited in institutional structures, fewer testimonies will gain credit, and thus fewer traumatised victims or survivors of traumatic experiences have the possibility of healing (Vickroy, 2002: 16). Inevitably then, the literary representation and adaption is vital for cultural codification and acceptance of traumatised individuals. The genre allows readers to both engage in a complex interweaving of social and psychological aspects of trauma and memory, and gives access to elucidate stories that are rarely testified elsewhere. In spite of this, Vickroy supposes three issues present when dealing with the relationship between readers and trauma narratives: multi-contextual social issues based on the themes in the concerned narrative; eurocentrism in the way healing, loss, and fragmentation are perceived; and dilemmas in how the characters' own fears as well as challenges in perception of each other and exclusion are represented (Vickroy, 2002: 2).

In her scholarly work, Vickroy emphasises the relation between the reader and characters in traumatic narratives, and compares it to the role of testimonies that Felman and Laub theorise. To illuminate Vickroy's claim, it is beneficial to refer to Kalí Tal, who claims that the literatures of trauma have the ability to re-construct a traumatic experience to: "make it 'real' both to victims and to the community" (Tal, 1996: 21). This sort of storytelling appeals to a community of readers and is important in all social and political institutions for conveying messages of traumatising. Readers are allowed into complex paradigms of contexts, historical events, psychological and cultural norms, and

values in trauma narratives. Because of this, Vickroy underlines the importance of analysing and understanding these contexts, and to do that the reader is obliged to connect with the characters. As such, it is not the reader's job to evaluate the character's traumatic experience per se, and whether or not the victim was complicit in the abuse. Instead, the reader's job is to "immerse in individual experiences of terror, arbitrary rules, and psychic breakdown so that we might begin to appreciate these [traumatising] situations" (Vickroy, 2002: 34). Thus, the reader has a great responsibility for the realisation of traumas and the journey of the characters, and that gives trauma literature in general, and refugee literature in particular an important cultural position in our modern and challenged world.

Analysis

After having outlined the theoretical basis for this thesis, we will next explore the corpus of novels considered for analysis. What follows are four analyses focused on the particular novels in question, which engage with a range of the theoretical considerations presented earlier. The four novels have distinctly different narrative structures, and so each analysis might at first glance seem disconnected from the rest. The novels will not be connected to each other before the analysis to allow each novel to present its own contents without bias or interference, but will in the discussion section be connected and comparatively discussed for a wider understanding of the refugee experience.

Little Bee

The novel *Little Bee* is written by Chris Cleave and published in 2008. The book revolves around Bee, a Nigerian refugee girl, and Sarah, a successful editor at a women's magazine, and follows both of them as their lives intertwine. After a disastrous meeting on a Nigerian beach with horrible consequences for Bee's sister, Bee flees to England in search of Sarah and her husband Andrew. On the boat to England she is discovered by the crew, and once they dock she is taken to the Immigration Removal Centre where she stays for two years under prison-like conditions. A Jamaican refugee—Yvette—manages to get herself set free and Bee is by chance included in that deal. As they try to leave the centre they each get one outgoing phone call where Bee contacts Andrew, who completely freaks out over the prospect of seeing Bee. One day she arrives at their doorstep, but in the meantime Andrew committed suicide so she appears on the day of the funeral. Later we learn the timing was not accidental as Bee is revealed to have visited the house before Andrew died and she saw him commit suicide. Bee's arrival turns Sarah and her young Batman-

obsessed son Charlie's house into a refuge, as Bee is an illegal alien. Due to a feeling of unhappiness prior to her and Andrew's trip to Nigeria, Sarah had begun an affair with a government employee named Lawrence, whom she gets more seriously involved with following Andrew's passing. Lawrence questions Bee's presence in the house and believes she is a danger, but Bee refuses to leave and they come to a stalemate.

They both join Sarah and Charlie on a trip to London that ends horribly as Charlie goes missing and the police are called; the incident ends with Bee being found out and deported. The book ends with Sarah and Charlie meeting up with Bee on the plane to help her and bring stories like hers into a book that Andrew had begun writing as a way to amend his experiences in the past. They end up on the same beach where Bee and Sarah's first meeting happened. Soldiers arrive and although Bee tries to hide, she protects Sarah and Charlie by giving herself up. The story encompasses several narratives, including an important flashback sequence of the first meeting between Bee and Sarah that leads to the death of Bee's sister, but this particular incident will be explored in greater detail as it represents the major traumatic experience for Bee.

Chris Cleave is a columnist for *The Guardian*, and although he spent some early childhood years in West Africa, he is not a refugee, and the main inspiration for the book came from a volunteer job in an asylum detention centre ("Chris Cleave: The author explores the tragicomic way Britain deals", 2008). In the novel, Cleave (2008) tackles a major conflict in Nigeria that relates to oil, which Cleave reports was the "second-biggest African exporter of asylum applicants" in the notes added to the back of the edition (269). Oil has been an integral part of creating conflicts among people in most of Africa ever since the continent became predominantly decolonised during the latter part of the 20th century (Obi, 2014; Hallmark, 2017). The conflict for natural resources plays a major role in African narratives of displacement, and serves as a backdrop for understanding the context Bee is placed into. These conflicts often involve insurgent groups and mercenaries and/or direct civil war situations with rebel armies (as will be evident in Eggers (2006)). The present analysis of *Little Bee* will begin with studying the character of Little Bee.

The character of Little Bee

Bee provides us with one half of the narrative as a first-person narrator, detailing her story and providing inner commentary on her surroundings. Bee is a strong-willed, selfless person, who constantly surprises both her surroundings and the reader. During her time in the Immigration Removal Centre, she quickly learns that there are two ways one can survive in a place that in many

ways resemble a prison: “So when the older girls whispered to me, *To survive you must look good or talk good*, I decided that talking would be safer for me” (Cleave, 2008: 6, *original italics*).

Through Bee’s interactions with Charlie, Sarah realises just how wise beyond her years she really is:

Finally it was Little Bee who went down into the grave and held up my son for other hands to haul out [...] ‘Thank you,’ [Sarah] said. ‘It is nothing,’ said Little Bee. ‘I just did what anyone would do.’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Except that everyone else didn’t’. (43-44)

Bee is described throughout as a wilful and insightful person despite her age, and she has a maturity in her reflections, which stands in stark contrast to her age and her more humorous reflection.

We do not learn Bee’s real name until the very end of the novel, where she shares one final moment with Charlie that in all its innocence presents a defining narrative for Bee’s personality: “‘My name is Udo.’ [...] ‘Udo means, *peace*. Do you know what peace is Charlie?’ Charlie shook his head. ‘Peace is a time when people can tell each other their real names’” (265, *original italics*). The symbolism of her name represents that she has finally found peace in her existence and her fate, however grim it might be, and she is hopeful because of individuals like Charlie who met her at face value and embraced her without any reservations. Bee spends a majority of the novel pretending she is someone else by using different pseudonyms to adopt a new identity: “It was not safe to use their true names, which spoke so loudly of their tribe and of their region” (100). Furthermore, when she explores London at the end, she tells a little boy that her name is London Sunshine because “‘It is the kind of name that starts off heavy but ends up light’” (222). This is a general personality trait in Bee, who repeatedly discusses how she acts and talks like the Queen, and in many instances almost believes she is her: “The play leader gave me a look which meant, I told you to stay by the door. I gave her a look back which meant, How dare you? [...] I learned it from Queen Elizabeth the Second” (143). She identifies with the Queen, because in Bee’s eyes, the Queen symbolises a powerful female figure who can never be subjected to the traumas that Bee has endured.

Since Bee is in her formative years, her identity and characterisation is particularly interesting, since she spends a lot of time in settings that should normally fall under the definition of a non-place. While Bee has spent some time on a boat and the ocean, her primary place of transit is the Immigration Removal Centre where she stays for two years:

Those cold years are frozen inside me. The African girl they locked up in the immigration detention center, poor child, she never really escaped. In my soul she is still locked up in there, forever, under the fluorescent lights, curled up on the green linoleum floor with her knees tucked up under her chin. (7-8)

Following Akhtar's model of the third individuation, the displacement and her subsequent stay in the immigration centre becomes, for Bee, both a second *and* third individuation, as she is "reborn—in captivity" (Cleave, 2008: 8). Forming her identity in this place of transit has caused her to not belong anywhere, which she is fully aware of because she does not speak like a Nigerian, but she does not look like an English girl either. Throughout, Bee is repeatedly denied any place of refuge from her trauma. Wherever she goes, her past haunts her, and so each new place is invaded by past experiences, the only exception being the O'Rourke house, where Bee seems to find refuge. Note that when she leaves the house, she is once again vulnerable to her past and it catches up with her when she is detained and deported; the deportation symbolises a return to her past.

Dealing with the theme of refugees

On the very first page, the narrator already establishes the thematics of seeking refuge and escapism. Bee narrates her wish to be a "British pound coin instead of an African girl", as she would be able to travel unhindered across borders and through all different layers of society (Cleave, 2008: 1). The refuge that Bee seeks is not readily available to her, since while she has been able to cross borders, she cannot escape her past. The book attempts to deal with the problems of a modern world where detention facilities, such as the Immigration Removal Centre where Bee spends her first two years in England, are used as prisons for people who have done nothing wrong. The detention centre experience shocks Sarah when she reads Andrew's research on the topic. She turns to Bee to confirm his research: "'Is it true you have to apply in writing if you just need a paracetamol?' [Bee] smiled. 'If you are planning to have a headache, you need to apply twenty-four hours in advance'" (227). While this passage exists as an interaction between the characters, it is clear that this should be read as the author sarcastically criticises the conditions refugees are subjected to.

Thematically, the novel explores the idea of belonging to anywhere and nowhere. In the beginning, Sarah reflects on the summer where Bee shows up at her house: "We [Sarah, Charlie, and Bee] were exiles from reality, that summer. We were refugees from ourselves" (22). Both Sarah

and Bee seem to be detached from reality as they try to process the trauma they share (the specifics of the traumatic experience will be explored in further detail later). As Bee comes to London by herself the first time, having fled the suicide scene of a fellow refugee girl, the notions of loneliness and loss of belonging is poignantly described as “drowning in a river of people and also [... feeling] so very, very alone” (85). The loneliness is enhanced by the feeling described in the former chapter, where she does not act and/or look like a Nigerian nor an English girl.

The novel also attempts to provide some insight into the general refugee experience through some discussions between Sarah and Bee. In one particular instance, Bee says that “I do not think I have left my country. I think it has traveled with me” (199). Bee presents this metaphor of the country as a travelling entity to explain a feeling that she has—of her past embedded into her present experiences. Much like the other girls from the centre who each hold on to something from their past, Bee, although perhaps reluctantly, is still affected by her past and her origin. At one point she describes the taste of tea as “the taste of my land: it is bitter and warm, strong, and sharp with memory. It tastes of longing. It tastes of the distance between where you are and where you come from” (129). The idea of longing makes her sad, and it seems inescapable for her. Bee rejects her heritage and her origin, as she no longer feels attached to her memories of her friends. She is different and changed by her experience, and so perhaps still unconsciously longs for a return to the way things were, but instead of being nostalgic she becomes galvanised by that longing.

The novel also deals with the fear of refugees as a central theme to a conflict between Bee and Lawrence, illustrated through other remarks throughout the novel. The first allusions to the conflict happen in a conversation between Sarah and Lawrence. Lawrence considers Bee dangerous: “How do you *know*? You know nothing about the woman. What if she comes into your room in the night with a kitchen knife? What if she’s crazy?” (122, *original italics*). The primary fallacy of Lawrence is that he does not seem to understand Bee and her situation, but instead sees her as a mere intrusion: “These immigrants, they come over here, they take our women” (177). For Bee, Lawrence comes to represent ‘the men’ that she fears, but instead of running away again, she faces him head on and bolsters herself against the fear of ‘the men’ and what that phrase represents. This provides a representation of the liberation of Bee from her trauma, especially as it happens while she gives another testimony around her involvement in Andrew’s death. The idea of testimony is explored further in relation to the main testimony of her pre-displacement traumas.

Trauma

As a main focus for this study, we should of course investigate the traumas that Bee has experienced over the course of her life. Following the model outlined in the theory, we should divide the traumas into pre-displacement, displacement and post-displacement sections. The pre-displacement for Bee is many-faceted, but is rooted in one particular episode that she experienced when she was 14 years old. This coincides with the first meeting between Sarah and Bee. Bee and her sister Nkiruka had been running for several days separately, but then find each other and they decide to come up with new names—this is when Udo decides to take on her new name Little Bee. They hide for some time, before one day Sarah and Andrew show up and they decide to come up to them in a faint hope that they will take them in and hide them from soldiers approaching, reportedly ““the oil company’s men”” (107). The situation escalates, and it ends up with the girls getting taken by the soldiers, and Sarah has to cut her finger off in an attempt to appease the soldiers: “I looked straight at Little Bee. She saw what the killer did not see. She saw the white woman put her own left hand down on the hard sand, and she saw her pick up the machete [...]” (115). After the girls are taken away, one very vivid scene in the book takes place, and to properly describe it, it should be reiterated in its entirety:

‘They raped my sister. They pushed her up against the side of the boat and they raped her. I heard her moaning. I could not hear everything, through the planks of the boat. It was muffled, the sound. I heard my sister choking, like she was being strangled. I heard the sound of her body beating against the planks. It went on for a very long time [...] In the end there were just screams. At first they were screams of pain but finally they changed and they were like the screams of a newborn baby.’ (130-131)

There are other factors that add to her pre-displacement trauma, such as the loss of her parents, but the main trauma remains this experience, which carries a lot of impact on her life.

The displacement period for Bee lasts roughly two years, as we should include the time spent in the immigration centre. During her time in the centre she was scared, as they were held in a facility with a mixed population, and the men “looked hungry” (6). She survived by trying to remind herself of her womanhood in secret by hiding it through a manipulation of her exterior. One note that should be made of her situation in the displacement period is that she seems to come to terms with her situation: “A sad story means, this storyteller is *alive*. The next thing you know, something fine will happen to her, something *marvelous*, and then she will turn around and smile”

(9, *original italics*). The language here illuminates how trauma inherently, when testified, comes from a place of survival. Sometimes she considers her status as a refugee a humorous subject. In one particular incident in the barn with the other girls, she designs in her head the flag of refugees which she decides “would be gray. You would not need any particular fabric to make it. I would say that the flag could be any shape and it could be made with anything you had. [...] Thinking about this, I made myself laugh” (76). But in other situations it becomes distinctly clear that she is completely aware of her situation: “So when I say that I am a refugee, you must understand that there is no refuge” (46). Instead of being completely traumatised anew in her displacement phase, she instead carries the trauma of her pre-displacement with her and it haunts her:

I stowed away in a great steel boat, but the horror stowed away inside me.

When I left my homeland I thought I had escaped—but out on the open sea,

I started to have nightmares. [...] It was a heavy cargo that I carried. (46)

She quickly becomes obsessed with finding ways to kill herself, “in case the men comes” (47), and for her it becomes a way of coping, no matter how morbid that might sound. These points exhibit her first reflections on traumatic suffering and trauma continues to influence her entire experience.

The post-displacement phase consists of her time spent with Sarah, as the house quickly becomes a safe haven for her. In the post-displacement phase, the trauma that Bee endures is markedly different from the physical and emotional trauma she endures during her time in her home country. In England, her main trauma consists of an invasive fear of being displaced once again. Several times, she expresses a wish to be adopted by Sarah and become a legal part of their family to secure her stay so the men cannot come for her ever again, but is initially let down which brings back traumatic memories: “My feet crushed the petals as we passed over them, and I realized that my story was only made of endings” (149). While these setbacks are experienced by her, they quickly become nullified as her surroundings provide her with a supportive environment; in this case, Sarah quickly concedes that perhaps staying together would be best for both she and Bee.

As mentioned earlier, one of Bee’s coping mechanisms for her traumatic past is to imagine ways she can commit suicide to avoid ‘the men’. But in one small passage, Bee decides to take a different route and walks into the unknown: “But to end your story well—here is the truth—you have to talk yourself out of it. After six steps I was inside the crowd, getting pushed this way and that way. I did not mind and I did not look back” (220). Bee decides to leave in a spontaneous moment where she finds hope in the diversity of the people that she sees in London. Her perception of London is no longer the “city of the dead” (85), but instead it becomes a place of freedom, where

she can finally start living. And for one second she almost succeeds in her endeavour but she is regretful as she considers the fate of Charlie in particular, whom she has grown to love and protect. She realises that her continued happiness is intrinsically bound to the O'Rourke's, and here we see decentrality and focus on Bee's environment. This also means that she gives up her only likely moment to escape and be free, because soon after she is sent back to Nigeria.

The foil of the British

Contrasting the elaborate character development of Little Bee, Cleave mainly operates within three other characters who also endures trauma in one or more ways. These characters provide material to consider Bee's trauma and how she handles her traumatising experience. The following will attempt to illuminate Sarah, Andrew, and Charlie's traumatic experience to juxtapose it with Bee.

Firstly, let us consider Sarah, the main female counterpart to Little Bee and a main narrator. Sarah is a successful journalist who made her way to the top of the ladder at a women's magazine. Trying to reconcile her failing marriage, she goes to Nigeria with Andrew, where they both suffer traumas, and in Sarah's case somatically as she cuts off her own finger. Her loss continues to haunt Sarah, particularly as she reflects on her condition in relation to her line of work:

In place of my finger is a stump, a phantom digit that used to be responsible
for the *E*, *D*, and *C* keys on my laptop. I can't rely on *E*, *D*, and *C* anymore.
They go missing when I need them most. *Pleased* becomes *please*. *Ecstasies*
becomes *stasis*. (25, *original italics*)

Quite literally, she is caught in a sense of stasis, of never truly moving on as she has not processed the episode and her trauma, and so she cannot return to a feeling of biopsychospiritual homeostasis. She has tried to forget the episode but comes face to face with her past when she finds Bee on her doorstep. Through her relationship with Bee, she begins to rediscover her trauma and starts reconciling with her past, as she is remembering it: "I realized I couldn't remember the point at which she had stopped telling the story and I had picked up remembering it" (116). Sarah is caught up trying to escape the past, and so it always haunts her until she finally faces it.

Charlie is an interesting character while looking at trauma because of his age. At the age of four, Charlie approaches life with a childish naïvety and he does not fully understand how he is repressing his trauma. Charlie is described as wearing a Batman costume throughout the novel, and he had been since even before Andrew's death. He views himself as the protector of the family, and

the Batman identity is a way for him to channel a reality he does not want to speak, until confronted by Bee: “‘Do you need to be Batman all the time?’ Charlie nodded. ‘Yes, because if I is not Batman *all the time* then mine Daddy dies’” (223, sic, *original italics*). Charlie continuously tries to escape his reality by hiding “in [his] bat cave” (239), a metaphorical escape from reality. Charlie copes with his trauma very differently from Sarah, because he does not necessarily deny what has happened, but he creates a childish game around it to comprehend the loss he has faced.

All trauma narratives in *Little Bee* except Andrew’s end with some form of resolution where the traumatised individual finally absorbs their trauma and moves towards a healing experience. From descriptions, Andrew was violently affected by his trauma on the Nigerian beach:

For me there were countless foretellings, innumerable small breaks with normalcy. Andrew’s chin unshaved, a second bottle uncorked on a weekday night, the use of the passive voice on deadline Friday. *Certain attitudes which have been adopted by this society have left this commentator a little lost.* [...] he was always so precise with the written word. From a layperson, *lost* would be a synonym for *bewildered*. From my husband, it was a measured goodbye. (25-26, *original italics*)

Andrew’s trauma is best embodied in Bee’s description of him in the days leading up to his suicide when she was observing him and trying to make contact. He perceived her as a hallucination, some spectre from his past who had returned to torment him and it completely broke him. Andrew’s trauma shows a lack of reconciliation with his past, but by trying to ignore the past he fails to assimilate it into his existence and that ultimately destroys him: “He said, *Words are nothing. The person I am is the person you saw on that beach. He knows where the commas go, but he wouldn’t cut off one finger to save you*” (193, *original italics*). Andrew suffers from survivor’s guilt in a severe form, and that leads him to take his own life, in some ways seeking refuge and as Sarah also reflects, “Death, of course, is a refuge” (22).

When we discuss these representations in juxtaposition with Bee, we find some interesting differences, where one might assume that their situation would be remarkably similar. The O’Rourke’s are controlled by their trauma and their grief, and it affects their lives to the point where they are completely altered from their ‘normal’ state. What stands when looking at Bee, is that she seems to live and overcome her trauma: “‘We are all trying to be happy in this world. I am happy because I do not think the men will come to kill me today’” (179). The way that Bee overcomes her trauma might border on the extreme with her focus on finding ways to avoid ‘the men’, primarily

through thoughts of suicide and self-harm. Yet, where Sarah seems to be lost in her life, Bee becomes her guide even though one would think the roles should be reversed considering Bee's age. Whenever Bee might be scared and fear resurfaces, she seems to constantly find resolve to move on no matter the consequences, as when Sarah begs her to call the police to find Charlie in the end: "[Bee:] 'The *police*, Sarah,' she said. I stared at her. Her eyes were pleading. She looked *terrified*. And then, very slowly, her face changed. It became firm, resolved. She took a deep breath, and she nodded at me" (238, *original italics*). Bee's resolve should be linked directly to her resilience. While Beiser notes how a *like-ethnic* community can promote resilience, Bee seems to not need this. We can explain this because Bee seems to relate less to her home and more to the British e.g. with her fascination of the Queen's English. Bee's resilience is bound in a cultural relativity, where her fascination of the British Queen and the ideals she embodies become Bee's resilience. The novel handles how resilience and perseverance can only be managed by the individual itself, and also highlights the futility of helping and trying to understand trauma:

'They tried to help us, you know? There were some good people [....] One of the psychiatrists, she said to me, *Psychiatry in this place is like serving an in-flight meal in the middle of a plane crash. If I wanted to make you well, as a doctor, I should be giving you a parachute, not a cheese-and-pickle sandwich*. To be well in your mind you have first to be free, you see?' (Cleave, 2008: 147, *original italics*)

It should be pointed out here that the novel does not insinuate that she has 'cured' herself of her trauma in any way. Instead, it seems to suggest that despite her situation, Bee seems to find the beautiful things in life, and she does find an ending she can live with, even though she is about to be taken away by soldiers: "But me, I watched all of those children smiling and dancing and splashing one another in salt water and bright sunlight, and I laughed [...]" (266). After the story ends, the book even offers up a Nigerian proverb⁵ that echoes Bee's temperament and her approach to life. Resilience seems to be a markedly central way to approach refugee lives in this book, while highlighting that resilience is not a given and it requires a certain approach to life.

Witnessing trauma and witnessing testimony

As discussed in the first part of this project, testimony and witnessing theory has proven to be central to discuss and illuminate trauma, and *Little Bee* is no exception. Bee seems acutely aware

⁵ "If your face is swollen from the severe beatings of life, smile and pretend to be a fat man" (Cleave, 2008: 267)

that everything she says and does have an audience, and this is visible in her way of narrating: “That is the reason I spent two years learning the Queen’s English, so that you and I could speak like this without an interruption” (Cleave, 2008: 6). In many cases, Bee deals with the concept of telling the story of her ‘adventure’ to the girls back home, who provide a reflection on who Bee could have been, had she not escaped and learned: “This is what it would be like, you see, if I had to stop and explain every little thing to the girls back home” (5). Accepting how the novel is obsessed with telling stories—and what the implications of telling stories might be—allows us to then investigate testimony aspects of the novel. The entire novel should be seen as a mode of testimony for Bee (and Sarah by implication as she narrates half of the book) and her testimony has implications for further understanding the case of trauma in *Little Bee*.

The main explicit testimony of the novel is Bee and Sarah’s shared testimony to each other (and to themselves) of what happened the day of their meeting. As Bee tells the story of what happened to her sister, she pauses as she sees the impact of the testimony on Sarah, who is visibly shaken. Bee remarks that she wants to end the testimony there, but “I could not stop talking because now I had started my story, it wanted to be finished. We cannot choose where to start and stop. Our stories are the tellers of us” (131). It is instantly recognisable that this passage is a turning point in the novel, as it furthermore provides a sort of cathartic experience for Sarah and Bee as well as the reader. The power of testimony is that Bee’s story, which she has never shared with anyone else, finally becomes realised in words and it brings their relationship a lot closer as a result. The testimony is the result of the meeting between the Global South and the Global North. Sarah accurately represents the feeling anyone in the Global North would have in a meeting with the reality of the traumatic experiences in the Global South. In Balaev’s terms, the unspeakable experience is somehow conveyed through language and on that accord it seems to free the testifier. It is noteworthy that Bee points out how mundane and normal her narrative is, although Sarah cannot comprehend Bee’s trauma: ““You have seen trouble too, Sarah. You are making a mistake if you think this is unusual. I am telling you, trouble is like the ocean. It covers two thirds of the world”” (138). Here, Bee seems to act as a vessel for the author to express his concern over the amount of people who are affected by traumatic experiences all over the world, and yet in the Global North we hear the stories and think of them as unique.

In relation to testimony, one should also consider the concept of a second witnessing. In the novel, several explicit examples of second witnessing are presented through the different refugees Bee encounters and her own encounters with other people. This follows the general focus on

narrative that the book has exemplified through Bee's considerations of her 'friends back home'. For example, we should consider the reactions that both Sarah and Lawrence have when listening to Bee's testimony: "Sarah stopped crying and shaking then. She was very still. She was holding on to her tea, like she would be blown away if she did not grip on to it"; "Lawrence's hands were shaking. There were ripples on the surface of the tea in his cup" (132; 192). Both exhibit visible somatic symptoms as a reaction to the horrible experiences that Bee testifies to them. This functions as documentation for the validity of the concept of second witnessing and supports Felman and Laub's (1992) considerations. It also allows us to understand the trauma suffered in *Little Bee* as a layered experience, where the refugee trauma can be considered in relation to other traumatic experiences.

Looking at testimony and ideas of witnessing also allow us to examine the relationship between the writer and the narrative. As mentioned earlier, Cleave is not a refugee himself but has spent time interacting with refugees and listened to some of their experiences. In a relationship between life and art, Sarah and Lawrence can function as surrogates for the writer and the reader by proxy, because they have the experience of a second witnessing. In contemporary culture, there exists a debate around appropriation and misrepresentation of culture and narratives, and in some ways Cleave could be construed as a perpetrator of such. But in force of his occupation as a journalist, he has been a *second witness* to narratives of trauma. This second witnessing gives him the opportunity to engage with traumatic experiences and convey the critique of the refugee conditions in contemporary British societies. Much like the students mentioned in Felman and Laub (1992), Cleave has gone through a secondary witnessing and has experienced trauma through it.

Concluding remarks

To summarise, in *Little Bee* we find a straightforward refugee narrative that follows the conventions of trauma theory discussed earlier. The character of Bee represents a segment of refugee orphans who are acutely aware of their own situation. As Sarah several times notes, Bee seems older than what she really is, yet sometimes she shows the signs of being younger when she feels powerless. The novel illuminates issues of refugee conditions, especially criticising the conditions they are subjected to after coming to England. The descriptions of the Immigration Removal Centre draw similarities to how one imagines an old prison. The prison setting is also shown to further a traumatic condition, as these people are not given the proper help and consideration to help them deal with their pre-displacement trauma. Bee's displacement journey is

not very long and fairly uncomplicated, so she is not nearly as subjected to trauma during her displacement as one might expect. Still, the displacement affects her deeply when considering how she has become obsessed with the idea of narrating to the people back home. While her journey is not lengthy, the time spent on the ship by herself allowed her to fall into nightmares, another common symptom of trauma. What is perhaps most significant in this novel is the idea of resilience. Bee attempts, and many times successfully, to achieve a new biopsychospiritual homeostasis through her continued resilience even through adversity. Her resilience is perhaps best seen in this quote: “We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This will be our secret. Because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, *I survived* “ (9, *original italics*). This survival instinct is central to Bee’s character and properly reflects the main message of this book: that adversity can and should be faced with strength and perseverance. The narrative rejects the concept of the unspeakable, as instead of focusing on the inability to comprehend, it proactively engages in refugee narratives and trauma narratives.

Exit West

The novel *Exit West* was published in 2017 by the Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. Once again, his authorship brings him to elucidate cultural differences, similarities, and relations between the western world and anywhere else⁶. Through his status as a cosmopolitan writer, Hamid is often recognised for intercultural takes on matters and themes revolving around more than one nation and one culture—however complicated these concepts often are. Hamid’s recent novel is no exception, and explores themes of refuge, loyalty, and humanity with its magic realism. Initiating in an unknown, but most likely Middle Eastern, city, Saeed and Nadia meet in a class and take notice of each other. Nadia is open-minded, enjoys music and psychedelic mushrooms, and extraordinarily lives alone in her apartment. She does, however, wear traditional black robes “so men don’t fuck with [her]” (Hamid, 2017: 16). Saeed is traditional and lives with his parents; he is fascinated by Nadia’s independent way of life, and they start to go out. Their lives complicate when militants enter their city and changes their way of life: “one day the signal to every mobile phone in the city simply vanished, turned off as if by flipping a switch” (55). Soon after the internet breaks down and a curfew is established at the time of sunset. After the killing of Saeed’s mother, Nadia moves to Saeed’s apartment, and helps Saeed and his father adjust to a new life.

⁶ For other examples, see *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)

Within a short span of time, rumours begin to spread in the city that doors are opening, and that people who go through them will leave the city for good. Saeed's father encourages them to leave, and though Saeed is filled with guilt of leaving his father, he and Nadia go through one of the heavily guarded doors and end up in Mykonos. Here they spend time in what resembles a refugee camp and come in contact with a local girl, who helps them find another door. This leads them to London, and slowly they start to construct a normal life living together. With time, Nadia adapts to their new location and its habits, whereas Saeed becomes more traditionally oriented towards his own culture. Nadia convinces him to go through another door leaving them at their final location in San Francisco, California, but by now they are far too separated in their way of life, leaving Saeed to marry a native preacher's daughter and Nadia to live alone again, ultimately losing contact.

The novel resonates clearly the ongoing migration problem that defines contemporary politics. Although Hamid is reluctant in sharing any information about the native city of Nadia and Saeed, it goes without saying that we are in a Middle Eastern city. Because of the religious character of the militants and their prohibitions—hand-holding, listening to music and restrictions of clothing—it resembles the current-day situation in the regions Islamic State controlled until recently. As a result of this, and as a result of civil wars, thousands of refugees fled their native country on a fearful journey to the Western hemisphere as their last hope of surviving a brutal regime and the media in the western world depicted myriads of refugees arriving in the Greek archipelago—exactly as the reader sees in Hamid's novel. There is nothing new about Syrian, Eritrean and sub-Saharan African refugees in southern Europe, however the game-changer is that from 2015 the refugees entered through Greece as well as Italy. With a crumbling Greek economy, Greece was completely unprepared for the massive amount of refugees standing at their shores, and what had until that point been primarily a Western challenge, Eastern Europe were to face the same challenges now (Kingsley, 2016: 5). The analysis of *Exit West* is then founded in the authentic refugee problem that Europe has faced since 2015. As a migrant himself, Hamid has an insight in the prejudice refugees may meet in their host country, and his dwelling on character's change, displacement, notion of transit, and an eloquent language of trauma result in a striking representation of refugees connecting with a host country.

Despite the novel's realistic nature, Hamid omits the entire journey from Nadia and Saeed's home country, and simply allows them to enter a door and step out in a new country. These doors—as ordinary as they are—come to be symbols of freedom and represent hope: "A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all [and]

most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently nonetheless” (Hamid, 2017: 70). Through these doors, our characters move through alternating places, which leaves the reader with few middle-passages and many sudden collisions with new settings that one must adapt to in the same way as the main characters. The symbolic representation of the doors is straightforward and works as a stylistic device for the author, however the doors may also seem paradoxical. In a novel so obviously centring on the present-day refugee crisis, Hamid simply omits the dangerous, physical journey from one country to another and all the traumatic implications that follow such. However, this omission is convenient, as instead of focusing on the traumatising experiences refugees have during their journey from A to B, he focuses on the representation of refugees and their struggles in a new country. This allows him to tell different stories of different refugees, and as present analysis hopefully will illustrate: different concepts of refuge.

Before the analysis unfolds into how Hamid represents refugees and their traumatic experiences, it is beneficial to dwell on the title *Exit West*. It represents two things; firstly and most obviously the escape—the exit—that continuously moves further west, starting in Mykonos, further to London and ending as far west in the western hemisphere, in San Francisco, California, as they possibly can. Secondly, the specification of west represents a lucrative destination and stands opposite to the abandoned, Eastern world:

[Saeed and Nadia] were on the Greek Island of Mykonos, a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter, and that the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured [...]. (101)

Hamid continues this distinction as the eastern doors are in too great a number to secure; there are too many doors connecting to poorer places and almost no one escapes—exits—east.

Use of characters and place

Present chapter aims to illustrate Hamid’s beneficial use of characters to clarify his purpose of the novel: the depiction of versatile refugee experiences. According to Balaev, the protagonist is crucial to understand in an analysis of trauma narratives, which is also the case in this novel. The reader engages with two protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, whose development is elucidated in the following, however in this specific novel it is beneficial to include two more concepts. Firstly, minor characters - even those who seem to have little influence on the narrative plot. Secondly, the

concept of place, which we also account for through Balaev's theory in the section of *The Potentials of Pluralism*, is highly applicable because of its vivacity and effect on the character's development, behaviour and relations.

Initiating at the novel's beginning, the reader meets Nadia and Saeed, who in the very beginning encounter each other in an evening class on "corporate identity and product branding" (1). Quickly, the reader realises that they in more than one way seem like each other's opposites. Saeed is traditional and comes from a conservative family, while Nadia is in conflict with her family, because of her untimely decision to move out on her own. Saeed lives, as tradition requires, at his parents' place in an apartment. His parents are well educated; his mother with "the commanding air of a schoolteacher [...]" and his father [...]" a university professor" (8), who both enjoy reading and debating. The family is religious, however the reader is not explicitly aware of this until after the assault on the stock market and the following curfew, which constitutes a point of no return. At this point "Saeed went with his father to pray on the first Friday after the curfew's commencement, and Saeed prayed for peace and Saeed's father prayed for Saeed", while "Saeed's mother prayed at home, newly particular about not missing a single of her devotions [...]" (49). Already from childhood, Nadia has had little patience for traditions, stemming from a school that emphasised memorisation "for which she was by temperament particularly ill-suited" (17), thus spending a great time drawing in the margins of notebooks, and getting a subsequent scolding. Her decision to move away from her family and consequently disrupting their relations comes as a result of her (and her family's) ill-temper. What is most characteristic about Nadia is her strong sense of self, her ability to adjust to new situations, and her resourcefulness which is demonstrated in the following; "She learned how to dress for self-protection, how best to deal with aggressive men and with the police, and with aggressive men who were the police, and always to trust her instincts about situations to avoid or exit immediately" (19). One noticeable uttering on their first date illustrate Nadia and Saeed's different worldviews: "Saeed asked her about her conservative and virtually all-concealing black robe: 'If you don't pray [...] why do you wear it?' [Nadia:] 'So men don't fuck with me'" (15-16). Saeed cannot perceive any other reason to wear the religious garment, if not to perform the rituals that accompany it, whilst Nadia utilises the symbolism of the same garment to live unbothered from society's gaze.

Native city

The characters of Nadia and Saeed develop through the novel, and their differences become more distinct the further one reads. The changes they go through will be the constituting part of the analysis, albeit it will be illuminated through an emphasis on the places they are in. In that way, the concept of place assists the analysis of the characters, and will be treated as a contextualising contribution to understand Nadia and Saeed's change, thus utilising Balaev's theory of the potentials of pluralism. Firstly, we argue that their native city changes to a new place while they still live there. Arguably, the life altering changes introduced by the militants affect their home to a degree where one can argue the place to be unrecognisably different and thus new. Examples are windows: "a window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come" (68). Shots from guns or even soundwaves from bombs far away easily break the windows and threaten the security of everyday life in a safe haven: one's home. This led families to rearrange furniture to less compromising positions in case of gunfire through windows. Further, Saeed and Nadia experience the feeling of being scared about whether the other person arrives home safely, and because of the lack of a stable (or non-existent) network service, they cannot know until they are in contact the following day (63). The absurdity of the situation is striking and almost unbearable for individuals who a few months earlier lived an ordinary life. Moreover, because inhabitants of the city experience more death, funeral rituals and traditions become inaccessible, and individuals suffering from the pain of a deceased loved one have no choice but to keep "funerals [...] smaller and more rushed affairs in those days, because of the fighting" (73). In itself, the changing of cultural customs can separate an individual's identity from his native place, and make them feel estranged.

In relation to their existence in an altered city, Saeed and Nadia evolve in different directions where their contrasting perceptions are clearly expressed. One striking example is that Saeed desperately uses his lunch breaks to call Nadia through landlines, while Nadia desperately runs back and forth between her apartment and the store to stock up on supplies, in case there will be a lack of commodities (58). This should not be interpreted like Nadia has less affection for Saeed, but instead that her way of life always requires her to be aware of potential critical situations, which is also expressed by her choice to wear traditional garments. Saeed on the other hand has a family to provide for him.

Shortly after the militants occupy Saeed's neighbourhood—when he and Nadia decide to travel through a door with the hope of reaching a better destination—the reader discovers that they

have different attitudes towards leaving their home city: “Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger [...]” (90). This is not to say that Saeed was not eager to leave for a better place, but his intention of leaving was marked by a desire to return, albeit knowing that under these circumstances return was unlikely. For Saeed, his “loss of a home, no less, of *his* home” (90, *our italics*), and the following separation from his family and friends, caused distress and imbalanced his identity. Further, the realisation that his father will not accompany them becomes unbearable for Saeed, and it changes his perspective of leaving, which becomes evident for Nadia later in their travels.

Mykonos

The first place Nadia and Saeed travel to is Mykonos. Inevitably, they have come to a new place that is indisputably different from where they came from. The island of Mykonos is a place that is “pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places” (101). Despite this, there is not much ordinary about the place, which resembles a refugee camp more than anything else. Hamid does not refer explicitly to it as one, however the description of the tents (101), the way of life (110), and desires of the other people (107) is unmistakable. Fundamentally, the theory section of how refugee camps affect individuals, is beneficial to bear in mind in the following chapter of the analysis. The nature of these and the presumed temporariness is visible in Saeed and Nadia’s perception of the place as they establish a “temporary home there, and Nadia felt as she was doing it that she was playing house, as she had with her sister as a child, and Saeed felt as he was doing it that he was a bad son [...]” (102). Knowing their impending fate, it is a fact that they merely inhabit the island temporarily, but they are surprised at how long they end up residing there. However, what may be more interesting in the quote is that they, once again, perceive the reality in a binary. Saeed feels inadequate as a son and guilty for leaving his father behind; a guilt he illustrates as he angrily turns his head from Nadia when she tries to kiss him (102), and she interprets it as a bitterness she did not know he possessed as it “[corroded] his insides” (102). Instead, Nadia perceives the entire situation light-heartedly, almost naïvely, and relates it to a children’s game. Moreover, Hamid emphasises this naïvety later when they, on Nadia’s suggestion, start exploring Mykonos as tourists would have, hiking through the landscapes of the island. Arguably, another interpretation should be included here; playing tourists is an escape from the hard reality they find themselves in as they are in fact refugees with an uncertain destiny. Their minds

have not yet perceived the unstable and vulnerable situation they are in, albeit this becomes clearer for both of them, which is also evident in their development as characters.

After an unmentioned time-span, they learn that exploring the island is too energy consuming, and they have to stop as they start to lack nutrients. Slowly, but inevitably, both of them realise that life in Mykonos is not a vacation, but an undesirable condition of life:

They better understood the desperation they saw in the camps, the fear in people's eyes that they would be trapped here for ever, or until hunger forced them back through one of the doors that led to undesirable places, the doors that were left unguarded [...]. (110-111, sic)

This realisation both ends their escape as tourists, and initiates a more desperate search for a door away from the island. Moreover, this realisation is also important for the reader's understanding: after leaving their native city, this is the first description of the hopelessness refugees encounter. This hopelessness and state of being desperate is omnipresent in all refugees, and as Nadia and Saeed do not fully perceive that until this point, they do not have the chance to begin to perceive the hardship they live under. Eventually, the political statement that Hamid utters in his authorship is too powerful to omit: the conditions that many of them endure are inhumane to a degree where some decide to "[venture] through [the doors] to the same place from which they had come, or to another unknown place when they thought anything would be better than where they had been" (111), which for the majority of them equals going back to war, atrocities, or oppression. Arguably, this illustrates one aspect of Arendt's concept of *Trauma of Rightlessness* as it is a denial of basic human rights.

At the very end of their stay in Mykonos, their relationship alters from being affectionate to be more protective and they more easily relate to each other. It becomes more evident that their refugee experience is marked by a distinct past that is separated from the others in the camps. In particular, this is illustrated through an event where rumour has it that a door is open to Germany. As the rest of the camp, Nadia and Saeed desperately run towards it, however they were both scared when they realised the uniformed men blocked the way and started to slow down letting others pass "[...] because they had seen in their city what happens when bullets are fired into an unarmed mass of people. But in the end no bullets were fired [...]" (108). This episode illustrates more than one aspect. Firstly, it depicts individual refugee experiences versus the collective one as we also delineate in the theory. Nadia and Saeed have experienced traumatic events in their native city and are traumatised by them differently from others in the camp. Thus, they react differently when the

masses run towards the door, and it contributes to the understanding of one of Hamid's main themes in the novel: the depiction of the individual's refugee experience instead of the wave of refugees' experience. Secondly, it serves as the first symbol of a strengthening tie between Nadia and Saeed based on their mutual experiences. Lastly, Hamid leaves it for the reader to imagine what may have happened in their native city when people ran. Most certainly, the militants would fire shots at them, but that fact is never uttered; the reader has to decide how many shots, how many militants and how many victims such an episode would cost. Thus, the reader imagines the exact volume of such an atrocity and by that Hamid eloquently utilises unspeakability in his novel.

London

Nadia and Saeed go through yet another door, and find themselves in London. During their time in London there are significant changes in their characters and in their relation to each other. Moreover, the description of London as a place is relevant to understand the struggles of Nadia, Saeed and the other refugees. At the same time, Hamid offers some authorial comments on refugees, all of which will be elaborated and analysed in this section.

Nadia and Saeed's destination in London is described as a person travelling to a western capital for the first time would; with "a row of white building" which are all "perfectly painted and maintained", and together with the blooming trees the entire scene "seemed almost unreal" (117-118). For any reader who has visited London the description seems realistic, however Hamid quickly shakes that perception, when he divides the centre of London into two: Dark London and Light London. The symbolism of this is unmistakable: the authorities have cut the electricity in the areas of London that is settled by refugees (141), and kept the lights in areas of non-refugees, illustrating how some people are more worthy of light than others. However, Nadia and Saeed learn that "in London there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than any place [they] have seen before [...] and in contrast the city's dark swathes seemed darker" (142). The light in London symbolises the desirable places, the places that are important enough to have light. More importantly, as the function of light is to help make objects and places visible, one only turns the light on what one wishes to see, whilst darkness covers what one does not want to face. Thus, by keeping the refugees in the dark, London does not have to deal with them. Based on this, London is the first place that represents a distinct difference between the refugees and the non-refugees in the novel.

In a variety of aspects, London changes Nadia, Saeed, and their relation to each other. Nadia demonstrates her independence in more than one way. One example is when Saeed corrects her

when she is only wearing a towel; “[Saeed:] ‘You can’t stand here like that’; [Nadia:] ‘Don’t tell me what I can do’” (123). Clearly, this demonstrates Nadia’s continued reluctance to obey any limitations put on her. Moreover, in the same scene, while Nadia spends a long time showering and cleaning her clothes, Saeed is impatient and does not feel they have the right to take long showers in this new place. Nadia did not shower because of her own levity—to her it was about “the essential, about being human, living as a human being” (122), to feel connected to what she once was, and to her it was a right worth starting a fight for. What is complex about Nadia’s character is that in one situation, her attitude is independent and ready to fight for anything, and in the next that is overshadowed by a childlike attitude as when she compares the environment of the house to a university dormitory (128). Contrary to her, Saeed feels guilty that they occupy a house that is not theirs, and he is suspicious of other inhabitants (129).

In London, it is not merely their different spirits that creates distance between Nadia and Saeed, they also begin to build relations with other people separately. Nadia finds her way to a group of Nigerians, and Saeed finds a different house of people who originates from their native country. Nadia’s meetings with the Nigerians serve a higher analytical function: not only does it represent Nadia and Saeed’s distancing relationship, it also represent the individuality of refugees. That is, the more time Nadia spends with them, the more she realises their differences in language and religion, and she learns that the Nigerians were not only Nigerians (144). Moreover, Saeed’s continuous need to be with his own people also represents the guilt and loss he feels for not being home anymore. Saeed feels a need to connect to his own culture, language and customs, while Nadia, because she has never felt the same connection, feels they are in a different place now, and does not need that connection to home anymore. When Saeed suggests that they move to the other house to be with “their kind” she answers: “‘What makes them our kind?’ [Saeed:] ‘They’re from our country’; [Nadia:] ‘We’ve left that place’; [Saeed:] ‘That doesn’t mean we have no connection’ [Nadia:] ‘They’re not like me’” (149). Significantly, this represents that even though Nadia and Saeed have had a similar refugee experience so far, they perceive the process of adapting to a new life differently.

After Saeed’s suggestion of moving, the distance between Nadia and Saeed continues to widen. During their stay in London, it changes from a romantic relationship to a more protective one, where they both worry that they cannot offer the protection that the other one deserves (138). Up until Saeed’s suggestion of moving, their relation is marked by quick alterations where they start one day “[to look] at each other and silently [agree] to start their day without growling” (132), or

“to try harder not to speak shittily to each other” (133). This illustrates their efforts to respect each other when mundane realities of their life become too present, as well as their wish to stay together. This changes when they lie together in bed the night after Saeed’s suggestion about moving, when “he was unable to muster the enthusiasm to bridge the tiny distance it would have taken to kiss” (150). It seems inevitable, that the further west they move from their native city—both through physical locations and through span of time—the more difficult it becomes for them to strengthen their relation.

As mentioned above, Hamid uses London to introduce a distinction between refugees and non-refugees. Contextually, the inhabitants of London are not unlike those of other capitals composed of a wide variety of nations, ethnicities, cultures and religions, and then on the other side refugees who have not yet integrated. Furthermore, London is divided into zones where refugees stay, guarded by soldiers and have the same destiny “who had run from far already, and did not know where next to run, and so were waiting, waiting, like so many others” (135). This description illustrates the magnitude of refugees, all suffering in a similar state of transit as the one illustrated through the refugee camps in Mykonos. Albeit the novel represents the situation of the refugees to be almost similar, it still represents the individuality of such. For example, through one of Nadia’s reflections she considers the multitude of “different colours in all these different attires” (156).

As in the rest of the novel, Hamid offers a few comments on the refugee situation in the Western world. London as a place is ideal, because of its position as a powerful western capital, and the inhabitants of it worry about the same disadvantages as other Western nations. Despite his often political commentary, there is one particular example where he excuses the almost xenophobic Western precaution. It happens through a conversation between Nadia and Saeed after episodes of hostile and frightened Londoners either attacking them or pointing out their hostility through demonstrations (124; 131; 136). Saeed does not understand the hostility they face in London:

‘I can understand it’ [Nadia] said. ‘Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.’ ‘Millions arrived in our country,’ Saeed replied. ‘When there were wars nearby.’ ‘That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose’.
(162)

Lastly, but no less important for the understanding of the novel is the contextualisation of it. As mentioned, Balaev (2012) theorises the importance of regarding the context when reading trauma fiction, and thus if we argue that *Exit West* is a refugee novel that also engages with

traumatic experiences, the context of such is inevitable. Hamid eloquently depicts the context and the contemporary style of the novel through the main character Nadia. Nadia watches the news narrate of wars, migrants, fractures between regions and countries, however, Nadia's comparison of a nation and a person in particular is significant to look at. She states the following:

The nation was like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration, and that this person with multiple personalities was furthermore a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving. (Hamid, 2017: 155-156)

What Hamid aims to represent with his novel is a contemporary world marked by wars and atrocities. Victims from these atrocities are often referred to as countries or populations, but what is left out of that discourse is the multitude of individuals who are obliged to take refuge in other countries. When they do that, they end up in a "soup" of others that may look like them and is perceived as one group, but who are actually rather different individuals floating in a state of transit. Moreover, it contributes to the perception of the dichotomy between refugees and non-refugees as mentioned earlier.

San Francisco, California

The final destination for Nadia and Saeed is in Marin, San Francisco. Aside from being their final physical destination, it is also their last stop as a couple as their separation becomes too significant for either of them to ignore. As a place, Marin is poor, albeit marked by an optimism of the refugees settling there because it "was less violent than most of the places its residents had fled [...]" (193). From Hamid's point of view, the last place allows him to comment explicitly on the concept of nativeness through the character of Saeed. He describes the place as containing "almost no natives" (196), and elaborates on his perception of the concept of nativeness. Those who consider themselves natives of Marin are merely those whose families have lived there through generations, thus they have not migrated physically there themselves. Paradoxically enough, those "who claimed the rights of nativeness most forcefully, tended to be drawn from ranks of those with light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain" (196), which in fact they probably are. They are stunned by what is happening to their home country, whether they can call it that or not. Significantly, it is not Hamid's objective to argue against generations of peoples' claim to what they regard as their native country, but to point out the rather important fact that nativeness in our

contemporary world is rare, utilising Saeed's contemplations to make a political comment. Aside from this, Marin seems utterly mundane, however it is still important in terms of plot and character.

One particular episode illustrates Nadia and Saeed's separation distinctively. Nadia comes in possession of cannabis and despite the fact that they have enjoyed that substance together previously, albeit in what seems to be a different life, she considers whether or not she should share it with Saeed. It seems that she is surprised to have these considerations and wonders "about the ways in which she was herself putting barriers between her and him" (194). It is difficult to determine whether the chasm between them widens because of their different personalities, or whether the city of Marin offers just enough temptations for them to separate further. Regarding changes in characteristics, their stay in Marin has great influence. Saeed becomes melancholic, quiet and turns even more to prayers and religion. He prays more often, occasionally several times a day, and discovers a community in the local church that he can relate to. Albeit it brings him peace to be around people of his colour, language and traditions, it gives him plenty of guilt too. Namely, this is because of the preacher's daughter and how he "[feels] his breath tighten within him" (198), feeling for her the same as he once did for Nadia.

Regarding the theoretical section of *Resilience in Refugees*, Nadia and Saeed both discover ways to return to their biopsychospiritual homeostasis during their time in Marin. Nadia demonstrates resilience on multiple occasions through the novel, where she tries to adapt to the new way of life: some more desperate than others. For example her suggestion of playing tourists in Mykonos that fails because she does not realise the seriousness of their situation. Secondly, and more successfully in London, she adapts to their new home surrounded by Nigerians, by admitting herself into their group and slowly adapts to their community, while Saeed does the opposite. He tries unsuccessfully to adapt in their new home and instead becomes more distant. However, when they finally arrive in Marin, Saeed demonstrate resilience as he is slowly introduced to a *like-ethnic* community in their area. Here he finds a community that resembles his values to a degree where he can successfully return to a biopsychospiritual homeostasis. Nadia's resiliency allows her to find a job, and through this a new place to live, where she again can be independent and return to a similar mental state to the one she had before leaving their native city.

Saeed is not alone in his affection for other women: Nadia finds herself attracted to other men and starts a relationship with a colleague. She realises that Saeed "were becoming her brother" (199), which rather precisely confirms what both of them have felt for a long time: a wish to protect the other without being involved in a romantic relationship. This is also evident in a later chapter,

where we look at traumas in *Exit West*, in terms of their shared experiences and survivals. One may further argue that in Marin, Nadia and Saeed's relationship—if they have one—is a relationship of nostalgia: they hope that if they stay together, their relationship may “[flower] again, and so their memories took on potential, which is of course how our greatest nostalgias are born” (204), and be the glue that holds them together even if they speak and do less together. Ultimately, Marin becomes the place, where the two protagonists finally realises their fundamental differences, and decides that the path of their lives has separated into two different routes where they each follow their own.

Faceless Refugees

Hamid's overall objective with the novel is to start a debate on refugees and migration. The chapters above illustrate how he utilises his protagonists to represent refugee experiences, and how they may alter characteristics and perspective—both internally and externally—in relation to others. Regarding Hamid's objective, he did not merely wish to illustrate two individual refugees' experience: he wanted to represent the magnitude of refugees as well. He accomplishes that through the creation and inclusion of what may be compared to the effect of extras in a movie or theater stage. On different occasions he refers to these characters as a way of representing that in all the struggles Nadia and Saeed face, a thousand more face the same, and albeit their experience is unique, it is not singular.

The first example of this is when Nadia and Saeed arrive in Mykonos. Here, they encounter numerous refugees with a variety of characteristics to such an extent where it is impossible to characterise them as the same: they saw skin colours “within a band of brown that ranges from dark chocolate to milky tea” and they spoke “a cacophony that was the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite” (100). The characteristics given here allows the refugees to belong to anywhere in the Global South and as Hamid depicts the span of colours and languages, he represents an enormous group of refugees where “everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was” (100). Ultimately, the refugees in Mykonos are represented to be faceless and as such without unique identities, but still diverse in external characteristics.

Another example is when Nadia and Saeed come to London. In London however, the faceless refugees are ascribed more features than in Mykonos. The reader rarely encounters any minor characters aside from those inevitable for the plot, and so these faceless refugees and migrants plays a significant role in the depiction of other refugees. Thus, the ones represented in

London have, at the very least, a nationality; they are Nigerians, Somalis, or from Myanmar and Thailand (120), however the same argument is evident; their nationalities are too different to group them together, not even originating from the same continent. The idea of depicting refugees as numerous and versatile is not only founded in the objective to create debates on migration and refugees, it also contributes to the understanding on another point Hamid makes in the novel: the argument that refuge and migration are not contemporary phenomena, which will be elaborated in the following.

Extra Narratives

Within the main narrative, Hamid allows a few minor narratives to take place. They often only last a few pages, and bear the characteristics of colour commentary from the author, as they are completely insignificant for the main plot in the novel. There are a few different ones, however present chapter will only deal with two, chosen by the fundamental criteria that their messages align with the message of the novel.

The first one that we wish to draw attention to is that of the old lady in Palo Alto. She has lived in the same house her entire life and watched how the neighbourhood has changed, noticing how people “bought and sold houses the way they bought and sold stocks, and every year someone was moving out and someone was moving in” (209). The entire idea of representing these changes is that even though the old lady has lived there for decades, she is still estranged from the neighbourhood because all the new neighbours are younger, and they have a different view of life than her. This idea is also evident through her relationship to her children regarding savings; she has always put a small amount aside, whilst her children never do. Ultimately, this represents the chasm between generations, which in itself is not a new concept, however what is interesting is Hamid’s use of it. He uses it to represent how “we are all migrants through time” (209) to relate the idea of physical migration, where culturally different groupings have to adapt to new situations, the same way as younger and elder generations often do.

Another example of this is evident in the story of the mute woman in Marrakech (222), who works as a servant. Her story offers two interpretations. Firstly, it resembles the clash of classes in society, which serves as a classic trope of realist fiction. Differences of perceptions in life between wealthy people contra those who are poor, and their way of life may differentiate to the same degree as the clash between people of different nationalities. Thus, Hamid questions the validity of conflict that often arises in the host country between natives and migrants, and seeks to illuminate that

differences in cultures and religions are as significant as those of social classes. Secondly, it also represents a woman who, even though she sees her husband and daughter migrate and has plenty of offers to come, chooses to stay where she is, even though that place offers change as well.

Exit West - a trauma narrative?

Hamid's novel revolves around refugee experiences and challenges the concept. However, because it eloquently omits the dangerous journey, and narrates relatively little about events of the militants in Nadia and Saeed's home city, the concept of trauma is not articulated to a great extent in the novel. Still, the following will analyse Hamid's language, how it is marked by trauma language and what effect this has on the narrative. One of the strongholds in the theory of literary trauma studies is the trope of the unspeakable; and in terms of such the following refers to unspeakability in reference to the theory section *The Trope of the Unspeakable*, defining the concept in accordance to the theory of Mandel and Balaev (2006; 2012).

One of the clearest examples of traumatic rhetorical devices depicts the circumstances in which their city finds itself during the rule of militants:

[Saeed and Nadia] were dressed in accordance with the rules on dress and he was bearded in accordance with the rules on beards and her hair was hidden in accordance with the rules on hair [...] They passed a body hanging in the air and could hardly smell it until they were downwind, *when the odour became almost unbearable. (83, our italics)*

The lack of description—the unspeakability—of the smell from the bodies leaves the reader to imagine exactly how horrible it might smell, and further it emphasises that only persons who have experienced the smell of a corpse will fully comprehend the odour - the rest of the readers must refer to the worst smell experienced to understand it. Secondly, the quote also illustrates how their life is influenced on an everyday basis by the militants. The mention of dress-codes so closely related to the mention of dead bodies hanging in the city centre represents the absurdity of the entire situation that they find themselves in.

Based on Freud's early musings, nightmares and somatic symptoms constitute signs of traumatising. Nadia's trauma is visible through a nightmare where she dreams of her return through the doors back to Mykonos, from which she wakes up with violent physical reactions: "[...] almost panting and felt her body alive, or alarmed" (169). As we also argued in the analysis of the characters, Nadia and Saeed's relationship weakens the longer west they travel. At one point,

Hamid describes this change through a physical reaction to their more frequent fightings: “[...] not used to arguing, [they] tended to argue, as though their nerves were so raw that extended encounters evoked a sensation of pain” (186). Hamid explicitly manages to explain exactly how hurtful they find these fightings, and at this point it seems there is little chance of recovering their relationship.

At a later point in the novel, Hamid utilises the rhetorical device of unspeakability as well; albeit this time to emphasise the trauma of displacement that refugees find themselves in. Plotwise, during their time in London, Nadia and Saeed are drifting further apart and losing hold of each other as support and as a connection to their old life in their native city. As Saeed becomes more integrated in a community of his religion and countrymen, Nadia feels less connected to her cultural roots, and they find themselves struggling to communicate: “[Nadia’s] throat felt raw, almost painful, and what else she would have liked to say was unable to find a way through her tongue and her lips [...]. But [Saeed] likewise could not bring himself to speak” (180). Their common identity begins to dissolve, thus their common ground, and the little they have in common—that they are refugees and feeling the loss and deprivation of their home—becomes impossible for them to relate to each other. In the final part of the book, it seems inevitable that Nadia and Saeed will split up eventually, and they also do. However, they continue to stay in contact for a vast majority of their life, because of what seems to be a reciprocated act of protection and guilt. Neither of them wishes to inflict any form of fear of abandonment, and they feel they have experienced and worked through too much together: “a world of shared experiences in which no one else would share, and a *shared intimate language* that was unique to them, and a sense that what they might break was special and likely irreplaceable” (203, *our italics*). The sentiment Hamid offers on language here, resonates exactly what Arendt argues in *We Refugees* (1943), where language is one of the first things refugees replace, or even lose, and by that their “naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings” (110). Saeed and Nadia come to share their own language—one that can describe their feelings and one that is completely their own—which at this point in the novel symbolises a will to reinforce their relationship.

In connection to the trauma of displacement, as the theory section focused on, Hamid illustrates the loss refugees experience clearly and eloquently. Especially Saeed feels a loss of home, family and identity:

When the warmth between [Nadia and Saeed] seemed lacking his sorrow was immense, so immense that he was uncertain whether all his losses had not combined into a core of loss, and in this core, the centre, the death of his

mother and the death of his father and the *possible death of his ideal self*
[...]. (Hamid, 2017: 188, *our italics*)

Saeed does not only feel displaced in terms of physical location, loss of objects, and family; he experiences a loss of identity which the theoretical outline also depicted as traumatising cf. the chapter entitled *traumatised refugees*. As a recurring theme in the novel, as mentioned earlier, Hamid includes authorial comments offering his perspective on refuge and the necessary abandonment of one's home, family, and friends in order to survive: "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (94). By this, he suggests that for a successful post-displacement integration in the host country's culture and custom, the refugee or migrant must consciously break with one's old life and accept the loss that follows.

Concluding Remarks

Through the analysis and interpretation of *Exit West*, the vivid use of place and characters has been elaborated to illustrate the unique experience of the two protagonists. The contextual relation between place and characters is important to understand the changes in characteristics of Nadia and Saeed, and also how their shared experiences ultimately become their separation. Through their journey, they both try to adapt to their new surroundings, but not until they reach Marin do they both successfully return to their biopsychospiritual homeostasis and exhibit resilience. Perhaps because as they separate, they lose their final connection to the world they have left behind. Further, even though they stay for long periods of time both in Mykonos and London, both of these places come to represent transitional places. Especially Mykonos is a place in transit and the temporariness that should have characterised it evolves into a state of permanency.

With the novel Hamid attempts to debate different perspectives on migration and refuge. He utilises the trope of unspeakability as a rhetorical device to illustrate the necessity of Nadia and Saeed's flight. Furthermore, the novel depicts the unique albeit not singular refugee experience, and the use of separate narratives to comment on the western hemisphere's xenophobia of others. This clash is evident in their time in London, where there is a symbolic distinction between refugees in Dark London and non-refugees in the rest of London, where lights are still in function.

What is the What?

The Dave Eggers novel *What is the What* (2006) is a semi-biographical novel about Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. While Deng himself did not physically

write the book, he provided the story through his own memories. The book was written as a novel due to limitations in Deng's memories, yet the preface stresses that all the major events of the book are true. The novel writes into the context of one of the most publically available refugee narratives in the Global North, and spurred a plethora of different non-profit organisations specific to the situation of the Lost Boys. The Lost Boys was a name given to the large masses of boys who, without supervision, trekked over large parts of Sudan by foot in an attempt to escape their war-torn homelands. Most of these boys came from the southern part of Sudan, which existed as a tribal system opposed to the northern Sudan, which was largely ruled by a Muslim government. Disagreements about the division of land came up when rumours of oil reservoirs emerged, which led to a fully-fledged civil war. The boys were characterised by being mostly orphans or at least presumed orphans as they had been separated from their families in the different raids made on villages during the outbreak of the civil war (Biel, 2003). The Sudanese refugees in general, and the Lost Boys in particular, ended up in a refugee camp established in northern Kenya in 1992—Kakuma. The refugee camp provided a space for the hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees mainly from the Sudan conflict but also from neighbouring countries. Kakuma still to this day exists even though it was originally made as a temporary place for the displaced while the conflict resolved.

The novel is written as a frame-narrative in which we follow Valentino in Atlanta, as he is attacked in his home and his subsequent 48 hours of being assaulted by two individuals in his own home, visiting the hospital before finishing the 48 hours at work in a health and fitness club. While the events in present time unfold, he continuously fixates on different people in his vicinity and imposes them as the subject of his story-telling, either explicitly or within his own dialogue. Through all these flashbacks, he chronologically tells the story of his life as a child in southern Sudan from the age of six and through adolescence. Valentino's childhood name was Achak but he was baptised Valentino around the age of six, and as a child he lived in Marial Bai with his family. As the conflict in Sudan grew, his family tried escaping it, but found it futile and ended up back in Marial Bai shortly before it was completely razed, leaving Valentino alone with his parents presumed dead. He goes on a journey with a group of other boys and young men led by Dut Majok from his village, and the group steadily increases in numbers as they walk. The group faces constant adversity caused by lack of food and shelter, and through their travels death becomes a daily occurrence. On the way he also reunites with his two best friends from Marial Bai, William K and Moses, at different times. William dies in the desert on the way to Ethiopia; Moses survives, joins

the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) as a child soldier, and they meet again in the refugee camp Pinyudo in Ethiopia. Valentino himself has a near-death experience after being injured by a barbed wire fence, but he is encouraged and helped by his peers and he makes it to their destination in Ethiopia. After having settled in the refugee camp Pinyudo, they are once again chased out of the country in a slaughter at the Gilo River where thousands of refugees die trying to escape gunfire and bombings. After living as nomads for a while, they arrive in Kakuma and the refugee camp develops into a big city with its own commercial structure. Valentino spends his entire adolescence in Kakuma, and although one might think Kakuma is safe, they still face death and disaster from multiple angles. The novel ends with Valentino going on a flight for resettlement in USA with some of his peers, which leads him to his narrating position five years later in Atlanta.

The boy with many names

Having briefly discussed the plot of the novel, we should continue to examine Valentino in closer detail. Valentino is a complex character, who on one hand seems to have compassion for any person he meets, including his attackers at the start of the novel: “Why did I smile at this woman? I smile reflexively and it is a habit I need to break” (Eggers, 2006: 4). On the other hand, throughout his encounters with Americans, he silently reprimands them for not understanding what he is going through and becomes angry with them as a result. He seems to feel a sense of entitlement as a consequence of having been through so much adversity, a trait that he shares with many of his peers. Valentino himself laments how he repeatedly has to seek help from benefactors because he is unable to feel independent (254-255). While he wants to, his circumstances do not allow for him to be self-reliant, but it obviously bothers Valentino. Discussing thoughts of trauma and stressors, while feeling helpless is not exactly a traumatic experience, it does carry a signature of post-displacement stressors, which as shown in the theory come in several degrees of severity.

Throughout the book, we come to know Valentino by many different names. Often, he ends up taking new names for a multitude of different reasons. He does not give us the reasons explicitly while discussing the topic: “Each of us has a half-dozen identities: there are the nicknames, there are the catechism names, the names we adopted to survive or to leave Kakuma. Having many names has been necessary for many reasons that refugees know intimately” (Eggers, 2006: 260). Valentino finds that he needs to change names several times to leave his earlier experiences behind. It seems like a way to avoid his past experiences, and could be understood as a coping mechanism for his traumatised mental state. This then, in turn, informs why he decides to take up a new name in USA

once again after having been Dominic there for a few years; by taking up his ‘final name’ Valentino Achak Deng, he comprises an identity that honours both choices he has made, and his heritage. A slightly more pragmatic view is the case for survival, best shown in the example of Moses who has to escape persecution after he deserts the SPLA army (374). Valentino’s changing names also show a search for a permanent life and a permanent identity:

I have [...] realized that it is time to start my life again. I have done this before—each time one life has ended and another has begun. My first life ended when I left Marial Bai, for I have not seen my home or family since.
(370)

The loss of a fixed identity is a common trope in refugee literature; as refugees move physically, so does their identity and feeling of self, which results in Akhtar’s idea of the *third individuation*.

Considering Valentino’s character, one could also consider a few points made on his slightly childish way of thinking and existing. The narration of the experiences in his native country and displacement throughout Africa is interesting, because while it exists as a series of flashbacks from the perspective of the present-day Valentino, the narration and the narrative language sometimes takes the form of a childish voice: “This seemed to me a very stupid way to die. Only a very bad warrior would be killed by the murahaleen” (Eggers, 2006: 84). Throughout the narration of his past, a certain naïvety toward his experiences fuel the narrative as he is trying to connect with his childhood self. The connection is unhindered, owing to a consideration Anne Newton—one of his first beneficiaries—had given him: “Anne eventually suggested that I might in some way still consider myself an adolescent, having been deprived, as she put it, of a childhood” (115). If we again consider identity formation in the view of psychoanalysis, Valentino has in some ways been denied his second individuation that usually happens in the adolescent years, so he has not developed his identity in a safe and welcoming environment.

Talking trauma

In Valentino’s narrative, most of the novel deals with the journey from his hometown of Marial Bai to his final destination in Atlanta. While he narrates from Atlanta, his extensive flashback narratives open an unspoken dialogue between himself and his subjects: “Be grateful, TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighborhood, and now see the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me” (Eggers, 2006: 73). The frame narrative allows Valentino to continuously discuss his

experiences in the past tense, while simultaneously reliving them through a series of testimonies to the minor characters populating his Atlanta experience. The act of storytelling is a central one to the refugee narrative, and Valentino stresses its influence on the Sudanese refugees and “their willingness to oblige” in the expected refugee narrative (21). Valentino points out that all refugee narratives are distinctly unique, yet the world expects them to be similar and so to avoid confusion the refugees buy into similar narratives in the public. Valentino counteracts this by bringing to light a multitude of different refugee narratives as he meets either friends from home or new friends who tell their story to Valentino. Valentino further separates himself from this concept through his own narrative that he clearly claims for himself, without superimposing any half-truths onto it.

The narrative that Valentino presents to the reader is one filled with traumas, and so we should consider a few key places in Valentino’s trauma that constitute the main parts of the trauma narrative in *What is the What*. Addressing Michael, the TV Boy, Valentino describes the day that he left Marial Bai for the last time. Before this, he and his father had already been in Aweil but had not found any sanctuary there and had as such returned to the rest of the family empty-handed. The town had been under continuous assault, and when they return, “we found only a series of circles of charred earth” (83). The Arab raiders of the Murahaleen enter the village and a distinctive moment happens when Valentino sees his mother realise what is about to happen: “Have you ever seen her [your mother] terrified? No child should see this. It is the end of childhood, when you see your mother’s face slacken, her eyes dead. When she is defeated by simply seeing the threat approaching” (88). The assault leaves the town utterly devastated and Valentino escapes into the forest. His descriptions and reflections on his own experiences that day are extremely poignant, as they provide an adult perspective on a childish naïvety: “I believed that we could survive. That I could” (90). The fate of his mother is left ambiguous for a long time, albeit for all intents and purposes, the reader supposes that everyone from the village has died. As is shown in Valentino’s travels, he encounters a series of people whom all originated from Marial Bai and who all survived the same or similar circumstances, which emphasises the magnitude of devastation caused by the civil war.

The whole period of his journey with the Lost Boys can be seen as what is popularly described by scholars as insidious or perpetual trauma. Instead of concentrating on one particular event, a few different problems that arise along the way might prove more enlightening. Firstly, in their travels they rely on the benevolence of other villages as they traverse the Sudanese jungle. This means that, for the most part, they suffer from starvation and malnutrition as they often have

very little to eat. They live primarily on hope, but any hopes are consequently destroyed, as seen in the passage where they travel across the desert:

But there was not water and there was no food. Dut had been told, by whom I am unsure, that in the desert we would find food and could make do with a limited amount of water, and he was wrong on both accounts [....] Boys began to go mad. (196)

They live in constant uncertainty about their future; always told that the ‘promised land’ is just around the corner, yet whenever they get to their destination, they are met with disappointment and disbelief: “[...] my expectations had come to include homes for each of us, new families, tall buildings, glass, waterfalls, bowls of bright oranges set upon clean tables. But when we reached Ethiopia, it was not that place” (256). There are a few central passages where Valentino experiences loss of a more personal nature. During their walk, he befriends a boy named Deng who seems to have fallen ill. The nature of his illness and the severity of it are not immediately relayed to us, but shortly after signs of his illness start showing, Deng dies in his sleep. This causes Valentino “to stop talking” (156); Deng’s death is the first in the group of boys, which also means that this is the first time Valentino is faced with death and loss in a place where he has started to find a sense of stability and safety in numbers. His decision to stop talking feeds directly into the concept of unspeakability and silence, which, as has already been exemplified several times, is immediately central to the traumatic experience. Deng’s death can also be seen as Valentino losing a bit of himself, as the perceptive reader will notice that Deng’s name is the same as Valentino’s surname.

One last point should be made on the representation of trauma in the novel and language before moving forward to ideas of transit and displacement. There is a recurring metaphor in the novel, where Valentino describes his insides as a series of strings holding him together, and when his dad is attacked by soldiers these are affected:

At that moment something in me snapped. I felt it, I could not be mistaken. It was as if there were a handful of taut strings inside me holding me straight, holding together my brain and hear and legs, and at that moment, one of these strings, thin and delicate, snapped. (68)

He has a strong connection to his family, and when he thinks about them, this same feeling that he first describes here is echoed in the same metaphor. The metaphor of the strings breaking also repeat the point that trauma is a psychical wound or damage, and here the attack penetrates his defences. Valentino breaks several times from the pressure and in a fit of desperation it hits him just

how affected he is: “He saw something in my face. I was exhausted, and I suppose it was then that I finally felt the *crush of it*” (118, *our italics*). His displacement continues to cause him pain, and that will be explored in the following.

The transit place

Transit is the place where Valentino finds himself for most of the narrative, and it is clear that it is deeply affecting. In Eggers’ novel, we find the most descriptive and the longest narrative concerning refugee camps, which plays a major role in Valentino’s story. As mentioned earlier, refugee camps clearly constitute a place of transit, owing to its perceived temporariness and the makeshift solutions created for sustained living. Life in both Kakuma and Pinyudo become a major part of Valentino’s traumatic experience, as the sheer uncertainty of these places creates an existential fear: “Nothing was over. Nothing was safe. Ethiopia was nothing to me. It was no safer than Sudan [...], and I wasn’t near my family. Why had we come so far?” (262). Pinyudo develops into a seemingly permanent place with schools and other facilities, but the place soon comes closer to a military indoctrination camp; Valentino regrets that he did not identify this change sooner. The SPLA soldiers call the Lost Boys the ‘Red Army’; the rebel movement wants to take the children and train them to become soldiers, but as Valentino also mentions: “Boys make very poor soldiers. [That] is the problem” (327). While Pinyudo does not seem particularly peaceful, it at least for a short time attempted to create a sense of stability. That stability is swiftly destroyed when Ethiopia erupts into their own civil war, causing the protective measures of the camp to be nullified and once again Valentino finds himself alone in a warzone: “Shells exploded, sending plumes of white twenty feet into the air. Women dropped babies in the river. Boys who could not swim simply drowned [...] The river ran in many colors that day, green and white, black and brown and red” (340). The meekness and helplessness felt in their consequent arrival in Pochalla are embodied in imagery of the rain as the final blow to the boys: “They broke under the force of the rain, they melted back into the earth” (344).

Valentino’s final place of transit before coming to America is the refugee camp Kakuma where he effectively grows up. Kakuma is repeatedly described as the worst place he has been to so far, positioned in the arid desert. While “Kakuma was preplanned [...] by the UN”, food is scarce and Valentino describes the place as “a kind of purgatory” (373), providing further symbolism for the eternal uncertainty that it seems to offer him. At this point in the narrative, Valentino has become emotionally numb, and no longer seems affected by the death that surrounds him: “A dead

boy meant a half day, and any day that we could go home to sleep meant that we could rest and be better able to fight off disease ourselves" (382). At the same time, Kakuma is also the place where Valentino finally achieves some form of success as he becomes a teacher and a youth leader, ultimately cooperating directly with a Japanese initiative. Here he meets Noriyaki who becomes a close friend and he encourages Valentino to stay positive even though Valentino thinks he "had been examined by the powers that be and was deemed deserving of eternal hellfire" (490). As per rule of Valentino's existence at this point, he experiences another loss as Noriyaki dies in a car accident where he himself is also injured. The final resolution comes when he is told he is put in the relocation programme and will be sent to the US to start a new life there, which finally instills a little hope back into his otherwise miserable existence: "My chest ached and my head throbbed with the great terrible limitless possibility of the morning" (532).

Valentino's time in America has the outlook at the end of the novel to be a new beginning and a new start for him. But due to the frame narrative structure of the novel, we already know that Valentino is about to face even more disappointment, and the experiences he has had will continue to haunt him. The most explicit effect of trauma is found in his contemporary experience, as he is revealed to suffer from several somatic symptoms that can be directly connected to his trauma. Valentino "suffered under constant headaches and often could barely move; the pain could be blinding" (171), which could be observed as reflecting his struggles to adapt to life in USA. The headaches did not start in the US, so they also show an underlying connection to his previous traumatic experiences. He is helped by the Lost Boys Foundation and establishes a relationship with his sponsor Phil Mays and several other beneficiaries like Bobby Newmyer, but the joy is short-lived as they all leave his life in different ways and he is once again left alone.

Issues of abandonment take up a large part of Valentino's experience in the US, definitely also brought on by the amount of death and loss he encountered in Africa. The emotion following the possible abandonment or feeling of abandonment is not always the same though, as it sometimes invokes fright and other times resentment. When Achor Achor finds him in the apartment after he has been assaulted, Achor Achor suggests he go find some food but Valentino reacts wildly to that suggestion: "'No' I say, almost leaping off the toilet. 'Don't go. I'll eat whatever we have here. Don't leave'" (232). The feeling of abandonment and loneliness points to a deeper anxiety of being left alone, which can be attributed to a severe case of survivor's guilt, since he himself has been witness to so much violence, it is imperceptible how he has managed to outlive all his friends. That feeling is definitely enhanced with the loss of Tabitha, a girl he met in Kakuma who made it to

Seattle where they fell out of touch. They re-engage, but Tabitha's ex-boyfriend Duluma becomes increasingly jealous and angry, and ends up murdering Tabitha in a crime of passion before attempting suicide. Valentino has a desperate reaction to this, feeling cursed: "I was sure, though, in that hour I spent alone that I was alone completely. I lived without God, even for a time, and the thoughts I entertained were the darkest my mind had ever known" (357). All this evidence point to a man who has been broken by his experiences, but who tries to keep believing in a better life. The case for an actual resilience in Valentino will be explored in a later chapter.

Lost Boys and Lost Dreams

In Grinberg & Grinberg (1989), a series of points regarding immigrant displacement are provided, which can also provide further points for this analysis. From a psychoanalytic point of view, they see the immigrant as torn between his two parents, relating it to an Oedipal complex where the individual must choose one or the other to favour. Combined with the displaced persons' search for identity, as has been touched on through other studies, the connection to the native country can become almost too strong: "The danger is that these objects [from the native country], necessary at first to reaffirm one's sense of identity, will take over all the physical, psychic space and prevent the immigrant from incorporating the new and accepting the past" (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989: 133). That rejection of the resettlement place and culture can lead to resentment for the resettlement country and nostalgia for the native country. In Eggers (2006), Valentino several times reflects on his position in the US and how it seems like he is not understood: "When we find trouble here, it is invariably our own fault" (239). The sentiment of fault is echoed several times, and it creates—for Valentino—a sense of not truly belonging, of fitting in, which corroborates a sense of longing back to Africa, because at least he had begun to understand how the system worked there.

The experience of living in the resettlement country can prove troubling to refugees. Grinberg & Grinberg (1989) have created a terminology for considering the feelings of helplessness that refugees can find once they have been resettled: "Paradoxically, at the point where they can enjoy the results of their hard work and achievements, they fall suddenly into a state of profound sadness and apathy [...] We have termed this set of symptoms the postponed depression syndrome" (93-94). This symptom is quite evident in Valentino's existence in Atlanta; after a few years of things moving quickly because of his sponsors and the help from the Lost Boys Foundation, his support network starts crumbling. Five years later, he still finds himself trying to pursue the same

dreams he had when he first arrived, yet he has not been successful. He is still stuck doing the same menial, low-paying jobs and has never been able to move on: “[...] the slowness of our transition—after five years I still do not have the necessary credits to apply to a four-year college—has wrought chaos. We waited ten years at Kakuma and I suppose we did not want to start over here” (Eggers, 2006: 8). After his two exceptionally bad days that constitute his present experiences in Atlanta throughout the book, he is left questioning his very existence:

This is the moment, above any other, when I wonder if I actually exist. If one of the parties involved, the police or the criminals, believed that I had worth or a voice, then this phone would have been disposed of. But it seems clear that there has been no acknowledgement of my existence of either side of this crime. (471)

Life in a new resettlement country is quickly romanticised by the refugees, who cling to the ideals of a free world, prosperity for everyone and security, yet reality is that one seldom achieves those goals. Much like how Ethiopia is imagined as a prosperous place by William K in Sudan, so is the US imagined as a land of opportunity in Kakuma. Once in Atlanta, people start discussing the option of going to Canada as a better location, creating an unbreakable loop of displacement for these refugees. It serves to discuss and highlight that the grass may not always be greener on the other side, just different, and for these refugees different can sometimes be too much to cope with.

Resilient life

In the novel, resilience is exhibited in several different persons, where Valentino plays a minor part, but he does absorb these qualities towards the end of the novel and finds resolve. Particularly in Moses, who has undergone massive trauma as well and has avoided near death several times, Valentino reports a certain strength in his character: “He could not be beaten. He went to school in Nairobi and Canada and always looked courageously forward, even with an 8 branded behind his ear. Nothing about Moses could be defeated” (379). Also in his friendship with Achor Achor, there is a distinct will to survive as shown when he almost drags Valentino away from a female soldier following the attack on Pinyudo. Achor Achor is the character who seems to have adjusted the best of all the people Valentino knows in America, perhaps except Tabitha but she instead meets her end too early. Achor is described as someone who has lived in the US much longer than Valentino; he has a girlfriend and in many ways seem to have found happiness despite his circumstances. Valentino shows a certain resolve just in his ability to come back from the brink

of death several times: “He knows I have been here before, that I have approached the precipice of self-termination and have walked away” (359). He shows a similar will to live and continue on when he is assaulted in his own apartment in the beginning: “Thinking of that day, when we were driven from Ethiopia back to Sudan, thousands dead in the river, gives me strength against this person in my apartment, and again I stand” (6). At the end of the novel, Valentino makes a decision unilaterally and without any consultation, finally taking his life in his own hands compared to how he has repeatedly relied on the help of others to carry him forward. That is the growth of Valentino in the novel, and the way his increasing resilience shows.

Considering other aspects of language in the novel, one should perhaps pay attention to lying. Lies in the novel come to represent a choice to create a sense of stability and in some ways try to represent a false resilience. Owing partially to a naïve sensibility in the narrator, Valentino repeatedly tells the witness of the unspoken dialogue details of his own thoughts that exemplify lies. After having insulted a village, the group of boys flee but a few are injured and taken back to the village: “I am not sure what happened to these boys, for we never saw them again. I like to believe that they were taken in by the villagers who felt regretful for what they had done to us” (145). From the tone of the voice in this passage, it is clear that Valentino is wise to the reality but by telling himself a lie he can cope easier with the constant loss. The character of William K is also interesting in this aspect. Very early on he is established as the kind of person who is never fully truthful, so when he tries to encourage Valentino it also takes the form of a lie:

[William:] ‘Dut said that we’ll have to choose between three homes each. They show us three homes and we have to pick one. We’ll have floors made of rubber, like shoes, and inside it’s always very cool and clean. We will have to pick between blankets, and different colors for shirts and shorts. Most of the problems in Ethiopia are because of all this choosing we’ll have to do.’ I tried to block out his voice, but his lies were gorgeous and I listened secretly [....] His lies were so exquisite I almost wept. (196)

Considering resilience again, lying takes the form of a mechanism directly tied to resilient behaviour, through the characters trying to survive under dire circumstances by providing a narrative of hope and future happiness. Another form of lying can also be seen in the way Valentino constructs a narrative made up of past experiences in Chapter IV (34) into what he deems the best day of his life. He tells us that he has used this as a way of coping with reality, by transporting himself away from violence and fear for a short while.

Repetitive witnessing

As with other trauma narratives, witnessing plays a major role in the construction of the trauma narrative. We have already briefly covered the construction of the narrative as a series of testimonies, but perhaps this thought should be explored in greater detail. In the scholarly body of witness and testimony theory, language becomes the vehicle for constructing realities and reconstructing past experiences. In that light, the novel should be seen as a method for the narrator to reconstruct his past experiences and interact with them from a place of safety, removed from the immediate threats of their traumatic nature:

When I know someone is listening, and that person wants to know everything I can remember, I can bring them forward. If you have ever kept a diary of your dreams, you know how the mere recording of them each morning can bring them forth in your mind. (29)

Throughout the novel, Valentino creates witnesses of the people that surround him, specifically all the people that are different from him. This seems to come from a wish to make them understand, and here the novel takes political form as it repeatedly intrudes, without consent, on the Global North subject and forces them to listen. This function exists as a way to confront the reader, since Valentino does not tell anything to the actual characters in the book. Instead he uses those characters as proxies to let us witness his testimony from afar. There is a sense of inevitability exemplified in a conversation between Achor, Valentino and Valentino's sponsor family:

““Sometimes the teeth can accidentally bite the tongue, but the solution for the tongue is not to find another mouth to live in”” (176). Achor tells this as a Dinka proverb, albeit they just made it up in the bathroom, and Valentino narrates that “no one but Achor Achor knew what the proverb meant” (176). In a situation with Michael, he describes the “steps” to become a child soldier, which he reflects are “virtually impossible to reverse” (57). Considering this in the light of narrative and testimony, one can see this comment as a reflection on the inevitability of testimony, echoing considerations from Felman and Laub. For the reader, we pair these to the sense of storytelling and witnessing. While some stories might be hurtful to tell, it is still their story and they are responsible for sharing it and in many cases, sharing it is unavoidable.

In classic trauma theory, repetition also plays a major part in identifying traumatic experiences. In *What is the What*, Valentino faces repetition both through his own reflections but also from outside circumstances. Firstly, Valentino is displaced several times, first from his home and subsequently from a variety of refugee camps, which constitutes a repetition of the same

displacement trauma. One particular situation is especially clear, when Valentino has to run back to Kakuma after trying to recycle his refugee card⁷: “I darted from bush to bush, ditch to ditch, crawling and scraping and breathing too loudly, as I had when I first ran from my home” (408). Valentino experiences this situation like running for his life away from the murahaleen and the other attackers on his people. Similar situations arise in the escape from Pinyudo, the difference being that he has Achor Achor to accompany and support him the second time, versus running away all alone through the wilderness. He also faces a repetition or perhaps a hallucinogenic flashback in his meeting with Powder and Tonya: “I stare up at Powder and I know who he brings to mind. The soldier, an Ethiopian and a woman, shot two of my companions and almost killed me. She had the same wild light in her eyes” (6). He has tried to escape his traumatic past, but it seems to catch up with him time and time again.

Another traumatic repetition is one experienced primarily in his resettlement in the US. During his time in the US, he experiences several incidents of neglect and rejection of his humanity, which serve as a catalyst for increasingly poor mental health for Valentino. One particular incident is striking, where he laments the situation in the waiting room:

As I am about to approach her, in hopes of appealing to her, she gets up and finds something urgent she must do in the next room. We are no longer considered patients here. No one knows what to do with us. We are furniture. (290)

The loss of humanity is experienced several times for Valentino; another striking example is provided when he is covered by his captors in his own apartment: “He stands the cushion up against the seat of the chair. Bringing another chair from the kitchen, he places it, with a couch cushion soon resting against it, at my feet. He has effectively eliminated me from his view” (73). He is covered up, made to be one with the interior decoration and effectively rejected of his humanity time and time again. Note also how he is stripped of his personal identity by Powder and Tonya, who refers to him as ‘Africa’ and Nigerian.

The What

The novel poses a question to its main protagonist and by extension the reader: “What is the What?” There seems to be a few different considerations and ideas as to what the exact nature of

⁷ Recycling allowed a family to gain an extra ration of food, since one person would be allowed rations for two different people

this 'What' is. The phrase originates from his father, who uses it as a philosophical question to a trader when he tells a religious story:

'God said, "You can either have these cattle, as my gift to you, or you can have the What."' My father waited for the necessary response. 'But [Sadiq said], What is the What?' he said, with an air of theatrical inquisitiveness. 'Yes, yes. That was the question. So the first man lifted his head to God and asked what this was, this What. "What is the What?" the first man asked. And God said to the man, "I cannot tell you. Still, you have to choose. You have to choose between the cattle and the What." Well then. The man and the woman could see the cattle right there in front of them, and they knew that with cattle they would eat and live with great contentment [...] So the first man and woman knew they would be fools to pass up the cattle for this idea of the What?' (62)

One should perhaps consider the similarity between the story his father tells and the biblical story of Adam and Eve, in that they seem to both be offered an idea, knowledge of some bigger question that is intangible in itself. Contrary to the biblical passage, the choice of the cattle in the myth is exemplified as the correct choice because it gives the Dinka people prosperity.

This still leaves us with very little understanding of the peculiar phrase, because following the first encounter with the What, it comes to take on a multitude of forms in Valentino's engagement with the hermit: "'What do you think is the What?' he asked. I didn't know what I thought. 'The AK-47?' [...] 'The horse?' 'Airplanes? Tanks?' 'Education? Books?'" (205). Valentino is trying to process the different kinds of power he knows of: war, the *murahaleen*, modern technology, ideals of identity and knowledge. The hermit provides a *Hermit Guru* trope-character for Valentino to ponder the relationship between this unknown entity and tangible concepts in his ontological map of the world. The novel considers the What as something positive and powerful, something that can create good circumstances for a person. In the most direct transference of the word, *hope* is a concept that is positive and powerful and as has been discussed earlier seems directly tied to happiness. The argument in this consideration is that the What transforms during the novel from something perhaps less wanted than material goods⁸ to be the perhaps most important thing to strive for. When Valentino considers going back to his newly located family back in Marial Bai, where both his mother and father is found to be alive, his father

⁸ Like cattle in the Dinka story

tells him ““Yes, the What. Right. Get it. This is it. Go. I am your father and I forbid you to come [...]” (513). The father identifies the What as hope and chance, but also something that offers agency. Valentino’s trip to the US represents the chance for him to avoid dependency on food rations, international refugee help etc. and going to the US will give him a chance to make his own actions. This is exactly why Valentino seems depressed over his time in the US, because this agency has once again evaded him as he finds himself dependant on the benevolence of so many people. The choice to leave Atlanta in the end, as mentioned in the earlier segment on resilience, provides a sense of agency and that seems to be at the heart of Eggers’ (and by extension the real Valentino Deng’s) message to both refugees and the people who surround them.

Concluding remarks

The interesting origin of this novel provides an array of different perspectives on life as a refugee and especially how the displacement and subsequent resettlement can have both positive and negative aspects. In the character of Valentino, we find an extremely traumatised individual who has undergone so much loss he has become almost paranoid of being abandoned. He is subjected to repeated adverse experiences to his well-being both during his displacement, but also in the assault and robbery of his apartment, which should definitely be considered as traumatising in itself. He provides a textbook example of repetition in the Freudian sense, as he is tormented by cognitive repetitions through dreams and hallucinations both during his displacement and in his resettlement, and physically as he experiences a multitude of displacements that follow the same general pattern. The novel also provides an excellent prism for considering place and setting as vital to the refugee experience, as the long periods in refugee camps clearly takes a toll and creates their own insidious traumas simply by existing in what we refer to as a place of transit. Still, Valentino and his peers exhibit strong resilience and willpower in periods of severe adversity, and definitely personify the idea of the strong refugee person, who always tries to fight their own conditions and find a purpose and reason to exist.

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

Dinaw Mengestu’s novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* from 2007 depicts Sepha Stephanos’ life 17 years after his arrival in the United States in his new home city of Washington D.C. Stephanos owns a small mini-market in his neighbourhood where he sells essential and less essential supplies, struggling to earn just enough money to pay rent and buy bread. As the novel

progresses, the reader encounters his two friends Joseph and Kenneth, who as Stephanos are immigrants from Africa. They spend their evenings talking about Africa, their native homes, nostalgia, xenophobic Americans, or they spend their extra money on alcohol in strip bars. The novel initiates with the changes in Stephanos' neighbourhood, where rising rent prices force residents out and allows new (wealthier) residents in. One of the new families is the divorced mother Judith and her eleven-year-old daughter Naomi. Naomi shows great interest in Sepha and he becomes rather fond of her and her extraordinary intelligence. Naomi often comes to hang out in Sepha's shop after school, and they read books together. Slowly, Judith also notices him and they evolve feelings for each other, initiating as they start eating dinner together. However, they soon realise their great differences. Through Sepha's interactions with Kenneth and Joseph, and Judith and Naomi respectively, the reader is allowed into the complex strive for adaptation in a new country, even years after Sepha arrived. These interactions and their messages will be the focus points of the analysis, but the point of departure will be different depending on the context, whether it is characters, place, trauma, or resilience. Lastly, the novel also contains some flashbacks and Stephanos tour to his uncle's place, which sentimentally reunites him with his native country.

Mengestu himself is an immigrant from Ethiopia, and migrated to the United States in 1980 where he, unlike his protagonist Sepha, graduated from university. Mengestu grew up in Illinois and is familiar with the marginalisation, racism and displacement that Sepha experiences as well (Mirakhor, n.d.). Thus, Mengestu utilises his own heritage to represent the hardship it is to reject one's home and start a new life. Differently from the other novels, this analysis does not consider the pre-displacement trauma as thoroughly as the others. However, it does to a great extent represent the post-displacement struggles that refugees have a long time after their arrival to their host country.

Trauma

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears (2007) is a novel strongly marked by its theme: the duality between a displaced, African man and white Americans. Though this theme bears equal characteristics of a novel that revolves around racial oppression, yet it is not entirely the case. Mengestu has another agenda; while the binary of race is essential, he also aims to tell the story of a refugee, of his development, his relations, and his struggles adapting to a different life. In this, trauma plays a vital part, not because the reader engages with a dysfunctional protagonist because of the actual traumatic experience per se, but instead in the following consequences of a traumatic

experience. The aim of the following chapter is to analyse how Mengestu represents trauma in the novel, paying special attention to language and loss.

With the purpose of initiating chronologically, the main traumatic experience in the novel is also the one that initiates the plot. Midway through the novel, as a result of Sepha's frustration of receiving a notice requesting his leave of his store, he wanders to visit his uncle. Having the key, he enters the apartment without the uncle's presence. Sepha finds an old letter addressed to President Carter on the current crisis in Ethiopia, and in particular the beating and murdering of Sepha's father by militants, after finding anti-revolutionary flyers in his office (Mengestu, 2007: 125). Reading it, he rectifies the uncle's facts so the reader receives the actual information, namely that his father was not carried out of the house by the militants, but insisted to walk out on his own feet after numerous beatings, as well as he hides that in reality the flyers were Sepha's. Following this is a thorough description of the episode with one main goal: to vividly describe exactly what happened that day as if it was happening in the exact moment, but also it clearly illustrates the countless amount of times the rather short scene has been replayed in Sepha's mind. This is clearly visible in the following where his mother throws herself at the soldiers to protect his father:

I remember the studied, almost bored air in which they conducted the whole affair. They saw her coming long before she even took her first step. One of them simply raised the butt of his gun and leveled it directly at her chest. He didn't even have to turn around to see her coming. When she fell, it was as if someone had lifted her legs from under her, and then pushed her backward while she was midair. (126, sic)

The event has too many details to be perceived with the natural eye when it actually happened, and the description comes from Sepha's countless replays of the event, representing his traumatic experience. Continuing the depiction of his experience, it becomes obvious to the reader that he feels guilty for the death of his father. Not only because it was his flyers, but also because of his failure in doing anything to prevent the murder of his father: "And me? Where was I during all of this? Standing in a corner holding my seven-year-old brother's head against my body" (126). Certainly, the experience could cause anyone great traumatic stress, but that is not the case per se; there is little doubt that Sepha is traumatised, but this experience is referred to rather rarely in the novel. What seems to cause Sepha most distress is instead the trauma of loss.

Loss is omnipresent in the novel; not only specifically in Sepha's life, but also in the other characters' lives. His neighbour, the old lady Mrs. Davis, recently lost her husband, and Naomi lost

her father figure as Judith and Ayad split; albeit not traumatising her, it does affect her behaviour. An example is her tendency to run away from her home to escape from Judith - the only one she can blame for her parents' separation. Moreover, loss is also present in the conversations between Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph, all experiencing the loss of their families and cultures, with one significant example: all of them lost their fathers and in their conversation Kenneth utters "'I can't remember where the scar on my father's face is'. [...] 'Don't you worry you'll forget [your father] someday?' [Sepha:] 'No. I don't. I still see him everywhere I go'" (9). This uttering represents that while they are all refugees suffering from losses, their experiences and coping strategies are rather different, ultimately showing individual characters. Evidently, it also illustrates Sepha's trauma and his incapability of forgetting.

Mengestu explicitly uses the connotation of the word *loss* to convey the degree of the suffering Sepha feels during the novel. In terms of literary trauma theory, loss is—as mentioned—one of the major tropes in terms of displacement and disconnection with one's host country and culture. Frequently, this is also the case in the novel, and will be elaborated in the next paragraph. Firstly though, Mengestu utilises the trope of loss rather oddly after the episode at Judith's where they come to reflect over the fact that there are great cultural differences between them, which creates a rather awkward situation for both of them. The following morning, Sepha wakes up "with an overwhelming sense of loss [...]" (149), expressing more a state of melancholia than it represents an actual loss. It stems from Sepha's fear that their differences finally have become too pronominant to ignore and ultimately cause their separation, however it may not be quite enough to actually refer to it as an irrevocable loss. Nevertheless, Sepha is clearly affected by the incident - much more than necessary as it will turn out later.

Regarding loss, the novel represents another aspect of such in term of loss of culture. Sepha's loss of culture is often depicted through sentiments in his store. There is one interesting comment on loss of culture in general and loss of Sepha's culture in particular, where Sepha overhears his uncle's neighbours in an elevator. In the conversation of other Ethiopians the themes are "infidelity, abuse, drugs, unemployment. It all amounts to one thing: proof of a vanishing culture" (118). This is to convince the reader of the following sentiment that explicitly states the novel's message: that "[t]ime, distance and nostalgia have convinced these women that back in Ethiopia, we were all moral and perfect, all of which is easier to believe when you consider the lives that most of us live now" (118). Neither of these women are satisfied with their life in the host country, feeling a longing for home, and a loss of culture. Their nostalgia brings them to imagine

the better life in Ethiopia, allowing them to forget the atrocities that at one point forced them to flee. Thus, their disconnection to the new culture forces them to recall their pre-displacement life to be easier and better, than what their post-displacement life offers them.

Another aspect of the sentiment uttered in the elevator is illustrated in the following: “With enough time [...] there won’t be any Ethiopians. They’ll all become American” (118). Sepha personally identifies with that comment, and he continues to elaborate on how disconnected he feels with his Ethiopian culture and regard himself to “stand convicted of the same crime” (118). He finds himself displaced and disconnected from other Ethiopians. His loss of culture can be ascribed to the theoretical section on *third individuation*, where he—after growing up and building his identity—finds himself in a situation where the identity he constructed does not fit the new culture he lives in. One may further argue that his reluctance in engaging with other Ethiopians and his eagerness to be in the company of Judith and Naomi is an example of a coping strategy. It allows him to escape his loss and to create new relations.

The novel’s status as a trauma novel is also evident in the language, where the trope of the unspeakable is a rhetorical device in connection with a frequent use of the word silence. As theorised above, trauma as a literary concept is often represented through its unspeakability and its sphere of silence. Following will illustrate that use to emphasise the effect for the reader and the representation of Sepha as a troubled and melancholic character: “[...] the days of a shopkeeper are empty. There are hours of silence punctuated briefly with bursts of customers [...]. The silence becomes a cocoon in which you can hear only your voice echoing [...].” (40). The symbolism of the uttering is unmistakable; Sepha is not merely physically alone in his store, his mind’s loneliness surrounds him with a wall that disconnects him from the rest of the world. Not because he wants to be, but because he cannot find a way out of it. The trope of the unspeakable is also actively utilised when Sepha recalls his past: “I came here running and screaming with ghosts of an old one firmly attaches to my back” (41), not explicitly representing what horrors he bears, but allowing the reader to imagine them.

Evidently, another major theme in the novel is the refugee experience which Mengestu alludes to on more than one occasion, obviously to direct attention to the struggles refugees have when arriving in a new country. Similar to Hamid’s *Exit West*, it does not revolve around the hardships many refugees experience on their travel from A to B, nor does it focus extensively of the pre-displacement trauma. Instead, the novel centers on the post-displacement experience, melancholia and the impossibility of ever forgetting one’s past. Refugees often feel guilty for

leaving home; the destiny and security of those they leave behind is uncertain, and they feel responsible for helping the only way they can - economically. Sepha feels the same responsibility as he sends them money they do not really need: “because [he is] American, and because sending money home is supposed to be the consolation prize for not being home” (41). The feeling of loss never entirely vanishes for him, and the economic help he offers symbolises the need to reconcile with his guilt.

Mengestu utilises the character of Sepha and his thoughts to illuminate some of the struggles refugees go through. One example is his thought that “the first aim of the refugee is to survive, and having done that, that initial goal is quickly replaced by the general ambitions of life” (98). Certainly, the goal is to survive; survival is the exact thing that drives them to flight. However, once in safety they have similar life goals as anyone else, which only make their disconnection with ‘normal life’ even more present.

Characters

The Protagonist

Following chapter will have in its scope to centralise Mengestu’s use of characters in the novel. Firstly, the protagonist Sepha will be analysed, but to fully understand the novel, a prerequisite is to understand the minor characters and their relation to Sepha to unfold the complex theme of being a refugee in a post-displacement state.

After Sepha’s father is murdered by militants, his mother knows that Sepha will be next and forces him to move to his uncle in Washington D.C. to save him. Through his time in the US, Sepha keeps in contact with his family, sends them money, presents, and in general vividly imagines how they are doing (156). Sepha’s character is incredibly kind and insightful. As a businessman he is not talented, but nowhere does the reader get the idea that he has genuine ambitions for his store - except from a few utterings. However, when it comes to people he genuinely cares about, he goes to great lengths to show his affection: he sends presents to his family even though he does not have a great income, he buys beautiful gifts for Naomi and Judith, and when Naomi runs away he utters to Judith that he used to do that as well because he know that “even the smallest gesture of sympathy could go when needed” (26).

When he first arrived in Washington D.C., his ambition was to get a degree from a university, a dream that was crushed by multiple rejections because of his age. The rejections are not enough for Sepha to lower his ambitions and instead he dreams about opening a restaurant that

he “could sit back and look proudly upon” (3). The first step in his business plan is to extend his store to offer sandwiches; however, this leads to the sad realisation of yet another defeat. Sepha’s affection to America is linearly connected to how his business is; one day he hates the country with all his heart, the next he finds it beautiful and that things could be a lot worse (5). Moreover, at certain points in the novel, Sepha’s ambitions turn into a strive for perfection, one example being his obsession with having his presents for Judith and Naomi wrapped perfectly, as the ones under Judith’s christmas tree, but realises that they never will be (162). Evidently, this represents Sepha’s desire to live up to what he believes is Judith’s standards and by extension America’s standards.

Moreover, his ambitions under the circumstances of being a shop owner changes in accordance with the events of the book and the activities in the neighbourhood he intercepts; an example could be the runners where he wonders, albeit briefly, “how I could get them into my store before or after their runs” (206). It seems that Sepha is acutely aware that customers are vital for his store, however, his fundamental lack of interest in his store is just as visible. His reluctance to serve customers and keep them waiting while he and Naomi are reading is obviously—seen from a Western perspective—a poor way to run a business, and it will certainly not help his volume of trade.

Through the plot, there are different hints towards signs of Sepha’s resilience, which in many cases seems always a bit out of his reach. The ultimate representation of him never achieving it, despite of great relations to Naomi, is in the very last page of the novel where Sepha quotes his father: “a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough” (228). Ultimately, this represents his refugee experience rather accurately, as he never manages to be neither fully content and relaxed with anything in his life nor—if finally feeling that—is able to hold on to it. Moreover, it also represents how Sepha has a foot in each part of the new neighbourhood, both feeling an attachment to Judith and Naomi, and the residing residents.

Kenneth and Joseph

The following chapter aims to illustrate the importance of Mengestu’s use of minor characters. Firstly, it will centralise around Sepha’s friends and as it unfolds, Judith and especially Naomi’s character will be analysed in depth. The thorough focus on minor characters may seem to contrast the theoretical focus on the protagonist in reference to Balaev. However, as the analysis of the characters will clarify, Mengestu’s use of minor characters is extremely interesting and important in terms of understanding the protagonist. Thus, the following should not only be

perceived as a character analysis, but as an analysis of the protagonist's relations. Also, each character—as will be evident—represent a character trope and plays a role in conveying the novel's message.

The novel quickly introduces the reader to Sepha's friends, Kenneth and Joseph. Kenneth is a refugee from Kenya, who is obsessed with his appearance; he works as an engineer and wears a well-tailored suit "to command the attention and respect of those who might not otherwise give him a second thought" (2). He is desperate to be acknowledged and respected in the American society and has the idea that successful Americans have a specific saying when they greet people resulting in the same uttering every time he enters Sepha's store: "you close the store early today?" (2), which unpurposely is a tragic uttering. Kenneth never expects much out of life except order and predictability, which for him symbolises that the world is exactly the way it is, no matter how flawed. The peculiar thing about Kenneth is that, despite his obsession with acknowledgement, appearance, and a fine income, he is reluctant to have his teeth fixed; they still resemble those of a poor Kenyan man, being brown and bend. For Kenneth they represent his home: "[Joseph:] You can never forget where you come from if you have teeth as ugly as these" (3), suggesting that he is not entirely ready to be deprived of that characteristic. Ironically enough, Mengestu describes the rest of his outer features to be Kenyan; dark skin, long and thin nose, and delicate features (3), which renders his affection to his teeth as a Kenyan characteristic superfluous.

Ultimately, Kenneth represents a character that seeks a connection to his native country, but who in numerous ways also seeks to adapt to the American society. Unfortunately, the society offers a bit more resistance than what he expects. An example is when he finally has enough money to buy a car—an "American commerce that [Sepha thinks] [Kenneth] imagined would lift him above the fray" (11). For the occasion, Kenneth wore a suit to blend in at the car store and when they enter, Kenneth encourages Sepha to wait and let the sellers come to them, exactly as one is supposed to do. The only problem is that none of the salesmen notice them or at least do nothing more than briefly glance at them. The message of this event is striking; no matter how much Sepha and in particular Kenneth try to appear American, they do not do it convincingly enough. It brings them to the realisation that "no one was coming to us, regardless of that we wore or how long we stood there" (12). Not being ready to admit the defeat and disappointment, Kenneth simply utters that he did not like any of the cars.

Sepha and Kenneth's other friend is Joseph from Congo. In some manners he functions as the opposite of Kenneth, applying some depth to the representation of refugees in Washington D.C.

Firstly, albeit Kenneth and Sepha also drink a lot, Joseph's abuse of alcohol seems much more extreme than theirs. Secondly, his employment is inevitably of a lesser standard than Kenneth's because he is a waiter at a somewhat expensive restaurant. The reader gets the impression that he is not exactly doing a perfect job, as he "downs whatever alcohol is still left in the glasses before bringing them back to the kitchen" (5) while cleaning the tables. Opposite Kenneth, his outer features do not resemble his native country, which—with his round face, nose and eyes—resemble a Ghanaian, at least according to Kenneth and Sepha (6).

The dynamics of the friendship between Kenneth, Sepha and Joseph are important for the novel - both in reference to their conversations but also what they each represent. Because of their differences, and because of their characteristics, they are far from complex. Narratively, they serve the distinct aim of representing the versatile experience of refugees' integration. Also, on a much more superficial level, the fact that they are all from different countries in Africa firstly illustrates that they are not remotely alike and cannot be perceived to have one identity, as the western discourse so often does in its Othering. Secondly, they perceive themselves as rather different from each other. In multiple manners, their friendship is rather dysfunctional, often revolving around drinking alcohol and having nostalgic conversations about their homes and native culture. One of their favourite topics is a quiz where one mentions a dictator and the other two guesses the revolution, country and year (8). Mengestu's point of relating all these revolutions may have many origins. Firstly, they could be interpreted as the author's comment on the continuous, numerous and somewhat similar state of the revolutions. It can almost be regarded as a critique of the colonial powers' complete ignorance and failure in helping their former exploited colonies when finally given their independence. Similarly, for the reader the quizzes represent that revolutions in Africa are far from rare events, and this group of friends is inconsequentially small in relation to all the victims killed and forced to flee their homes and relatives. This can especially be read from the comment Joseph has to the activity: "When we stop having coups, we can stop playing" (8) resonating that it most probably will never happen.

Another way of perceiving the quiz is that it works as a coping mechanism for the group: a way of handling their constant nostalgia by reminding themselves that what they have left behind are societies made from atrocities, oppression and hardship: "We were always more comfortable with the world's tragedies [...] Coups, child soldiers, famines were all a part of the same package of unending grief that we picked our way through in order to avoid our own frustrations and disappointments [...]" (222). De facto, they—as many others—find a way to compare their hardship

to that of others as a way of degrading their own - or at least escape from actually finding a healthy way of managing it. However, this is not the case in the following expressed through Kenneth:

‘That’s all [my father] ever was. A poor illiterate man who lived in a slum.
And you know what that makes him in Africa? Nothing. That’s what Africa
is right now. A continent full of poor illiterates dying in slums. What am I
supposed to miss? Being sent into the streets to beg white tourists for
money? [...] That’s why I’m here in this country. No revolution. No coup’.
(185)

For Sepha, the memory of a life in Africa is not worth reminiscing and the stability in America is satisfactory for him. Through this conversation, it is also evident that Kenneth to a much greater extent is content with living in America, whilst Joseph and Sepha are marked by a greater degree of nostalgia, longing for home and a feeling of displacement. Based on this, one may argue that the pervasive and continuous talk of hardship and revolutions is an auxiliary for Joseph and Sepha to rebalance their biopsychospiritual homeostasis.

Naomi and Judith

Sepha finds a great amount of support in Kenneth and Joseph, both of them being active and supportive participants in the daily operations in his store. Additionally, when Sepha initiates his relations with Naomi and Judith in particular, they also warn him that “American women are different [...]. Remember that. You never know what’s in their hearts” (109). Evidently, Sepha cares little for this sentiment and continues to involve himself in the lives of Judith and Naomi. Narratively, these characters represent a connection with America, which is also why they should be analysed in relation to Sepha. For that purpose, the analysis initiates with Naomi - both because her character is more complex, and also because she is the link not only between Judith and Sepha, but also between Sepha and America. However, Naomi is not only the link between the American society and Sepha, she also represents a duality: the duality between Africans and Americans. She is the intersection and direct progeny of an American female and an African male. Maybe it is because of this she shows such an extraordinary interest in Sepha. Naomi is not particularly fond of Ayad which is founded in his bad breath (203)—one of the only childish utterings she has in the entire novel—where she actually behaves in correspondence to her age. However, she quickly connects with Sepha, and they form an extraordinary relationship, which in some situations come off as almost unreliable in its nature.

Sepha and Naomi's friendship develops in Sepha's store, where Naomi occasionally comes to buy a few items—mostly candy. For the other residents at Logan Circle, Naomi's mixed skin colour instantaneously becomes a topic for discussion, as does Naomi and Judith's habit of reading in the park and the entire modernisation of their house. In the beginning, Naomi seems like an ordinary child of 11 years, who talks exactly as the reader expects. Narratively, it allows Mengestu to ask and align simple issues, as when Naomi claims that Sepha should have more than one photo of his family, because he (as she correctly states) must miss them (27). Within the span of a few months, she starts to visit the store almost every day, sometimes reading, sometimes merely standing, and at other times she offers her worldview of the day in exchange for candy. Other than that, Naomi is extremely intelligent and takes pride in shaking her head at the world:

She was convinced that American foreign policy in the Middle East was a failure, that a two-state solution in Israel was inevitable, and enough wasn't being done about the global AIDS crisis. [She] folded the creases of the *Washington Post* with an agility fitting an old man [...]. (29)

Moreover, notice how the problematics highlighted by Naomi all on some level is affected or initiated by refugees.

Albeit being overwhelmingly charming, Naomi is flawed by her tauntiness. Sepha's other customers are charmed by her appearance, and when she responds to their affection she does it with what they perceive as shyness, however, the reader is informed that this is pure resentment. One example is when she whispers that a man should shower, and the response is for both of them heartbreaking as he "turned his head toward her [...] with a resigned sadness [expressing] that if given half a chance, he would have done anything not to be judged by this eleven-year-old girl who wore pink cashmere" (105). This sentiment utters too clearly the great difference between Naomi's world—that of wearing cashmere—to the rest of the neighbourhood that is fighting a battle of survival and stability.

For Sepha, the friendship with Naomi is of vital importance, however sometimes he does not perceive that clearly. After the failed dinner at Judith's place, which the analysis will elaborate on later, Sepha does not manage to wake up and open the store and disregards the possibility that Naomi may be waiting for him. But in fact that is exactly what she does, and when he learns that the day after, he realises that "there seemed to be no end to the disappointment [he] could cause" (151). Until this point, he does not perceive that his sudden role in Naomi's life also comes with some sort of responsibility—a responsibility he so far only has had for himself. Another reading is that the

disappointment referred to is not founded in Naomi, but himself; that he desired to be more reliable. The second reading connects to the thoughts Sepha have in the ending of the book, where Judith leaves Naomi in Connecticut. Judith relates the word *fond* to the relations between Naomi and Sepha, a description that for Sepha echoes that Naomi liked Sepha, “just as she was fond of her stuffed animals and bedroom and some of her teachers. I realized, however touched I might have been by her presence in my life, just what an insignificant role I had played in hers” (204). Evidently, as correct as he may be, he simply fails to remember how extraordinary Naomi is—thus how insignificant stuffed animals may be for her—and how she has a genuine connection with Sepha. Nevertheless, as Naomi is only a child, her friendship with Sepha will most likely fade into a *fond* childhood memory, where she for Sepha will be the one of the most significant persons in his life. Exactly because of this, the narrative use of her character is vital: she represents the transition that Sepha dares to take into the American life, however unsuccessful it may be. Naomi is what connects his old life and his inevitably new life. One may even go as far as to say that for Sepha, Naomi, within the frame of the narrative, manages to help him balance his homeostasis and their friendship comes to represent Sepha’s resilience.

As illustrated in the theoretical section on resilience, any sort of disruption from the biopsychospiritual homeostasis creates imbalance; and resilience is then the re-balancing of this disruption. For Naomi, her physical location alters when she and Judith move to Logan Circle, the same way her everyday life altered when Judith and Ayad separated. As Judith states, Naomi used to run away every time they had a conflict which also comes to be Naomi’s initial response when they move to Logan Circle (26), however she soon recognises the inefficiency of that strategy. Instead, Naomi starts to regard Sepha’s store as some sort of safe haven. Together with him, she invents an imaginary friend—a rather childish yet helpful way to deal with imbalance. The imaginary friend, Henry, comes to be responsible for many things; a broken radiator in the store, low stock of candy e.g. On other days “he gave us advice on our taxes, suggested investments, brokered deals, and when life turned out unexpectedly, bore the brunt of our failures and mistakes, our disappointments, accidents, mishaps, frustrations, and angers” (31). Through this, Naomi starts to adapt to her new life and exhibit resilience.

Significant to that connection is also the relationship with Judith, whose character will be touched briefly upon in the following. While Naomi acts on desires no matter the consequences, Judith is deliberate and patient in even the smallest of her actions, utterings and gestures (30). This difference obviously stems from the fact that they are mother and daughter. Despite of this, Judith

still utters: “I forget sometimes that she’s just a kid” (202). Judith is one of the newest residents in Logan Circle, a scholar engaged in American history, politics and poetics with several published works. She is argumentative, fierce, and passionate, which inspires Sepha to read a few books on the history of America and American democracy (138). Notice again that while Naomi’s interests are global, Judith’s evolve around America and a fascination of its history and politics. This fascination influences Sepha as well as he begins to read *Democracy in America* and thus understand the tragedies, failures and heroes of America - his new country (158).

Other significant traits of Judith are that she is proactive, strong and persistent. This is especially visible when she shows up at the residential meeting of the neighbourhood as the only white person present. She does not perceive herself as a part of the problem they are discussing, she merely seizes her democratic right to actively participate in any meeting (197). Rapidly, the meeting turns to revolve around the binary of us and them. Sepha’s remark is that given enough time “a conclusion would have been drawn that held ‘them’ responsible not only for the evictions in the neighbourhood, but for every slight and injury each person in that room has suffered” (200). Still, yet briefly, Judith expresses her concern as well, before she is interrupted by another citizen.

To sum up, the minor characters influence the protagonist immensely, and his way of perceiving himself thoroughly depends on the input he gets from them. Mengestu’s vivid use of characters allows him to represent two worlds that so often clashes when we are dealing with refugee literature, and the never-ending difficulties of adapting to a host culture. Through the characters of Kenneth and Joseph, the reader is allowed into three rather different experiences with adaptation, where Kenneth represents the resilient refugee who manages to create a functional everyday by slowly rejecting more and more of his heritage. Joseph on the other hand continues in a state of dysfunctionality, never actually succeeding in creating a stable and functional everyday life.

The Significance of Place

In accordance with the theoretical section, present chapter will elaborate on the significance of place according to Balaev’s theory. In Mengestu’s novel there are two places in particular that are significant to elaborate on, both to understand the characters better, but also to thoroughly comprehend the novel’s message. Firstly, we will illuminate Sepha’s store and its importance both for him, but also for the minor characters of especially Naomi and Judith. Secondly, Sepha’s uncle’s place plays an important role, which will be accounted for as well.

The role of Sepha's store is absolutely insignificant for the majority of the residents in Logan Circle. In the very beginning of the plot, the reader is thoroughly introduced to the manner of the store, the same way that the reader is introduced to Kenneth and Joseph, perhaps to allude to the similarity of Sepha's relationship with Kenneth and Joseph, and that of his store (38). It is a small corner store in which one would shop for emergency articles; where one would enter, quickly locate the item(s) that one needs, quickly pay at the register, and then leave the store in a rush to do what else that is required for the day. In a manner, all the items in the store are absolutely non-essential except the few items a customer enters to buy. For Sepha, he sells just enough to make ends meet, but never more than that. In that sense, there is nothing inspiring happening there, and reasons to be present in the store are, for others than Sepha, few. Nonetheless, this is exactly what happens: for the characters in the book, the store becomes a place they meet. Sepha utters more than once—as is also visible in the analysis of his character—that in most cases he does not really care about the store nor the customers: he is by far the most happy when Naomi or Judith spends time with him there. For Judith and Naomi, the store quickly turns to be a safe haven. Naomi in particular finds safety in the store after they moved to an entire new neighbourhood, and without doubt “Naomi had picked it as the place to be seen” (27). Thus, for the three of them, the store evolves to be a pleasant place, further visible when they occasionally start to use it as a location for picnics. Interestingly enough, the store becomes the setting for Naomi and Sepha's friendship. Her uttering: “This place [store] is filthy” (106) initiates a larger mission of cleaning the store for both of them. After this, probably founded by the time he spends with Naomi in the store, he turns out to feel “the pride of ownership that Americans always speak of with such reverence” (110), again filled with ambition.

The other place that is quite interesting to elaborate on is Sepha's uncle's apartment. As stated priorly, his uncle lives in an apartment complex consisting of almost exclusively Ethiopians. When Sepha first came to the United States he stayed at his uncle's place. Sepha's realisations here are vital for the rest of his refugee experience. The first thing he learns from his uncle is that “everything there is in this apartment [...] belongs to you as much as it does to me. Outside this apartment, though, you have nothing. Nothing is yours [...] People will only give you something because they think they will get something in return” (139). This sentiment represents two things: a xenophobic reception from the society, and the uncle's experience from living in the host country. However for Sepha, he does not process the content of his uncle's message, because he at that point still perceived his coming to America a temporary state. Thus, whilst the apartment for the uncle represents a home that is stable and close to comfortable, for Sepha it is a transitional place where

he struggles to find a way of living in America, while he “had never really left Ethiopia” (140). Ultimately, it is not until Sepha leaves his uncle’s apartment that he starts his *third individuation* phase, and begins to discover his identity in the host country. Lastly, it is relevant to briefly include the uncle’s refugee experience, which is a great deal more chaotic than Sepha’s. First of all, he wanders through the deserts for a month, always accompanied by different people—some vanished in the bush and new ones take their place. His displacement is an experience that definitely leaves one to be dependent on oneself, as there is never a way of knowing who will vanish the next day. Finally, he reaches a refugee camp, where he and 15 others live together under wretched circumstances in a small room. In this manner, the uncle’s refugee experience is far more traumatising than Sepha’s and in spite of that, he has a relatively fine job and does not seem to have problems with alcohol abuse. It seems that his life among Ethiopians and his native culture have contributed to resilience similar to what Ungar refers to in terms of the importance of being surrounded by a *like-ethnic* community. Another point can be made here, which will be elaborated in the next chapter: whilst his uncle’s home represents a stable setting, many changes are happening in Sepha’s neighbourhood, leaving clear marks on him and the other residents.

Changes and Contrasts

As referred to quite a few times, the novel represents one great change for Sepha; that of the new residents in Logan Circle. In order to convey a message of contrast and duality, the changes in the neighbourhood serve an important narrative function.

The plot initiates with the change in the residents of Logan Circle, which up until that point seems to have had the status of a ghetto. Suddenly, moving vans started to show up, and after a year of rising rents, more of the original residents were forced out. Particularly Mrs. Davis explicitly utters her reflections on the changes: “‘It’s not right. *These* people coming in like that and forcing us out’” (189, *our italics*). Eventually, it also becomes quite clear for Sepha that “most of *these* people wanted nothing to do with my little run-down store” (190, *our italics*). The chasm between the new and former residents represents the cultural differences between different populations. What is odd in the specific representation is that it is the upper middle class who comes to reconquer a neighbourhood that for a long time has had the form of a ghetto, where the inhabitants eventually feel that they are once again forced to abandon their homes for the wealthier population. Moreover, this chasm is also very much present during the communal meeting, albeit Judith is the only representative of the new residents. The discourse of ‘them versus us’ is rather explicit in this

setting, where *they* (newcomers) are talked down upon: “I don’t know who *they* think *they* are. What are *they* doing here anyway. *They* have their own neighbourhoods and now *they* want ours too. It’s bad enough that *they* have all the jobs and schools” (200, *our italics*). Thus, the novel brings a new dimension to the entire debate of refugees, and by that a new dimension to this thesis; that migrants also prefer a distance between them and natives, obviously in this case because it forces them again to leave their homes. Inevitably though, there is a chasm between different cultures, which has complex consequences for the difficulties that are when they are forced to engage in each other’s lives.

The first time Sepha is invited to Naomi and Judith’s home he is strongly aware of “all [his] flaws, in Judith’s immaculate living room, which was larger and grander than anything I had ever sat and eaten in since coming to Logan Circle” (55). There are worlds separating his one-room apartment from Judith’s six-storied, newly renovated house, and this difference is omnipresent in Sepha’s mind. During a dinner, the inevitable happens; Judith as a joke utters that “[he has] gone and picked the wrong family” (134) which initiates a train of thought in Sepha’s mind. He realises that he will always feel incongruous among Judith’s acquaintances—he feels that he will never meet her standards in terms of wealth, class, or intelligence. The feeling of inadequacy “[sends] a sudden shock of shame and humiliation beneath which everything else crumbled” (135), and this feeling seems to be the ultimate reason why Sepha gives up on a serious relationship with Judith.

Concluding Remarks

Mengestu’s novel introduces the reader to the post-displacement phase of Sepha. Through his character, the reader realises the struggle it is firstly to accept that his presence in the US is not temporary, secondly, to realise that the US is not a place where he can get his college degree, and finally, to realise that the chasm between he, and Naomi and Judith is too significant to be ignored. However, the relationship between the three of them provides a hope for him, that America can be “a beautiful place once again” (193). Both place and minor characters are used vividly, and the best way to approach place was to look at it as a minor character, especially because the context of the place coheres to the characters’ relations and development - e.g. how the store becomes a safe haven for Naomi, and a place of happiness for Sepha.

The clash between two cultures forms the greatest theme in the novel, being present in almost all aspects of the novel. Another important theme is the longing and nostalgia for home that Joseph, Kenneth and Sepha all feel immensely. Their game of naming revolutions comes to

represent a kind of resilience for all of them, and their friendship seems in many regards to be significant for the survival of them all. Moreover, loss is also omnipresent in the novel as many of the characters experience this in one way or another, which ultimately marks the novel as a trauma narrative.

Lastly, but not of smallest importance is the title; *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* is directly quoted from Dante's *Inferno*: "Through a round aperture I saw appear/ Some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears,/ where we came forth, and once more saw the stars" (99). In its original context, the words are uttered when Dante in *Inferno* finally finds a way out of hell. The use of the quote comes to be a bit odd as the arrival to the United States for neither of the characters have awarded them a new position where the stars shine more clearly (the exception may be Kenneth). Instead Sepha, which may be the ultimate message of the novel, merely manages to escape the atrocities and life threatening events in his home, and is not able to adjust completely to the host country's culture.

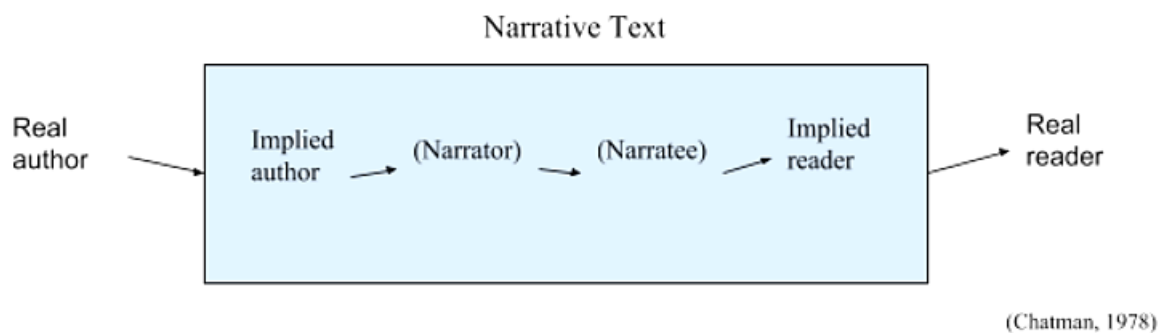
Discussion

The aim of the following chapter is to discuss and evaluate the novels and their relationship with traumatic experiences. Noticeably, there will be included a bit of new theory, however only in the form of other aspects of what the theoretical section already covered. This is to illustrate the complexity of many of the terms utilised in the thesis, and to more thoroughly understand the novels' representations of refuge and traumatic experiences. Ultimately, this will provide an evaluation on the novels' differences and similarities. As a general rule, all novels will be treated in reference to each discussion point, however not always to the same extent depending on the relevance of each thematic in each novel.

From the analysis, it is extremely evident that our corpus consists of four rather different novels, thus the analyses are coloured by these differences. The discussion then, will take form as a discussion of differences rather than similarities exactly because the overall common characteristics of this corpus is characterised by great disparity. The four novels tell a rather similar story, but the discourse of it—the way they do it narratively—is significantly different. Hence, each aspect of the discussion is an example of a common characteristic that will illuminate versatile refugee narratives and refugee experiences. The first aspect we consider is the relations between the reader and the author, which vary greatly as the corpus consists of a diverse authorship.

Reader and Author

In recent post-structuralist and post-modern narratology, the importance of the author has largely been dismissed in favour of focusing on a close reading of the text itself. When we consider novels of this form—social commentary—it might be relevant to examine the relationship between the reader and the author. To examine this, we have returned to early narratology in the form of Seymour Chatman (1978) and his model, which outlines the relationship between author and reader in the narrative text:



Perhaps we should give a brief explanation of these terms in order to avoid any misunderstandings in the following. The real author is a given, in our case it would be Cleave or Hamid etc. They produce the actual writing that constitutes the novel. The implied author is then the ‘author’ of the work that is read; they control the overall norms of the text and have hegemonic power. The narrator is the vehicle the implied author uses to present the story that the implied author wishes to tell. The narrator can both be an actual character or it can be a construct of the implied author in order to tell the story. The narratee is the receiver of the narrated story; e.g. in novels like *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1899), Marlow directly narrates to an unknown but present narratee. The implied reader is the person to whom the implied author is speaking; they have accepted a series of rules determined by the implied author and receive the narrative based on these rules. The real reader is then us, the physical receivers in our reality; the real reader does not have to identify as the implied reader, but can instead use the implied reader position as a tool to receive the narrative. According to Altes (2014), “stories arguably help weave the social fabric and shape what we experience as reality,” (39) so we should consider novels as a mode of cultural reflection which informs the following.

Both Chatman and his inspiration Wayne C. Booth refer to the implied author as being distinctly separated from the real author, and the general consensus in narratology is that the real

author cannot represent himself in the novel. But for socio-critical novels such as our novels, we may perhaps consider the real author to be more present and closer to the hegemonic structure of the implied author. This consideration is closely linked to the so-called ‘ethical turn’ in literary criticism, sparked by an emerging postcolonial field that engaged in politics from a literary position. In Altes’ (2014) work on ethos in a narratological sphere, she points out how “narratologists [...] are more prepared than ever to expand their scope beyond the boundaries of the text, taking into account social and historical contexts in which literary works are written, circulated, and read, as well as the role of the author” (29). She draws on the rich tradition in narratology juxtaposed with the rhetorical theory of *ethos* to communicate a way of reading literature as a negotiation not just embedded in the narrative text but also surrounding it. Beginning at the literal face-value, the book covers have their own narrative values and a clear intention. Cleave and Eggers write in the first person, and the theme of testimony is clear from the book-cover; both have images of faces of what might be considered the novel’s protagonist, and their head and mouth have a forwards motion, representing the urgency of their testimony. Hamid on the other hand is written from the third-person and the cover gives us a different point of entry—we enter into the novel through the peeled paper resembling a door on *Exit West*. Although Mengestu is written in the first person, we also enter his book through the broken window glass on the cover of Mengestu’s novel, which seen in retrospect is a representation of Sepha’s broken store. All of the covers carry some form of comment that reflects the centre of the novel’s thematics and plot, and they carry an authorial intention that is outside the narrative—a direct exchange between real author and real reader. The book covers directly help the author “posture” (to borrow one of Altes’ terms) themselves in a certain way, which is particularly important for the Global North native writers, who—by putting their subjects on the cover—try to signal an authority of the subject by speaking directly from the refugee. The impact of the narrative point-of-view will be addressed further in a later chapter.

All of the authors behind the novels in this study have a certain ethos that helps and allows them to write the fiction in a way where social critique is natural and almost expected. Hamid is well-known for writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), a commentary on terrorism and radicalisation of individuals, and both by way of that social commentary and his position as a cosmopolitan writer, he has a vast and nuanced experience of the world. Cleave writes from the position of a journalist-turned-novelist, who undoubtedly has done research on his topic the same way a journalist would in order to write an article. He further writes with authorial ethos when he, as mentioned earlier, discusses his experiences working at a refugee detention centre—his central

focus for social criticism. Mengestu has, despite his relatively young age, written for several news outlets detailing conflict in Africa, and so he is well-positioned to write about someone like Sepha, who has escaped prosecution as a consequence of conflict in his homeland. And lastly Eggers, who has a distinct position to communicate his ethos to the reader. The full title of his novel is *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng - A Novel*, a title that is both contradictory and illuminating. The extra-textual elements surrounding the novel are extensive compared to Hamid and Mengestu, as Eggers includes a map of the area of Africa in the narrative as well as a preface by Valentino Achak Deng, the subject of the novel and the real person on whose memories the novel was written. Similarly, Cleave also includes a 'notes' section in his novel detailing the research done and the choices made in the narrative. What this should exemplify is that the four authors all have a degree of ethos, albeit that ethos comes from very different places—Hamid and Mengestu have ethos based on their origin and their heritage, whereas Eggers and Cleave have to ally themselves with extra-textual discourse to hold a similar position.

We have already outlined how testimony and witnessing have a distinct ability to realise experiences that might otherwise be unfathomable and unspeakable. Several scholars including Tal (1996) have pointed to the importance of acknowledging testimonies as individual recollections of events that in their own right have a truthfulness to them. Considering the broader scope of the four novels, there is a strong focus on telling stories, thus the narrators demand that the reader acknowledges their experiences. In Eggers (2006), Valentino several times makes explicit his need for his subjects to hear him and understand his past:

She is leaving, and I cannot bring myself to care. The sense of defeat I feel is complete. I had, for the fifty minutes while we waited for the officer's arrival, mustered so much indignation and thirst for vengeance that now I have nowhere to put the emotions. (239)

The passage here outlines Valentino's meeting with the police officer taking his statement after he is assaulted. Clearly, the officer does not acknowledge the testimony that Valentino is giving, and that affects him deeply, offering an explicit comment on the importance of being heard. All of these novels as a whole constitute a wound in society that cries out (in Caruthian terminology), a group of people who have been neglected and left behind, and that wound can only be healed if the writers succeed in making the reader acknowledge their stories and understand their experiences.

Traumatising Temporariness

The concept of temporariness has already been presented in the theoretical section and as an aspect in the analysis of the novels. As Coughlan & Owens-Manley (2006) delineate in the theoretical section, the state of transit is almost an inevitable consequence of seeking refuge. To refresh a theoretical point, a prime example of the state of transit is the refugee camp, where the limbo refugees find themselves in may be destructive to their identity. Given that these transit places are temporary—though the transit is often long-term—it is assumed that the refugee will recover automatically when they return to *normal society*, albeit that is rarely the case. This aspect of the discussion will add another dimension to the concept of temporariness: the lack of successful adaptation to a *permanent* living situation. Firstly, we will delineate the theoretical background of traumatic permanency based on El-Shaarawi, and through this discuss the representations of the protagonists and their experiences in their gradually permanent living conditions.

In the chapter “Everything Here is Temporary”, El-Shaarawi exemplifies the traumatic symptoms of several refugees who suffer under circumstances related to the permanent living situation. Even though the research is founded in a somewhat proxy-location of (Egypt) to the origin country (Iraq) her findings are quite similar to what the majority of the novels this study present. Significantly, El-Shaarawi realises that the traumatic symptoms of the refugees resettled in Egypt have little to do with the traumatic experiences they had in Iraq (of which there were many), but a lot to do with the insecurity and uncertainty of their new life in Egypt (2015: 195). Though both countries are located in what we refer to as the Global South, there are great cultural differences; primarily based on religion (Iraq consists predominantly of Shi’a muslims, Egypt of Sunni muslims), as well as a great difference in the prosperity of each country. One of the refugees, May, states that: “As a Shi’a Muslim, she experienced additional isolation from the predominantly Sunni Muslim Egyptian society, as neighbors and strangers alike openly questioned her about her faith, sometimes derisively. She reported feeling like an outsider in Egyptian society” (El-Shaarawi, 2015: 197). For the refugees in focus, they have all found a house and a job, which for many echo stability and permanence. However, it is evident that the refugees still perceive life in Egypt as temporary, which suggests that when society recognises them as integrated, they continue to be in the traumatic state of temporariness. Their traumatic state is obvious through somatic symptoms such as tiredness, fatigue or anxiety, and other symptoms as stress (197).

Concludingly, El-Shaarawi offers a list of thoughts that occupy many of the traumatised refugees which is constituted by safety concerns, worrying about the future and people in the native

country, and worrying about their continuing life in the host country and their continuous suffering. Thus, we find that what is often less acknowledged in scholarly work on the refugees' post-displacement trauma, is the traumatising event of finding permanence in what the refugee perceives as a temporary state. More explicitly it is the "existential insecurity and uncertainty about the future [... that is] a reason for their inability to integrate [...] and [is] identified as a major cause of suffering and psychological distress" (202). Mannik also adds to the discussion around displacement saying that "the actual experience of physical movement often positions refugees ideologically, psychologically, legally, and physically in a void where marginality, loss and fear prevail" (Mannik, 2016: 7). The scope of the following paragraphs is then to exemplify and discuss the novels' representations of these issues in reference to what is already delineated on temporariness.

The protagonist Sepha is certainly an example of a character who has resided in a host country for a long time, in possession of a job and an apartment; thus, his condition is, in reference to El-Shaarawi, permanent. When Sepha first came to the United States he stayed in his uncle's apartment, and in the following he clearly elaborates on his relations to his host country:

In those days I believed it was only a matter of weeks or months before I returned home to Ethiopia. [...] How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia? I wasn't, I decided, I wasn't supposed to live here at all. I nodded my head obediently as [his uncle] spoke and pitied him for not understanding just how temporary all of this was.

(Mengestu, 2007: 140)

Clearly, Sepha did not realise just how permanent his situation was, and this serves as a prime example for his unsuccessful integration. The refugee must see a certain and secure future in the host country, and without that, he loses the most important prerequisite to begin the integration process. Sepha's thoughts are offered to the reader in a flashback, thus they do not correspond to the frame of the narrative and as the reader learns, the situation for Sepha is rather permanent. However, in many regards he is—as the refugees El-Shaarawi refers to—not at all well integrated in the society. Nostalgia and loss of home are—as the analysis thoroughly illustrates—omnipresent not only in Sepha, but in the majority of the characters. In many aspects Sepha's failure to perceive his situation as permanent is quite similar to that of Saeed through the novel *Exit West*. As Sepha, he experiences great difficulties in integrating to their new homes in the Global North, because he is uncertain about his future, and because he is preoccupied with his past and his longing for home. It

is not until they arrive in San Francisco that Saeed finds a bit of certainty and stability in his life, as he marries the preacher's daughter and in some way manages to reconnect with his former identity. Both Sepha and Saeed suffer from a strong sense of guilt for abandoning their families in their native countries. In the theoretical section Kunz (1981) refers to this exact feeling as something that often promotes ambition to do well, which for Saeed is the case. However, even though Sepha struggles to do well, he is still determined to send money home. The guilt they both experience also makes it more difficult for them to readjust their sense of the host country from temporary to permanent.

When the reader meets Sepha, he has lived in the United States for approximately 17 years, but he still feels uncertain about his life in Washington. He finds himself in a neighbourhood full of changes, and despite the fact that Naomi and Judith in many aspects bring plenty of happiness into his life, his insecurity of how to act towards them is still rather present. Opposite the other novels in this corpus, Sepha's physical security is never threatened in Washington D.C., and while the neighbourhood changes, he is highly indifferent, both to the possibility of losing his store and apartment. Evidently, Sepha still perceives his permanent state as temporary. Thus, he definitely does not see Logan Circle as his home, consequently he never fully integrates or comes to care enough about his store (or neighbourhood) to manage a stable business that may supply the neighbourhood. He does not have any roots connecting him to Logan Circle, and it seems that he would be just as perfectly (un)happy anywhere else. In the very end of the novel though, Mengestu (2007) indicates that this may change, as the reader gets the impression that Sepha may finally have a feeling of home: "Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own" (228). Evidently, this also marks his coming home from his small yet significant quest to his uncle's apartment. Moreover, it signifies exactly what the concept of home is: both perfect and imperfect, but definitely personal.

Temporariness and permanence for Bee in *Little Bee* is rather different from Sepha's experience. Rather quickly, Bee adapts to her new life with Charlie and Sarah in their home, only facing the unwelcoming attitude of Lawrence. Regarding El-Shaarawi's argument, Bee is not in a permanent state whatsoever, because of the fact that she does not have her own place to live, or a stable job or education that—according to El-Shaarawi—constitute permanence. Nonetheless, Bee may be the only protagonist who perceives her stay in Sarah and Charlie's residence as permanent, which simply seems to be rooted in a relation to them. In some manner, one may even argue that

because Sarah was present on the beach the terrible day of Bee's sister's murder, and as Sarah was equally traumatised, they not only share that experience, but for Bee, Sarah becomes a symbol of safety and Sarah's home becomes Bee's safe haven. In Bee's continuous strive for security, Sarah becomes a rock she can cling on to. Because Sarah once sacrificed herself for Bee's safety, Bee feels the comfort and safety of home when she is around Sarah. Ironically enough then, while Bee may be the protagonist who feels most at home, she is also the only character without an actual home for herself, but she nonetheless fixates the atrocities she has conquered in her life on Nigeria. Thus, her terror is visible when she is faced with the risk of having to return, e.g. when Charlie is lost and they need to call the police. Moreover, her traumatic symptom of always considering what to do if 'the men' come, continues to disrupt her sense of resettlement, even though she begins to achieve permanence. Evidently, this also founds her uncertainty about her new life in the London suburb, and she is conflicted between at most points never wanting to return to Nigeria, and in other cases feeling nostalgic towards her home.

Bee's experience of nostalgia is rather different from what Mengestu represents in the protagonist of *Sepha*, which is inseparably connected to the messages of the novels respectively. As stated, the concept of home is also present in *Little Bee*, and Bee's nostalgia only occurs when she relates her experiences to her friends back home. It may be argued, that Bee's difficulties in fully adapting to a life in England is problematised by two factors: her uncertainty about her future in her host country and her longing - not for her home, but for her old identity. In the end she states that "sometimes I wish I could take one day off from being Little Bee [...] I would like to be a village girl again and do the things that village girls do [...] And most of all, you know, I would like to use my real name" (Cleave, 2008: 225). In England, she is fixated to her identity as Little Bee, and all the complexities which constitute that identity, however that also keeps her in a limbo of never achieving certainty in the host country, and constitutes her longing towards her former self. Bee's nostalgia then, is a longing for her former identity; for a time before she had to take a new name; for a time before her sister died. In contrast, *Sepha's* character represents nostalgia towards the place of home not ever explicitly considering what home might be today.

To a great extent, Eggers' novel represents the problematics that El-Shaarawi delineates, however quite differently than the previous novels. Valentino has a stable life with a permanent home and job, and has lived in Atlanta for five years. Narratively, the novel's focus is not on the permanency of his life in Atlanta—which interestingly enough is brutally violated by perpetrators—but on what should be the temporary state of the refugee camps. In reference to what we have

already illustrated regarding life in refugee camps, there is yet another relevant aspect. As has been pointed out, refugee-camps are often a more permanent solution than first intended, and in Valentino's case, life in refugee camps comes to constitute fundamental parts of his identity as he grows up in them. His life there comes to signify something permanent in reference to what El-Shaarawi delineates permanency to be: he has something to come home to, he engages in somewhat familial relations and he has a job. If we perceive his life in the refugee camps as permanent, this offers another dimension to Valentino's trauma as this condition is far from secure. Often, the foundations that constitute permanency—stability, certainty, and security—are disrupted repeatedly. Ultimately, what Valentino survives is having each of his displacement traumas exponentially worsened, as the characters he finds support in continues to vanish (Eggers, 2006: 184-185). In this sense, Valentino may be the most traumatised protagonist, especially if we take the assault in Atlanta into account as well. This represents the final failure of Valentino's surroundings as stable, and one might imagine how he has to struggle to once again rediscover certainty in his host country.

Through this part of the discussion, we thoroughly illuminated yet another aspect of the traumatic experience that refugees go through. As literary trauma scholars it is significant to understand the protagonists' relations to their conceptual place, as it provides a contextual understanding within the narrative. Perceiving the temporary state refugees often experience is important, and as we went through the discussion of the feeling of temporariness in a permanent state we have enlightened that aspect further. These findings provided the fundamental perspective: Though the refugee may be integrated in the host society, this has little effect on their mental well-being, as long as they continuously perceive their state as temporary, and finds neither certainty nor security in the host country.

A Series of Traumatic Experiences

Present discussion has already pointed towards one traumatising aspect of being a refugee: accepting one's host country as one's permanent country. This chapter will open a discussion on how trauma studies perceive insidious and perpetual trauma, and begins with a theoretical outline of the two terms. Hereafter, our corpus will assist to illuminate how a distinction of traumas contributes to understanding refugees' struggles.

Within the field of trauma studies, there has been some controversy discussing if experiences only can be traumatising if they can be pointed back to a specific time and event of origin (punctual

trauma), or if an individual can be traumatised gradually and as a result of recurring atrocities or structural oppression (insidious trauma) (Gibbs, 2014: 15). The trauma theorist Alan Gibbs investigates this idea in his work on trauma in literature. Within this field, it has been a pervasive idea that a trauma is the product of an event that is not perceived properly in the mind - an idea stemming from the seminal work of Cathy Caruth. More recently however, literary trauma scholars have started to agree on the fact that there may be reasons to open a discussion and acceptance of insidious traumas. Inarguably, that will provide another theoretical aspect towards the sufferings of traumatised individuals for recognition and healing. Gibbs (2014) argues that the necessity of such a discussion is founded in a continual ignorance of individuals who suffer from traumas of structural violence and oppression because of gender, race, class or other characteristics, which happen on a daily basis (17).

Gibbs argumentation is further emphasised in Grinberg and Grinberg's early work on trauma in migrants, which in many cases can be directly transferred to refugees as they point to the same consequential conditions they suffer from (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989: 11). While Caruth's reading of Freud's trauma theory results in an occupation with the singular traumatic event and thus founds for literary trauma theory, the insidious trauma has been left out. Notwithstanding this, Grinberg & Grinberg stated that the father of trauma theory, Sigmund Freud, presented traumas to be caused by one single event, or "the accumulation of several partially traumatic events" (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989: 12). Explicitly then, they both argue the actuality of perceiving traumas as a consequence of more than one event and that "migration as a traumatic experience comes under the heading of what have been called cumulative traumas and tension traumas [where] the effects of such trauma run deep and last long" (12). This is relevant in two aspects: when it is difficult to point to one specific traumatic experience that causes inner conflict, and when we are dealing with episodes of structural oppression.

By accepting that a traumatic experience can be caused by both a punctual and insidious trauma, the literary scholar receives a much more elaborate perspective on trauma novels, and in that case a wider understanding of the sufferings of the protagonists. In particular it provides an understanding for the protagonists' sufferings in their pre-displacement state. For example, because of the focus on Nadia and Saeed's post-displacement struggles, Hamid's novel does not vividly describe their native country. However, based on the few descriptions Hamid accounts for (the smell of dead bodies, clothes requirements, public behavior, disconnection of the internet), the insidious trauma becomes all the more relevant. The structural oppression from the regime and the

disruption Nadia and Saeed go through in their altered everyday life is significant to understand the struggles they have adjusting to their new life in the host country. For Sepha in Mengestu's novel, the situation is not quite similar, as Sepha suffers from one punctual traumatic experience; the murder of his father and the guilt that is connected to his death. Notwithstanding this, his struggles in adapting to the host culture are marked by the same difficulties that Saeed experiences: loss of home and nostalgia.

As pointed to before, Bee's character is rather resilient despite the atrocities she has faced. The face of horror is referred to in Cleave's novel, and Bee rather explicitly explains it to the reader: "For me and the girls from my village, horror is a disease and we are sick with it. It is not an illness you can cure yourself of by standing up and letting the big red cinema seat fold itself up behind you" (Cleave, 2008: 45). The message for the reader is evident: the terror she and her friends are surrounded by, which characterises their everyday life, is constant. The terror that she escaped is still present every day with those who still live back home - and moreover the insidious trauma is everyday life for many more than just Bee and her friends. The exact same thing is relevant to delineate in reference to Valentino's story, whose displacement life offered an almost infinite string of traumatising events, and where the death of his friends come to be an everyday situation.

By taking the concept of trauma to include the insidious and cumulative ones, obviously the entire concept comes to be much broader, and certain critical aspects may come to light. One such could be that the term may lose its rigour, which of course may be of great offence to individuals who are suffering from great traumatic experiences. However, in the case of refugee studies, there is great merit in looking at the protagonists' past, as they in many cases are still highly occupied by memories of their home. In that case, the representation of the protagonist's hardship before arriving in the host country is central, and if the reader through the literature receives an understanding of the refugees' sufferings, there may be an important lesson to learn for the entire society. The representations and understanding of these authors' messages are then absolutely vital for the acceptance of the entire conflict associated with refugees. If a more versatile trauma term is accepted, regardless of the criticism already accounted for, the insidious traumatic experience is important to bear in mind, and adds yet another aspect to the understanding of refugee's versatile traumatic experiences.

That which you are denying us

Next to a discussion of the aspect of insidious and punctual traumas is also the trauma of rightlessness. The feeling of rightlessness and difficulties in adjusting to a new culture, which Arendt refers to in her essay *We Refugees*, echo in El-Shaarawi's article as the uncertainty that follows the integration to a new culture. It goes without saying that displacement is present in many people who—by any reason—live in rather different cultures than their native ones, however the lack of recognition is not experienced by all migrants. It also goes without saying that if one does not feel connected to the host culture for a variety of reasons, this may lead to cumulative traumatic experiences. In particular, this is also worth debating in regards to our chapter *Trauma of Rightlessness*. Arendt's theory argues the “eloquent image of the pathos of traumatic speech” (Stonebridge, 2014: 114), the inability and impossibility to tell one's experiences and claim the human right - both of speech and of being recognised as a human being. Moreover, pathologically, the symbolic act of sewing lips together (referred to in the theoretical section), obviously represents that the prisoners were not able to speak. However, it also represents the difficulties of ever healing as it echoes the lack of testimonial account that proves vital to healing the protagonists - at least if we perceive healing from a Western perspective.

A lack of recognition of refugees as human beings is especially evident in *What is the What*, where Valentino more than once realises his indifference to others. This is illustrated through the following:

This is the moment, above any other, when I wonder if I actually exist. If one of the parties involved, the police or the criminals, believed that I had worth or a voice, then this phone would have been disposed of. But it seems clear that there has been no acknowledgement of my existence on either side of this crime. (Eggers, 2006: 471)

This is also evident in the hospital: “We are no longer considered patients here. No one knows what to do with us. We are furniture” (Eggers, 2006: 290). Here, it is not Valentino's feeling of displacement, but his entire existence that is ignored by authorities of the society who normally represent security: the hospital and the police. If we read Arendt's theory into this, the Western human right to have one's assault investigated, and the right to receive medical treatment are taken away from Valentino.

In *Little Bee*, there is a rather accurate example on the denial of human rights in the Immigration Removal Centre. The analysis refers to the particular episode, where Sarah reads

Andrew's research that discloses the fact that immigrants had to apply for an aspirin with 24 hour notice, if they 'planned' to get a headache (Cleave, 2008: 227). In this novel, the representation of such is directly connected to its overall message: to criticise England's treatment of immigrants. Simply, the denial of pain-relieving medication—when the centre is in possession of such—suggests that immigrants do not experience the same pain as others, thus they simply must endure it. This reduces them to objects similar to the experience that Eggers represents through Valentino. Bee and Valentino (and refugees in general) are objects that do not have a right to complain, or a voice to do it with. Thus, what they are denied is exactly what the refugees want to have considered: their human rights. Inarguably, like Arendt's theory, this indicates great criticism of the treatment of refugees, not only in refugee camps and detention centres as Arendt states, but also outside in the host society.

In reference to human rights, the trauma theorist Mollica (2006) dedicates an entire chapter in his work on trauma to humiliation. In short, Mollica theorises humiliation in regards to traumatic experiences. One significant aspect in this sense is that the feeling of humiliation is an individual experience, but all humiliating experiences constitute a somewhat powerful (and intentional) degrading of one's character. Within this is also that one's perception of being a human is challenged to an extent where one does not recognise oneself as a human—which in many cases revolves around basic human rights. One example could be when prisoners are denied food or have to eat food that is either decayed or from the floor as an animal would. Additionally, Mollica refers to the "universal nature of humiliation, regardless of social status or position in the world; it cuts across culture, gender, race, and ethnicity" (Mollica, 2006: 73). In these cases, humiliation is experienced through shame. In *Exit West*, the character of Nadia provides us with an example of this when she showers in London, as she perceives it as "the essential, about being human, living as a human being" (Hamid, 2017: 122). For her, there is a great deal of shame and humiliation connected to not being clean, and hygiene for her equals humanity. For her it is something she finds worth fighting for, and unlike Valentino and Bee, she takes (and has the ability to take) matters in her own hand.

As Arendt theorises the traumatic experience of having one's rights—and ability to articulate one's rights—taken away, Mollica (2006) contributes with the aspect that it is also traumatising not to feel like a human being. The aspect of rightlessness is highly relevant to apply to these novels, as it gives us a wider understanding of their respective thematics. It contributes to distinguish the novels from each other. Eggers clearly criticises the authorities' handling of

refugees' problems—even when they trust them to help them. Perhaps it may also imply Valentino's preoccupation with feeling different as waiting time at a hospital happens to everyone - refugee or not. Nonetheless, Eggers represents the feeling of being less worth than many refugees have, which is also visible in Cleave's novel. Cleave criticises the facilities England offers the refugees; centres that one should only have to live in temporarily, Bee lives in for two years, and that is without proper medical care, and without the right to ask for it immediately. However, what is also evident in Hamid is that the denial of human rights may be as simple as that of lesser hygiene than one is used to, and as such, a lesser living standard than one is accustomed to. Ultimately, all of this leads to a clash where the refugees are unable to perceive themselves as they used to, and thus it not only generates a feeling of displacement to their surroundings as alluded to in *Traumatising Temporariness*, but also a displacement in reference to their own identity. Ultimately, who they used to be, and what they used to be capable of, do not correspond to who they are now and how society perceives them. A continuous ignorance of a refugee as a human being may then be perceived as an insidious trauma. The findings in this discussion then contributes to an understanding of the almost endless struggles that a refugee endures, even when they are no longer suffering their pre-displacement traumas. As a prerequisite to thoroughly understand the refugee's difficulties in feeling adapted in the society, it may be beneficial to look at the following chapter, which elaborates on how home changes once left.

Change of Home and Self

Refugee theorist Miranda Alcock offers a theory that elaborates on another aspect of why temporariness and insidious traumatisation are such important aspects to understand when dealing with refugees and their struggles. As this thesis has accounted for loss prior, Alcock also initiates her argument with loss: the loss of home and family, a pervasive theme in most of the novels. More exactly, she points to why the loss of home may be so destructive for the refugee: "When home is lost it is lost forever, and even if we do return, both home and we ourselves have changed. We can never go back; we can never recover the past" (Alcock, 2008: 292). Further, she also emphasises that the anxiety that may arise from living in another country, not only stems from one uncertain future in that country, but also as a symptom of a severe homesickness. Thus, a vital aspect of life in the host country is also signified by homesickness that to some extent is damaging for the mind, and added to that, the fundamental loss of home (294). Additionally, the refugees also experience the

struggles with xenophobia and unwelcoming behaviour towards them, which magnifies their feeling of being displaced and disconnected to both home and host country (295).

The change that happens in the refugee when he or she has lost home is represented in different manners in the corpus of literature investigated in this thesis. For example, in *Exit West*, when Nadia and Saeed are in London, they live in *Dark London* and face direct xenophobia to a greater extent than the other protagonists. Moreover, Saeed and Nadia's conversation (Hamid, 2017: 162; cited in the analysis p. 49), represent their relations both to London and their home: where Saeed feels estranged in London, Nadia has sympathy for Londoners who are sceptic of their presence. Their idea of home is also different because Saeed offers a sentimental uttering while Nadia is more realistic in her way of talking about home. Perhaps it is also significant that Saeed—prior to the conversation—were assaulted physically by native residents in London, as well as he also experiences verbal assaults. However, it still represents their differences in how they perceive life in their host country contra their native country.

For Saeed, the thought of home is invasive, and his struggles for adaptation are persistent. The loss of home for Nadia is represented a bit differently, as her change is evident through a split in her identity. At one point, she has an out of body experience, where she imagines seeing herself reading the news back home and that this is televised in the news. She feels that she “was from the past reading about the future, or from the future reading about the past” (Hamid, 2017: 154) and as she walks home she reflects that there may be “two different lives [that] would unfold for these two different selves, and she thought that she was losing her balance [...]” (155). This experience represents the struggles of not belonging after she has been removed from home - an experience the other protagonists also have. Even though Sepha has lived in the United States for 17 years, he still struggles with accepting that he has changed - and that his home is lost referring to Alcock's argument. He explicitly states that he lives with a foot in each place, which is represented in the entire novel's plot, and which ultimately seems to offer him the greatest resistance in finally adapting to the host country. Another peculiar example to point out in Mengestu's novel is the scene from the elevator: “With enough time [...] there won't be any Ethiopians. They'll all become American” (Mengestu, 2007: 118). Here, the Ethiopians have changed their perception of home, and altered it to be an ideal and moral place to live, completely ignoring the oppression and violence that forced them to leave their homes. They have not yet realised that they cannot recover the past. Alcock (2008) states that as long as refugees seek to recover their lives back home, their sense of home will continue to haunt them. She suggests that a way of healing could be to rearrange

their reality so that refugees “can begin to live in the present, starting, not from the beginning, but from the faultline which disjointed [their] lives” (292), thus at their arrival to the host country.

Theoretically it makes sense, albeit it may be easier said than achieved practically.

Quite similar to Sepha’s experience, is the experience of Bee. As Sepha, she is in a constant limbo of not belonging, even though she in many aspects perceives her stay at the O’Rourke’s as somewhat permanent. Although everyone that Bee knows from home are most likely dead, she still imagines her conversations with them, but she is also acutely aware that she has changed—a change she goes through to assimilate in the host society. Interestingly enough, Bee is the only protagonist that goes out of her way to adapt to her new society; perhaps because of her young age, or perhaps because she replaces the loss she feels of home, thus constituting a change similar to the change of her home. The protagonists all fall victims of the eternal loss of home and face the mental hardship it is to accept that once home is lost, there is no returning to it. Home can no longer be perceived to have a role in their existence, because it has been torn away from them. The realisation of such is difficult, because it makes the return almost impossible - and as refugees the trauma of temporariness is magnified. They may still perceive that their stay in the host country is temporary and are to adapt to the thought that their home and themselves have changed. An inherent consideration with trauma is the concept of moving past the traumatic experience and reintegrating into life, and so the next chapter will provide some considerations of how to regain agency.

Regaining Control

In working with trauma, one aspect of living with trauma becomes abundantly clear to the observant reader. If trauma is assessed, one will almost always try to consider healing and ways of working through trauma. The concept of working through originates from Dominick LaCapra’s studies on historiography and trauma in which he repeatedly states that “mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting-out” (1999: 713). LaCapra directly invokes Freud in his concept of traumatic processes by using the same terminology from Freud’s writing. In LaCapra’s optic, the idea of absence in relation to acting-out and working-through is what fuels the traumatic experience and whether or not one can reach reconciliation with said experience. Absence and loss are terminology that LaCapra introduces to distinguish different forms of traumatic experience, and while they have intersections, he sees loss as more of a tangible loss (often referred to as deaths) whereas absence is connected to loss on an abstract level: “Absence appears in all societies or cultures, yet it is likely to be fronted differently and differently

articulated with loss. In terms of sense, one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had” (1999: 701). Seen in Caruthian optics, acting-out is the presence of the traumatic symptoms in terms of repetition, where LaCapra also notes that trauma “relives (or acts out) the past” (699). LaCapra provides a base from which to further examine ideas of healing, with which we can turn to the field of applied psychology.

Adding to this cultural theory of trauma, we can also consider the points of Vamik Volkan and the *linking object*. As mentioned previously, the theory of linking objects pertains to a certain process of creating a magical object that holds and represents the trauma endured by the individual. Bee has perhaps the most interesting linking object, since one should perhaps consider her name change as a figurative object. On one hand it helps her exist as it provides her with a sense of security and new identity, but on the other hand it also represents her trauma: “‘Well, you see, it was hard to become Little Bee. I had to go through a lot of things’” (Cleave, 2008: 225). We are aware that we might be taking certain liberties in interpreting Volkan’s theory, as Bee does not link to her name the moment the trauma happens, but it still has merit to be used as a way of understanding the importance of her name. As has already been pointed out, she carries her past with her, and when she finally relinquishes herself of her adopted name—and finds peace through the symbolic nature of her name—she is able to let go of her state as a perennial mourner. Her past no longer holds the same power over her as it once did, and so she regains control. In another view, we can also look at the way in which Nadia and Saeed almost imprint themselves on each other, forming a bond that is almost inseverable. They use each other both as a means for survival but also as a tool for mourning, and not always in the ‘healthy’ working-through path outlined by LaCapra. Their ability to leave each other and begin separate lives can also be seen as them relinquishing the bond they once had in search of wholly assimilating themselves into their new identities, thereby letting go of the past.

If we consider the act of forming identity, also seen in the light of Akhtar (1995), we can make a point to a specific genre that all four novels also share. The act of forming a new identity is especially central in the *Bildungsroman*, a common genre in fiction, where the adolescent protagonist works through some form of adversity in order to form a new identity. The *Bildungsroman* mimics the heroic narrative of home-away-home, attempting to return to a sense of biopsychospiritual homeostasis. If we consider the general refugee experience in this type of template we find several similarities. The refugee suffers some form of loss which prompts a journey to find something—in their case safety—and that journey usually proves gruelling. The

main difference between the Bildungsroman and the refugee narrative is that the refugee settles away from home, and so does not return back to their point of departure. This is obviously a translated model, but let us consider some specific examples. In *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed lose their sense of belonging as their home turns into a warzone, which prompts them to leave the past behind and seek a better future. They undergo a journey where—as has been mentioned in the characterisation of them—they have a markedly different sense of self from when they left, and they grow apart. In Mengestu and Eggers, the actual part of the coming of age novel is what happens in present time. This means that Sepha's identity crisis is sparked by the loss of Judith, which causes him to contemplate his place in society. For Valentino, the assault in his own apartment brings him to change and he develops a stronger, more independent nature. These situations are what Salman Akhtar calls *third individuation*, as has already been discussed in the chapter about *Little Bee*. The third individuation helps us draw a parallel between the coming of age narrative and the refugee narrative, because the third individuation has been described as similar to the second individuation, generally accepted in psychoanalysis as taking place during adolescence (Akhtar, 1995). Pushing the refugee narrative into a different narrative genre also implicates that the stories go beyond the refugee narrative and attempt to speak to a general concept of humanity and identity.

This begs another question: how do the protagonists in our novels exhibit the return to a biopsychospiritual homeostasis. We have repeatedly turned to ideas of resilience, as it arose as a central area in contemporary trauma research when discussing new perspectives to understand refugees. The classic idea of working-through can be directly connected to the ideas of resilience already positioned earlier. In our literary corpus, we find a series of different protagonists who all undergo a series of traumatic experiences and who all attempt to work through their losses and the absence they feel. In the novels, agency provides a central argument for the case of resilience in the different characters. All five main protagonists (Bee, Valentino, Nadia, Saeed, and Sepha) exhibit a will to fight for their own agency over the course of the novels. In *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed relinquish control of each other after they arrive in San Francisco, searching for their own happiness and accepting that they are not meant to be together. Valentino's search for *the What*, as outlined in the analysis, becomes a search for his own agency, one that he finally seizes at the end of the novel: "Today I have options" (Eggers, 2006: 534). Bee has been moved around the world without her full consent; there is always a sense that Bee does not fully agree with how her life is, but she sometimes resigns herself to it. When she talks about Sarah adopting her, she tries to take agency of

her own life, but in fact she just offers the agency to a person she trusts more. When she surrenders to the soldiers at the end of the novel, she knows the ramifications of her actions, but she decides to sacrifice her life to save Charlie and Sarah, claiming her life as her own to give up. Sepha becomes content with his fate, and decides to no longer be “stuck between two worlds. [...] I have dangled and been suspended long enough” (Mengestu, 2007: 228).

The mode of narration also provides a prism from which to view their own working-through. Through the ideas of testimony provided in the theory section and the examples of testimony and witnessing structures in the novels, this can provide additional material to further consider processing trauma. In *Little Bee*, *The Beautiful Things...*, and *What is the What*, all the narrators come from a point of reflection in their narrative state. They all attempt to move away from their state of melancholia towards mourning, and by reflecting on their trauma, they move towards a position of mourning where they are no longer controlled by their past experiences. Mollica (2006) notes: “Listeners need to remember that the inherent purpose of trauma stories is healing and survival. Survivors must be allowed to tell their stories in their own way” (60). By going through a *third individuation* through narrating their traumas and assimilating them into their identities, they have a possibility of being ‘rebirthed’, not literally but figuratively, as a new citizen of the world, carrying both worlds and cultures with them but not dictated by the chasm in between them. We also note how *Exit West* does not hold the same kind of personal narration and reflectivity that is offered in the other novels, which can come from a multitude of factors. The main factor seem to be that the vehicle for the narrative is its immediacy, and so we are not offered the same remembering in the characters, as we follow them in current time alone.

Narratively, the principle of comic relief is also present as a way of working through situations that might be traumatic. Particularly in *Little Bee*, her meeting with British society and her fascination with the British queen provide a humorous side to Bee’s otherwise adverse meeting with British people:

I wanted to show that we were British [...] This is why I smiled and walked up to the open window and said to the taxi driver, Hello, I see that you are a cock [...] He said, Don’t they teach you monkeys any manners in the jungle? (Cleave, 2008: 56-57)

The meeting between these two vastly different cultures, also hindered by a full understanding of the subtleties of language and double meanings, creates hilarious moments in *Little Bee*. The same sort of humour is apparent in Valentino and Achor Achor’s meeting with the Mays’ where their

urgency to present themselves as perfectly as possible leads to a hilarious bathroom discussion between the two Sudanese men. Most of the comic relief is not felt by the implied authors but instead by the reader, where it helps us stomach these traumatic narratives to alleviate the impact of the second witnessing.

In the end we find that all of these characters manage to let go of a state of perennial mourning in favour of working through their trauma. They are not, as Volkan states, “doomed to remain preoccupied with aspects of their mourning process for decades to come—even until the end of their own lives” (Volkan, 2017: 17). Keeping in mind the general definition of resilience as pointed out earlier in Richardson (2002) and Pickren (2014), it is remarkable how the circumstances they find themselves in should have theoretically broken them, but instead they manage to leave dysfunction in favour of ordinary behaviour and adaptation. Several of the protagonists hold normal jobs and function quite well in them—although they might not necessarily be content with them—and have adapted to a new way of living. They exhibit the resilience that Grinberg & Grinberg (1989) allude to when they say: “A deprived immigrant, through sustained loss of reliable objects in his environment, also suffers from diminished creative capacity. His ability to regain his skills will depend upon *his capacity to work through* and overcome this deprivation” (14, *our italics*). Throughout this study, there definitely seems to be clear proof of resilience as being far more prevalent than what we might have expected, which instead rises new questions about the approach we as Global North scholars should take. Through the final chapter in this discussion, we will engage in this debate and argue some perspectives on Eurocentrism in a globalised world.

Looking past the invisible borders

We have not, so far, dealt much with cultural boundaries in our analyses, apart from pointing out the differences in the authorship of our corpus. This exploration will go a little further to place a critique on the difference between the Global North and the Global South. Several scholars in recent time have started to follow anthropological traditions of immersion and participant observation—the practice of living in the studied culture to understand underlying practices and societal norms. We are providing this preliminary thought to consider a bigger issue, which until now might have been slightly neglected in overall discussion. Following our thesis, we expected a general traumatic narrative where these characters would almost be beyond saving, resigned to dysfunction and poor mental health. What surprised us the most was that while analysing these novels, the characters seem to live a dysfunctionally functional life. We have

already extensively discussed resilience both in theory and applied the concept to our particular corpus, but the magnitude of resilience in the characters was, put simply, surprising. This leads us to discuss that other factors should be taken into consideration in the future while doing research on refugees.

Eurocentrism has been an increasingly important figure when considering postcolonial theory, where shifting stances have forced scholars to be more aware of their own position in relation to texts. Stef Craps (2014), while discussing trauma in a particular postcolonial novel, says that "[...] in collectivist societies individualistic approaches may be at odds with the local culture. Moreover, by narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse" (50). As is evident from our theory section, there is a connection between old psychoanalytic theory like Freud and modern trauma theory. But in Craps' writing, he positions that trauma scholars and treatment professionals should attempt to move past using psychoanalysis and the Freudian talking cure to alleviate trauma, and perhaps that can also be translated to the way we interpret trauma texts. When reading fiction about cultures vastly different from our own, we should be wary of superimposing our concept of trauma and healing unto refugees who have different cultural heritages.

Recent research has led to a change in the The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, so the new version—DSM-5—from 2013 (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) included the term *cultural idioms of distress* (henceforth: CID) to replace *culture-bound syndrome* in the professional dialogue around trauma in the Global South. One example from a study based in the CID approach examined Somali discourse around mental health and symptoms, which found that there are vastly different ways of approaching trauma. One of them was that "*buufis* tended to be normalized in terms of the Somali diaspora and was seen as prompted by the poor quality of life experienced during forced displacement without an option of repatriation to the home country" (Im, Ferguson & Hunter, 2017: 642, *original italics*). The study found interesting notes on how diagnoses from a Global North professional "may have harmful effects because individuals may be discriminated against in their community if they are suspected to be suffering from mental illness, which is automatically translated in waali or 'craziness'" (Im et. al., 2017: 645). In relation to the novels, we can note how our actual protagonists never once use the word trauma themselves to describe their situation. Instead, they communicate their distress through an array of different metaphors and imagery, and while they do not adhere to the Somali idioms in Im et. al. (2017), they still express their traumatic experiences in different ways from the

terminology we use in the Global North. Similarly, El-Shaarawi (2015) describes *hala nufsia*—an Iraqi term for health—which is helped not by a mental health professional but instead through “religion, family, support, and learning to bear one’s suffering” (204). Note that they have a similar stigma around treating mental health through talk therapy with a professional, but instead position the talk therapy within the family sphere. We do identify certain similarities or notions that echo in Global North discourse, but if applied wrong, they can cause a violation to the integrity of the culture.

If we look at the authorship, they do not carry a shared background: Eggers and Cleave are two Global North natives who write on experiences from a second witnessing perspective. On the other hand, Mengestu and Hamid write from a perspective of a Global South citizen who has experienced migration; while not necessarily through a forced migration, they do have insight into the cultural modality of their subjects. Vickroy (2014) mentions that some writers allow their subjects to be “narrators of their own stories, after the fact, where they revisit their process of awakening” (130). Similarly, Eggers, Cleave, and Mengestu all write from a first person perspective with a strong sense of self-reflection in the narrative voice, whereas Hamid writes from a third-person perspective. It is interesting in that optic to consider why Hamid as a native Global South citizen writes from a third-person perspective, which we might have expected would be the characteristic of the second witness writer (the Global North native). He chooses to not use the reflective first-person narrator in favour of the outside, secondary witness position which is also the reader’s position. On the other hand, Eggers, Cleave, and Mengestu position themselves in the mind of the refugee, perhaps a vehicle for themselves to try and properly represent trauma and refugee experiences. Thus, all four novels manage to highlight the subjective experience of the traumatised refugee subject, even though they approach the topic from various narrative angles and structures.

Conclusion

To end, we should perhaps first return to the question that has formed the work throughout this thesis: How is refugee trauma represented and treated in contemporary literature and how do the traumatic experiences suffered by refugees impact their resettlement? Furthermore, what cultural and societal implications do the representations of refugee trauma carry? To answer this we have explored a series of concepts in relation to the novels employed.

The discussion shows that these novels, while they are all refugee literature, they still present vastly different ways of communicating the narratives. They represent a genre which centers

on the individual and therefore it is no surprise that they present these stories in their own, unique way. We find that there are rarely any identical representations either in terms of narrative form and structure, authorial position and heritage, or traumatic renderings. However, it should also be clear that both Global North and Global South originating writers have produced reliable representations of the different circumstances a refugee can find themselves subjected to. Furthermore, the novels also engaged with the topic of rightlessness and temporariness, two concepts that directly support the idea of insidious trauma that we find our protagonists to suffer under.

We found that the four novels presented a wide range of traumatic experiences, which could be identified both by traditional trauma theory as well as emerging literary trauma theories. Place and setting showed to be highly central to the refugee experience and the way they are subjected to trauma, as all four novels to some extent focus on the social, cultural, and physical environment around the refugees. The study of the protagonists also showed, unsurprisingly, to be vital to the understanding of traumatic experience. As trauma is an individual experience first and foremost, the literary trauma scholar has to examine the characters as the first point of action.

To talk to the central question of this thesis, the refugee resettling in a new host country faces a series of obstacles both socially and culturally. We found that the theory supported the notion of resettlement trauma found in all novels. The transition for all the main refugee protagonists does not happen seamlessly and they are further traumatised in a variety of ways. Sepha, Saeed, and Valentino experience the sensation of being in a limbo, caught between their native country and their host country, causing them immense stress to the point of trauma. While Bee also undergoes an immense resettlement trauma, both she and Nadia have the strongest exhibition of resilience. They find their resilience in different ways, where Bee finds hers through reflection and inner development, whereas Nadia finds hers as a necessity brought on by external circumstances.

It is clear from reading and analysing these novels that all authors have a message they want to get across to the reading public. Writing about refugees has a direct political dimension, as the refugee's movements across borders sometimes cause a violent clash between cultures. We found that all of these novels engage in this discussion through the traumatic experiences of the refugees, highlighting structural and cultural issues in the host countries and in the policies they enforce. The novels have the ability to represent an individualised and universalised refugee experience by transcending the refugee experience to a Bildungsroman and a coming-of-age narrative. It centralises the refugee experience as inherently human, and makes it recognisable for the Global

North reader. We expect that further studies made into refugee literature will only support these notions and continue to develop a strong base for a genre that is growing both in terms of popularity and relevance.

In the introduction, we considered the traumatised individual as being deeply affected by their trauma and as a consequence would be rendered dysfunctional, but as shown, all the traumatised protagonists exhibit resilience by taking agency. They regain control over their situation and all begin healing processes at different stages. Looking to the last point, the relationship between our presumed expectation and reality can be explained by a critique of Eurocentrism. We found evidence both in fiction and nonfiction that show how an Eurocentric perspective on trauma and refugees prove lacking if we want to consider the complete experience of the traumatised refugee. Instead, as we have done here, we point and argue to further explore different understandings of trauma in order to comprehensively manage and discuss refugee literature in the future. As the Global South refugee genre is inherently post-colonial in nature, the critical refugee scholar studying Global South refugees should examine these texts in a broader perspective to avoid misinterpretation. We leave you by returning to Warsan Shire and her discourse on the refugee experience from a Global South perspective.

i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here⁹

⁹ Shire, Warsan (n.d.)

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Summary

To initiate this thesis, our considerations are founded in the following questions: How is refugee trauma represented and treated in contemporary literature and how do the traumatic experiences suffered by refugees impact their resettlement? Furthermore, what cultural and societal implications do the representations of refugee trauma carry? To answer this we explore a series of concepts and theories with the aim of examining our corpus of novels.

The field of literary trauma studies provides the thesis with one of its theoretical constituents. Starting with Freud's initial thoughts on traumatic neurosis, we quickly move to the seminal work of Caruth. As the second wave of literary trauma theory also did, we further engage with the trope of the unspeakable and the potentials of pluralism through the theories of Mandel and Balaev. Lastly, the inclusion of Felman and Laub's theory is of vital importance for representing the traumatic experience in the novels: the act of testimony and witnessing.

From the theoretical writings we find that the refugee experience can advantageously be divided into three phases: pre-displacement, displacement and post-displacement. We find that notions of nostalgia are tied to the forced displacement situation, and contrary to what the Global North citizen might think, they do not always see the post-displacement country as better. Furthermore, some evidence is provided showing how post-displacement trauma might even be more affecting than a pre-displacement war trauma. To comprehend the adaptability of refugees' suffering from major traumatic experiences we introduce the term resilience. Resilience informs a series of traits in the traumatised individual that allow them to function beyond expected capacity, and the return to a state of biopsychospiritual homeostasis.

With a varied corpus, our analyses vary accordingly. All of the authors have a significant message for the reader, and to a great extent they promote a sociocritical position. The role of the pre-displacement trauma has different focuses in the novels, where Bee and Valentino are deeply affected by the hardship they have survived in the native country, while the post-displacement trauma is much more articulated within Sepha, Saeed and Nadia. The level of resilience varies accordingly, as Sepha and Saeed are marked by a great feeling of nostalgia, while Nadia, Bee and Valentino to a much greater extent are dysfunctionally functional.

Our discussion considers new aspects of trauma theory that can be directly applied to refugee literature: temporariness, rightlessness and insidious trauma. All protagonists except Bee perceive themselves in a limbo, where they cannot adjust to the host country. Moreover, they feel their human rights are compromised to a degree where they feel disconnected to the reality they find

themselves in. By including the aspect of the relation between author and reader, we find that the ethos of the author prove to be central when considering these critiques. The critical reader should always be mindful of the authorial position from which novels are written, as here where they are evenly divided between Global North and Global South natives. This leads us to conclude that while the novels are similar in form, they are rather different narratively. Their greatest force is that they manage to represent the traumatic refugee experience as singular albeit not unique. One final point is also, that to comprehend the refugee experience and resilience, it is absolutely vital to be aware of the Eurocentric perspective.

Keywords: Literary trauma, Refugee experience, Resilience, Displacement, Loss, Nostalgia, Global South