

Novels of Flight and Arrival: Abu Bakr Khaal, *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) and Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways* (2015)

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The current refugee crisis affecting the Middle East and the Mediterranean and attracting massive media exposure has had a polarising effect at all levels of society in Europe, arousing feelings that range from compassion and sympathy to anger, fear, and revulsion. Governmental organisations and immigration bureaucracies that patrol national borders, manage systems of regulation, and negotiate issues of legality for asylum seekers, have had to deal with conflicting public responses as well as with international political pressure in the implementation of immigration and asylum policies. Despite the humanitarian work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international charities like the Red Cross, Refugee Councils, Asylum Seekers Centres, and other transnational agencies, the problems of resettlement and relocation remain endemic throughout Europe as the right to asylum is often subverted by inhumane politics or policy setting (Maley 85). Media accounts of migrants detained in refugee or internment camps such as those in “Fortress Europe” like the recently dismantled “Jungle” transit camp in Calais, and Nauru and Manus, off-shore detention centres for asylum seekers to Australia, without prospects of long-term security, have inflamed the social crisis. Refugees continue to be represented in the media through generalisations that are either affective or dehumanising, and public controversy has arisen over narratives that aim to arouse compassion in the face of the demeaning treatment of refugees by official bodies, indicative of the political complexity in regulating readers’ frames of interpretation. Indeed the refugee influx has been instrumental in generating the new wave of populism in Europe and the USA that is fuelled by a sense of xenophobia.¹

The widely differing responses generated by press and TV coverage are also echoed in the variable reception of narratives that refugees tell (or that are told about them) as eyewitness, testimonial and documentary accounts. These problems, associated with detainees who seek asylum and whose accounts need authentication, stem from indeterminacies that cannot be verified, the need for mediation by Western observers, interpreters or recorders, and the possibility of representational appropriation, which may cause ethical issues. More generally, the affective impact of stories of desperate flight can lead to distorted interpretation and limited understanding of the implications in human terms: the recent harrowing scenes recorded in the media of

deaths from boats that have sunk in the Mediterranean, have generated heightened responses, which are nevertheless often fleeting and transient. Western viewers and readers may strike “the limits of empathy” when confronting scenes of trauma by turning it back on themselves, or by participating in the “economy of pity” and assimilating the suffering of others, so halting the urge to effect any sociopolitical change (Khorana 305). There is therefore a need, as Jago Morrison points out, for readers to question the habitual frames of perception and affective dynamics by which readers’ responses to vulnerability, death and violence are regulated (28).

The narratives by and about disenfranchised, displaced subjects who exist outside the social institutions validated by legal citizenship also pose problems of classification and interpretation. The indeterminate status of these subjects has given rise to a complex cultural terminology among nations of reception, ranging from labels such as asylum seekers, refugees, illegal immigrants, and exiles, to nomads, sojourners, and forced migrants, making for difficulties in defining the body of texts written on, by, or about migrant subjects. The fact that some social commentators see migrants as a zeitgeist of our time and hence a universalising category has only magnified this problem (Nail 1).

Whether fiction or documentary, the texts are often labelled generically as asylum writing, refugee writing or narratives of forced migration, although such homogenising terms do not usually account for the diversity of individual stories. Contributing to the difficulty of establishing meaningful categories are hybrid collaborative projects—anthologies and collections—that include the recorded words and written texts of refugees and asylum seekers alongside accounts or narratives by writers and commentators who are spearheading the publication process.

These writings are a form of advocacy and they mediate migrant voices that might be otherwise invisible and unregistered, to bring them to wider notice. Such is *Refugee Tales* (2016), a collaborative project involving stories told by migrants to writers, poets and academics in walks around the country that mirror Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, aiming to call to “an end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK,” and the anthologies by writers protesting at official treatment of refugees: for example, from Australia, *A Country Too Far: Writings on Asylum Seekers* (2013); and the UK, *A Country of Refuge: An Anthology of Work on Refugees* (2016) (*Refugee Tales* 133). Refugee narratives and the Western responses they inspire combine to produce a layered narrative format of different voices and textual types, which resists easy categorisation.

Media representations of migrants draw on familiar stereotypes often aimed at projecting the more sensational elements of their stories, but the western mediation and complementation of asylum seekers’ narratives in the anthologies and collections provide some comparative cultural contextualisation. For example, translations of and summaries from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in *Refugee Tales*, and Australian white settler migration narratives in *A Country Too Far*

create another dimension for stories that may be fragmented and discontinuous. Novelists, by contrast, can turn to a range of narrative devices to represent the uncertainties of identity and positionality of such precarious subjects. Expanded insights are made possible through cultural, social contextualisation, as well as diverse viewpoints with overlapping narratives, and greater interiorisation in representing subjects of dispossession. This flexibility allows for multiple, coexisting and directly competing perspectives to be considered, so engaging the reader on more than one level. Morrison, in identifying the “turn to precarity” in recent twenty-first-century fiction with reference to Judith Butler’s arguments in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), points to interpretative frameworks of perception that draw on point of view, voice and aesthetic strategies by which readers’ ethical and affective responses might be mobilised and managed; this approach is of particular relevance in reading the growing number of literary, dramatic and visual responses by and about asylum seekers and refugees (Morrison 12, 15).

In considering the diverse contexts and frameworks of production and reception of such texts, this article compares two novels that represent different types of migrant experience of subjectification and marginalisation, and that refer to different continents and homelands, Africa and India, and different time scales: the 1970s and the present. *African Titanics*, by Abu Bakr Khaal (2014), an Eritrean writer now living in Denmark, written in 2008 and translated into English in 2014, is an example of new fiction by Arab writers. In its correlation to the contemporary refugee crisis, it moves the narrative of the Arab novel of migration into a different sphere of activity, where the precarious life of the subject comes under the spotlight.² Written in a semi-realist style as a first-person account interspersed with stories, songs and legends, it is set in the chaotic world of the exodus of boat people from Northern and East Africa to the Mediterranean. This turbulent story of thwarted expectations, loss, and death foregrounds the delusional impulses that gave rise to such wholesale departure in ways that may seem alien to modern globalised readers.

The Year of the Runaways (2015), by British born Indian, Sunjeev Sahota, is about three illegal Indian immigrants in England in the 1970s whose experiences of flight have parallels with those of the protagonists of *African Titanics*. The novel belongs to the established literary genre of migrant or diaspora fiction and is comparable to Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) in its referencing of both the homeland and the relocated community. As a familiar account of migrant hardship being overturned that gestures at the good luck migration story, it was acclaimed on publication and shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2015. Both novels rely on a degree of stereotyping but their cultural representations of precarity and poverty generate different social imaginaries: of flight, imprisonment, and art as salvation in the first, and arrival, tensions, and conflict spanning homeland and diaspora yielding to settled relocation, in the second.

This comparison also draws on current arguments about precarity, that is, global social, economic insecurity and inequality as manifested in the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Precarity in the new millennium is caused by changes in the labour market and global neoliberal capitalism leading to worldwide inequality. As Simon During points out, “more extensive and less visible patterns of global dispossession” and “relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and insecurity“ have been gaining ground, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis (1). When understood from a collective communal and independently political point of view, precarity can be seen in terms of Butler’s “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support” (*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 25). This is caused by inaction within the political and economic system, a *laissez faire* approach adopted by some nation-states, which leaves humans vulnerable to injury, political violence, or death. Such arguments are of particular relevance to refugees and asylum seekers who lack “access to institutional structures that ensure safety, stability, income opportunities and protection” (Malreddy 14) and so lack legitimacy and recognition. In the terms of William Maley these conditions are symptomatic of states that have failed properly to live up to their responsibilities (12). As Butler implies, the new vulnerabilities and the sense of life as precarious and subject to the will of others are beginning to reshape the cultural category of being human. Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard comment that, when manifested as an ethical turn in criticism, this shift in perception concerns “how humans live and what they live for” (7).

One of the marks of life being recognised as human is the grievability at its loss, confirming that a life matters when “the apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of a precarious life” (Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 15). Both novels address the issue of “humanness,” not as an inalienable right, but a position which is presented to the reader through a framework of perception that regulates their moral responses, such as determining whether lives matter as “grievable, as worthy of protection as belonging to subjects with rights that ought to be honoured,” or whether they slip from recognition (Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 41). Such a framework can also be extended to Butler’s view of co-dependence, that recognising life as grievable means valuing individual vulnerability and establishing “the interdependency of persons involving reproducible and sustainable social relations” (*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 23). A dynamic of co-responsibility appears in *African Titanics* in the bonds of loyalty forged between the pilgrims; in *The Year of the Runaways*, by contrast, individuals are inconsistent, and loyalties between the immigrants are often subverted by hostility, rivalry and conflict, reflecting the stress of the survival struggle. Furthermore, in making visible a broader pattern of precariousness as a form of insecurity, of not having and of being excluded, the novel delineates reactions to the status quo that can be aligned with what Guy Standing in his study of

today's precariat as a political force calls the "primitive rebel" phase (*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* x). In the microcosmic community of the Indian diaspora, this is found in the unravelling of family and social ties by middle-class Indians, unmoored because of the lack of roots or the wish for independence.

The novels foreground the material conditions of deprivation that motivate their characters to leave their homelands, while also identifying poverty with failures in the global system, caused by "socio-cultural exclusion and lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)" (Korte and Zipp 2; citing Sen 1993 and Nussbaum 2011). As Korte and Zipp point out, "poverty is a 'collateral' motif in much literature dealing with migration" (3), and in these two novels, poverty provides a powerful reason to migrate along with limited social capability in the homelands of Africa and India. Indeed, this explains the willingness of an entire generation to put their lives at risk in *African Titanics*, although the narrator represents this urge in terms of the superstition and myth-making to which the travellers fall prey, which he attributes to the black arts, a demonic force in the form of rumour fostering false hopes about the untold benefits of migration. In the longer, more wide-ranging *The Year of the Runaways*, by contrast, poverty and economic hardship due to entrenched class and caste divisions are compounded by other misfortunes that catalyse the exodus: financial mismanagement, accident, and ill-health. These misfortunes contrast to the types of adversity the characters endure as illegal labourers in Britain, where their conditions evoke the "new pauperism" that prevailed after the economic downturn of 2008, crystallised by the image of "Broken Britain" (Korte and Zipp 2).

Abu Bakr Khaal, *African Titanics* (2014 [2008])

The deteriorating situation in Eritrea that causes mass migration is due to socioeconomic deprivation, and lack of state support. In *African Titanics*, this is described in terms of bewitchment and magic that recall the darkness of Joseph Conrad's Congo. For the narrator and his Eritrean community the West is far removed in every sense—epistemologically, ontologically—a point to aspire towards rather than a reality. Symptomatic of this disconnection is the characters-in-flight's ignorance of their status as refugees; they refer to themselves as "travellers" until they see the media reports from satellite Italian channels broadcasting images of shipwrecks and drowned corpses (Khaal 59). Volatile discourses about migration, witchcraft and sorcery, circulate in the society to which the first-person narrator, Abdar, belongs, and where he is "converted" from initial scepticism to addiction to this powerful new force:

Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell sweeping everything along in its wake. ... I, and many others beside me, attributed it all to the works of a dark sorcerer, emerging from the mists of the unknown and sounding a magnificent bell It was a pandemic. A plague. And not a single young soul

was left untouched. Dong, dong, dong pealed the bell, calling one and all to its promised paradise. (Khaal 3)

The real dangers of migration—the losses at sea—are blurred and ignored in the flow of gossip, rumour, “strange and wonderful stories.” The title, which evokes the apparently unsinkable boat *The Titanic*, alludes to their untrustworthy boats (15, 41), otherwise called “The Doomed” (61), although the text records that the sinking of these vessels and the drownings are often met by public uncertainty and incredulity.

The novel anchors these observations through the voice of Abdar who speaks as a migrant on behalf of the collective as recorder and observer, while also aware of the higher calling of his art: to memorialise the loss of life. He is at first scornful of “the dangerous lure of migration” (Khaal 4) with its familiar bounty: the beautiful lady and flashy car. But he becomes hooked when he believes, in a moment of epiphany, that migration is associated with the transformative power of art (pertaining indirectly to the writing of the novel). After hearing from his friend Malouk the story of a song sung by an uncle to cure his nephew of the “migration bug” (Khaal 6), he becomes enchanted by the mystique of his own cultural heritage, for the “Song of Joy” is the song sung by the first man on earth when he sees woman for the first time. He enters “the rich world of his [Malouk’s] imagination,” convinced that “the power of song can overcome sorcery” (Khaal 9). This conviction and Abdar’s subsequent conversion to migration stems from believing that the song has talismanic properties. It first appears when he assumes the guise of a sorcerer and flexes his rhetorical skills to seduce a witch, who has “the most enchanting eyes of any witch that ever lived” (Khaal, 20), with what he confesses is “my own ridiculous rant.”

Abdar’s revelation appears to be a moment of recognition (anagnorisis) and increased ethical knowledge, “a moment of disruption and transformation where the character’s understanding of the world is altered, rearranged, in order to make more space for the other” (Van Bever Donker 27). But it is a false recognition which, as Levinas notes, is prompted by an image of reality—and leads to irresponsibility because it draws attention away from a fluid and living relation by exchanging “the living image for one that is static, that is an ‘idol’” (Levinas 8, cited in Van Bever Donker 26). Art therefore carries the risk of irresponsibility as an “evasion of reality” (Van Bever Donker 26), and the narrator is seduced by the lure of migration because he believes in the power of art to overcome the sorcery at its source. This false premise provides what seems to be a validating rationale for his failed flight with others from Eritrea, Liberia, Sudan and Somalia to Europe. In light of Butler’s view that in “saying a life is precarious requires that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended as what is living” (*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 13), the interpretative framework provided by this false argument, which is also a framing tactic, forecloses any ethical response on the part of the reader: the lure of song in justifying flight because of its superior powers still resembles the lure of the sorcerer

which the narrator claims is able to be overruled. It ignores any valuing of life as worthy of protection that Butler sees as one of the ethical responses that the apprehension of a precarious life demands.

Through the first-person narrator, the novel blends written narrative with the mode of oral testimony from eyewitnesses reminiscent of documentary accounts by refugees and asylum seekers. But a new dynamic develops when the narrator meets Malouk, an artist who travels with his guitar, and whose powers of music and song make him instantly legendary after he sinks to a watery grave in one of the capsized boats. He may be a mirror image of the narrator himself, for the latter partly appropriates his identity by writing down Malouk's songs and stories on behalf of the collective to give voice to the tragic loss of many refugees' lives. This implies a hierarchy in the grievability of life, as the deceased singer becomes valued through memory and rumour of his sightings and his loss is felt more widely.

Khaal's narrative strategy is to project typographically the disjunction between the narrator's semi-realist account and the artistic commentary by italicising the inset stories and poems, many by Malouk, to which the narrator attributes cultural value. This has a memorialising function, recording expressions of sadness or bravura at the loss of the lives of those who have embarked on the same unpredictable journey. The novel ends with the verses of Malouk, both a victim and a hero, whose legend is such that sightings of him are reported from various towns, so perpetuating the legend that surrounded his ancestor Malouk I, who also died in a similar fashion. In writing down and concluding with Malouk's words, the narrator drives home his belief in song's power to overcome sorcery, which he sees as causing the mass urge to migrate. This is Malouk's lament for the lives of those who have perished:

To all the pounding hearts
In feverish boats
I will cut
Through these paths
With my own liberated heart
And tell my soul
To shout of your silenced deaths
And fill palms of dust with morning dew
And song (Khaal 122)

Whether in the shadowy world of illicit travel across the Sahara desert, or in unreliable vessels on the Mediterranean, or trapped in the smuggler's den or in prison, the characters occupy a no-man's land. Apart from the narrator, his friend Malouk and one woman, Terhas, who is overcome with grief at the tragedies she witnesses, victims are nameless and at the mercy of smugglers who are generally unreliable, dishonest, incompetent and often out of control, because they are themselves at the mercy of unpredictable forces like rival bandits, unseaworthy boats, and harsh weather conditions. An affective thematic appears with the increasing fragility of the travellers as illness and death take their toll; there are signs of co-caring and responsibility: even the smugglers and bandits are moved by the visible decline of the

travellers, and they take to hospital a Kurdish woman who falls ill in the smuggler's den.

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

Sunjeev Sahota, *Year of the Runaways* (2015)

The new consideration of what it is to be human under contemporary conditions of precarity is registered in the novels in ways that mark out significant differences between the 1970s, when illegal migration from the Global South to Europe was less widespread, and refugee phenomenon of the present global era, which is attributable to the greater inequalities emerging from neoliberal global capitalism. The frameworks of perception by which precarious lives are viewed points to major contrasts between the refugee novel (about departure and flight) and the novel of immigration (about arrival and relocation). If *African Titanics* represents life as increasingly vulnerable due to a general inability to manage risk and so mitigate disaster, Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* takes a wider overview by linking poverty and the socioeconomic disadvantage of the migrant community to more than one concept of precarity. Here precariousness is a pervasive condition, a general state of unease due to psychological, cultural and domestic insecurities. The novel's transnational, transcultural framework and dualistic time frame of pre- and post-

migration reference the multiple class, caste, and geographical demographics of India and its English diaspora. This structure suggests that precaritization and insecurity pervade the lives of those who move between nations and social systems.

Butler argues that in “the politics of immigration ... certain lives are perceived as lives while others ... fail to assume perceptual form as such” (Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 24); asylum seekers or illegal or undocumented migrants who have only civil rights and lack economic or political ones, often fall outside officialdom with its differential formulations for entry. In both novels narrative framing is inextricable from what Butler calls “the politics of moral responsiveness” (*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 41) at the failure to meet some or all of the basic conditions for survival: “shelter, work, food, medical care, legal status” (Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 13). Yet the challenge to the optimistic expectations of migrants for improved conditions forecloses any simple affective response. The personal tragedies or misfortunes that cause the characters of *The Year of the Runaways* to flee into exile might arouse empathy, but the disadvantages that are made clear to them on arrival suggest that flight is not the only solution. Both novelists nuance their narratives with invitations to reassess and recalculate the risk to life and well-being that migration involves. Tochi, a Dalit, is told by an Indian co-worker that he is a fool to think that earning the money he hopes to is sufficient reason to stay: “Take my advice and go back now. Before there’s nothing to go back for and you’re stuck here” (Sahota 89). As with the heartfelt messages of farewell on the walls of the smuggler’s den in *African Titanic*, the reader’s perception of “grievable” life is challenged by the questioning of undimmed faith in flight by those who have gone before. Sahota also suggests what Jennifer Lawn points out is the reversal of precarity: a new “openness to risk and opportunity” that seems to valorise the capacity for self-empowering action, but in fact reinforces the paucity of choices, especially for the disempowered or the underclass (Lawn 2017). This appears in the sub-plot of the second-generation Indian diasporan, the pious Sikh woman Narinder, who abandons the security of her family to enter a fake, arranged marriage with Randeep, so that he can gain a resident’s visa after a year, putting herself at risk with unpredictable consequences.

The refugee novel of flight and the novel of migration and arrival also differ in their attitudes towards departure and movement: in the migrant novel management, planning and support are given careful attention and are subject to negotiation, including provision for the migrants’ unexpected arrival in the host land, whereas in the refugee novel such systems are arbitrary, even non-existent. *The Year of the Runaways* shows that the black market of people smuggling offers the chance to purchase, with the requisite extortionate fees, for the passage out and documents that will guarantee entry: the fake student visa for one of the migrants, Avtar; and a fake marriage certificate for his friend Randeep. Both young men receive hospitality from relations already settled in the UK upon arrival, although they cannot rely on

this source of support; other networks open up opportunities for illegal work. Like other subalterns the men are employed as temporary labourers with no security or work-based identity and their urgent financial commitments—to money lenders, family or the illegal bride in her flat (Standing, 10, 11; Morrison 13)—make them obsessively hoard what little they do earn. They suffer this adversity because of the fear of being deported, and because labour, however poorly paid, is a means to gain residency, citizenship, or sufficient wealth to return to India and start over, as Tochi, who has lost all his family in a casteist attack, hopes to do. In *African Titanics*, by contrast, systemic poverty and lack of opportunity mean that travel is a desperate resort, becoming a way of life. Accordingly, no plans are laid down, decisions are arbitrary, money is traded only for passage out, labour has little place in the scheme of things and chances of a better life exist only in an imagined future.

Sahota's novel, like Khaal's also shows how conditions of adversity and risk generate co-vulnerability and relations of responsibility towards the other; his exploration of the hardship in surviving the first year in the new land also shows how such relations are inflamed by rivalry and conflict. The lives of the precarious underclass in *The Year of the Runaways* are marked by insecurity of employment, no rights of social protection, and are subject to poverty, debt, and fear of deportation; they show the increasingly arbitrary divisions between abandonment or support, caring or violence. The three men—Tochi, Randeep and Avtar—who share temporary occupation in the bleak environs of Sheffield, question their ties and loyalties in ways that contrast with the protagonists of Khaal's novel. The latter are fellow travellers, who reinforce their mutual bond in confronting the prospect of death. The circumstances of Sahota's protagonists make them sceptical about the value of family affections, an overriding rationale for their migration to England. To Randeep's question Avtar replies:

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

'We come here for the same reason that our people do anything, Duty, We're doing our duty, And it's shit.' (7)

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

Precarity also relates to the differential distribution of resources playing out into the political struggle between wealthy and marginal

groups. Sahota addresses the injustice that the subaltern group is more routinely exposed to high levels of precarity, and his novel challenges economic differences and class inequality, and overturns the assumption that wealth and social status are ultimate markers of value. Symptoms of precaritization, what Guy Standing notes as drifting, a loss of purpose, alienation from labour, “anomic, uncertain and desperate ... behaviour” (23), occurs among the affluent elite, displaced migrants who have prospered in the diaspora. Dr Cheema, a wealthy Indian business man who works with newly arrived international students at the university at which Avtar is enrolled, suffers a psychological, existential crisis when he feels that his new belonging in the host society involves sacrifice of all that is familiar. Feeling alienated in England, he sees in the indigent working-class migrant who represents a greater vitality of being, a powerful material counterpart to his own spiritual losses, his dispossession and nostalgia for the homeland. Meeting the illegal student, Avtar, makes him aware of his alienation, precipitating a crisis of cultural identity and a desire for security beyond the family and workplace (Standing 17): “‘They don’t understand. We don’t belong here. It’s not our home. You helped me realise that. People like you’” (Sahota 317). Dr Cheema’s urgent need for greater rootedness overrides his class and wealth, effecting a shift in the relative positions of authority between the two men; here poverty marks “an ethic of authenticity” (During 3). The younger, impoverished student, by contrast, is oblivious to Cheema’s state of desolation and criticises the material values that give rise to spiritual losses: “What decadence this belonging rubbish was, what time the rich must have if they could sit round and weave such worries out of such threadbare things” (Sahota 316).

A further symptom of the precarious society—the greater willingness to take risks and seize opportunities in order to overcome the condition of exclusion and discrimination—appears in another subplot, one that exposes gender inequalities in the diaspora. The British Sikh Narinder, the daughter of respectable middle-class parents, rejects her safe, arranged marriage, by agreeing to a fake marriage to Randeep, so gaining some self-agency but at the cost of emotional resilience. The novel’s challenge to the expectations of women on which the Sikh family cohesion is based provides an unexpected twist, and her abortive bid for empowerment points to the lack of basic freedoms for some Indian women. Idealistic Narinder wants to do good and to help others, while also putting her own security at risk. She voluntarily endures suffering and loneliness in her subjection to this ideal, eventually getting a job, which gives her a measure of independence, and seeing through the year of marriage which is required for the visa. Yet she is unable to resist family pressure or to define herself and her needs more convincingly, and when the prospect of a love match with Tochi arises, she turns it down. Remaining in thrall to family expectations, after suffering bullying and harassment by her brother and his wife, and her father’s emotional blackmail, she returns home to care for him after her mother dies.

This comparison of the different frameworks of perception for interpreting these fictions, began with the fundamental contrasts in their representations of precarity, between their different dramas of life-endangering flight on the one hand, and the hardships of arrival on the other. The levels to which the reader's affective and ethical responses are mobilised vary according to the ways that life in each is apprehended and valued as precarious. In *African Titanics* life is easily expunged, and the well attested tradition of testimony memorialises this vulnerability, although the first-person narrator's mendacious claim that Malouk's stories and poems will enable his art to outwit the sources of tragic loss of life in sorcery, destabilises the boundary between fiction and non fiction. The added fictionality is reinforced by retellings of folktale and legend suggestive of a rich local culture in the face of non-existent state support and limited historical knowledge, further adding to the novel's memorialising function and affective dimension. *The Year of the Runaways*, by contrast, constantly mobilises an ethical awareness that complicates the affective response. Sahota manages to preserve sympathy for all three characters in their struggle to preserve moral integrity under life-threatening circumstances, and to survive at the cost of acting appropriately. The novel has attracted readers, and its being short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 further suggests that Western readers may be helping to sustain a global demand for third-world success stories like this, ones that naturalise the problematic process of relocation and so shed an outsider light on Western society (Byrstom 395). Yet the defamiliarisation of society in *African Titanics*, the emphasis on the irreducible humanity of refugees and the questions of social justice, equality and Human Rights that these arouse, is likely to solicit a more instantaneous empathetic response, albeit tempered by an ethical awareness of how the narrator is exploiting the boundary between art and life to mobilise it.

As a diaspora novel, *The Year of the Runaways* has affinities with the classic realist novel in which social mobility is informed by the twin values of money/wealth and romance/ marriage; but the questioning of these values and hierarchies also makes it closer to multicultural novels of migration like *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane*. Indian cultural and social values within the diaspora community are revalidated under duress, as Dr Cheema's mourning for his homeland despite his wealth, and Narinder's return to the demands of her family shows a valuing of loyal and filial piety above romantic love. These confusing reversals and disruptions of the larger social pattern of the Indian diaspora community in *The Year of the Runaways*, and the absence of any coherent social structure at all in *African Titanics*, reflect the extreme marginality of refugees as social actors. This is reinforced in the formal shape of both as novels of travel. The rhythm of Abdar's journeys is mirrored in the narrative form and dominates the novel's aesthetic structure, just as the characters' real and imagined journeys between England and India in *The Year of the Runaways* inform that novel's aesthetics. In conclusion the refugee groups and diaspora communities of these novels make them literary templates for

how forced exile and flight undermine social hierarchies, revealing gaps in the global political and economic system as mobile subjects point to and occupy cracks in the social structure. As narratives about the complexity of individual motive and hope, they challenge readers' habitual frames of perception, conditioned by affective documentary and media accounts of refugees. Their stress on the flow of experience at the expense of history, the strength of the impulse to survive in adversity, and the quizzical scepticism about ties of belonging, suggest that fiction is meeting the new challenges of managing and adjudicating truth values in today's post-truth, globalised world.

Notes

1. Khorana writes of the tension in the Australian public sphere aroused by "strategies of dehumanizing refugees and limiting journalists' attempts to individualise them, as a means of managing public perception" (305).

2. On Afro-European texts see Brancato; and on Arab diaspora writing see Al Maleh.

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