Identity in and out of Time: Narratives of Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Migrant Fiction

by Raad Ali Alshammari

B.A. in English, May 2013, Jouf University
M.A. in English, May 2018, Colorado State University

A Dissertation submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 10, 2025

Dissertation directed by

Kavita Daiya
Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences of The George Washington University certifies that Raad Ali Alshammari has passed the Final Examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy as of November 20, 2024. This is the final and approved form of the dissertation.

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Raad Ali Alshammari

Dissertation Research Committee:

Kavita Daiya, Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Dissertation Director

Melani McAlister, Professor of American Studies and International Affairs, Committee Member

Jennifer James, Associate Professor of English, Committee Member

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Dedication

For my mother,

To the memory of my father,

And my grandfather.

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee—Professors Kavita Daiya, Melani McAlister, and Jennifer James—for their unwavering support and invaluable mentorship throughout this journey. Their thoughtful feedback and constructive criticism have been central to shaping this dissertation.

From the very beginning of my PhD journey at GW, I have had the privilege of working under the guidance of Professor Daiya, my advisor and dissertation director. Her expertise, kindness, and care have been vital to my academic growth and the successful completion of this project.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Professors Antonio Lopez and Quito Swan for serving as examiners at my defense and for their valuable and thought-provoking insights.

I am deeply grateful to the professors who taught and inspired me in the GW English Department, including Professors David Mitchell and Patricia Chu, as well as the late Professor Daniel DeWispelare, whose memory and legacy continue to inspire me. I am especially thankful to Professor Holly Dugan for her invaluable support during her tenure as DGS.

Finally, I am profoundly thankful to my colleagues in the GW English Department and my friends. Their support and companionship during my time at GW and in DC have meant so much to me.

Abstract of Dissertation

Identity in and out of Time: Narratives of Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Migrant Fiction

This dissertation explores the role of time in contemporary migrant fiction, investigating the question of how representations of migrant temporality shape fictional narratives of displacement and deepen our understanding of "the age of migration." Situated at the intersection of temporal turns in both migration studies and literary studies and informed by theories of postcolonial temporality, the dissertation analyzes six different works of postcolonial migrant fiction by major writers of multi-ethnic American and British multicultural literature. The analyzed texts all emphasize the temporal dimensions of migrant mobility, featuring a consciousness of temporal displacement that operates across both thematic and formal dimensions of the narrative.

The dissertation seeks to illuminate how these texts negotiate the intricate relationship between displacement and temporality while articulating migrant experiences and identities in contemporary contexts. It argues that time plays a pivotal role in the literary production of meaning around individual and collective migrant identities, functioning across political, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions. Central to the dissertation's argument is the idea that migrant movement in these works extends beyond a purely spatial journey. It represents a temporal movement that transgresses and redraws the temporal boundaries of both the self and the world as constructed by cultural, national, and global forms of hegemony.

By emphasizing this temporalized understanding of mobility, the dissertation underscores a sense of agency and subjectivity that challenges the framing of migrant

experiences within geographical narratives of time. It demonstrates how migrant temporalities enable a "cognitive remapping" of a world that is no longer anchored in fixed ideological teleologies but is instead shaped by the global interconnectedness of economies, cultures, and populations. In this context, the dissertation highlights the importance of recognizing the "in-betweenness" of migrant subjectivity as a form of temporal in-betweenness—one that not only captures the nuances of the migrant experience but also reflects the broader condition of global humanity. Here, the dissertation underlines the role of migrant literature as a distinctive space where the de-spatialized, in-between temporality of the migrant subject becomes tangible and representational.

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Introduction

1. Temporality, Displacement, and Fiction

In his article "The Migrant's Time," historian and theorist Ranajit Guha illuminates a spatiotemporal paradox inherent in the consciousness of displacement. He points out that being a migrant means being "branded by the mark of distance" as someone "who has come in from the outside" (3). Yet, "[this] displacement is made all the more poignant by the paradox that it corresponds to no distantiation in time," as it is anchored in "an accentuated and immediate present cut off from a shared past" (4). With "no actual communitarian links to refer to," the migrant lives "a temporal dilemma," standing before the host community "only in the immediacy of the present"—"a present without a before or an after, and thus beyond understanding" (4, 9, 5). Within this context, displacement comes to represent an experience of "temporal maladjustment," reflecting "the failure of one culture to slot smoothly into another." As Guha insightfully observes, "[W]hat is cultural about this phenomenon is already entailed in the temporal and follows directly from it" (7). The question of the migrant's belonging is thus no longer confined to the conventional conception of migration as "a predominantly spatial phenomenon" (Brux et al. 1431). It is also fundamentally a matter of temporal reconfiguration reflecting the disjunction between the migrant's past and the migrant's present.

This line of thinking about the migrant experience through the concept of temporality resonates with recent developments in migration and mobility studies. In the "age of migration," a term commonly used to refer to the unprecedented global

movements of people since the turn of the twenty-first century, time has assumed a crucial role in shaping the discourses and practices that facilitate, hinder, and regulate global migrant movement.[1] This shift has brought the temporal aspects of the migrant experience into focus within the social sciences, which provide a platform for highlighting temporal inequalities and exposing global and national time-regimes of social control in the early twenty-first century.[2] Temporal concepts—such as "temporal traps,"[3] "timescales,"[4] "waiting,"[5] and "permanent temporariness,"[6] among others—are increasingly being employed to describe the social realities of the contemporary migrant experience. If Guha's reflection on the cultural consciousness of the migrant experience shows its openness to temporalized perspectives, these examples from migration studies extend that openness to its embodiment as a lived social experience.

Temporality's multifaceted roles in relation to migration invite deeper contemplation of this rich topic beyond the social sciences. Fiction is a unique locus for exploring the intricacies of this relationship. As Thomas Allen states in *Time in Literature*, "Literature enables us to envision time, to imagine time as something tangible and manipulable" (1). This recognition prompts the question: How can time in fictional narratives of migration be understood as a central element around which literary imaginations of displacement are captured, analyzed, and comprehended? My dissertation explores the role of time in contemporary migrant fiction, investigating how representations of migrant temporality shape fictional narratives of displacement and

[1] See Baas and Yeoh, "Migration Studies and Critical Temporalities" 163-166.
[2] See Robertson, *Temporality in Mobile Lives* 10.
[3] See Cwerner, "The Times of Migration" 21.
[4] See Meeus, "How to 'Catch' Floating Populations?" 1781.
[5] See Conlon, "Waiting."
[6] See Birger, "Permanent Temporariness."

contribute to our understanding of "the age of migration." I argue that fictional migration narratives offer an essential repository for understanding the migrant experience through a temporal lens. Time plays a central role in the literary production of meaning and knowledge around individual and collective migrant experiences and identities, operating across political, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions.

Drawing from David Scott's observation in *Omens of Adversity* that "a new time-consciousness is emerging everywhere in contemporary theory," this dissertation proposes a critical examination of migrant fiction through the lens of temporality (1). By doing so, it seeks to bring the critical agenda of what is called the "temporal turn" in the social sciences and humanities into studies of migrant literature, from which this perspective has been largely absent.[7] Literary studies, in general, have largely turned away from the framework of temporality with the dominance of the late twentieth-century "spatial turn," a shift anticipated by Michel Foucault's announcement that the "present epoch" is "above all the epoch of space" (330).[8] I argue that exploring temporal figures of displacement in migrant literature is crucial for understanding the influence of the "age of migration" on imaginaries of displacement experiences that still resonate within the "longue durée" of the postcolonial.

Temporality allows narratives of displacement to be interpreted through a dual perspective, incorporating both synchronic and diachronic perceptions. As Daylanne K. English points out, "Time, despite any claims as to its universality, works differently in daily life depending on who you are and how you look". When viewed through this lens of "time distinctiveness," as English calls it, migrant narratives can be understood within

[7] For more on the temporal turn in literary studies, see Allen, "Introduction." *Time in Literature* 1-14.
[8] For a discussion on space and time within the spatial turn, see Barrows, *Time, Literature, and Cartography* 1-4.

the peculiarities of their sociohistorical contexts ("Race, Writing" 227). This perspective allows us to uncover the ways in which migrant temporalities intertwine with historical processes of imperialism and colonialism. On the other hand, as Elizabeth F. Cohen observes, time "can … appear to be simultaneously universal and particular" (10). In this sense, migrant narratives serve as potential sites for situating the migrant within the global temporal context. This is not simply a narrative capacity but also a contextual reality, as migrants are frequently invoked as subjectivities that reflect the inequalities embedded in the current global system. In other words, migrants represent global subjects of precarity—"global precariats," in Guy Standing's concept.[9] Consequently, the movements associated with their experiences and narratives give tangible form to global precarity as the temporal experience of living under late capitalism, where "a future … cannot be propped securely upon the past" (Ridout and Schneider 5). Similarly, Bruno Latour places contemporary migration at the center of what he terms "a wicked universality"—what he maintains is the only form of universality available to us today. This universality is characterized by the reality that "we inhabit as citizens a land that is not the one we could subsist on, hence the increased feeling of homelessness" (*Down to Earth* 9; "Fictional Planetarium" 3). Such universalizing contextualizations of the contemporary migrant emphasize the idea that migrant temporalities can serve as viable vessels for generalizations about the global human condition.

To capture these dynamics, I adopt a lens of temporality that decenters spatialized constructions of migrant mobility, thereby enabling alternative forms of textual mobility to emerge within the temporality of the immigrant narrative. Through this textual

[9] Standing, *The Precariat.*

mobility, migrant literature can be examined as a system of meaning that remakes the world. In *What Is a World?*, Pheng Cheah associates postcolonial literature with what he calls "the normative force of worlding," which involves opening up an "ethicopolitical horizon … for the existing world" (5). Cheah posits that literature performs this normative act of worlding by producing "the world [as] a normative temporal category and not the spatial whole made by globalization" (16). Through a temporalized perspective on migrant narratives, I aim to uncover how these narratives act to temporalize the world, reshaping it into a totality of meaningful connections that facilitate the imagining of new horizons of justice and the production of values.

By foregrounding temporality, I also aim to shift the poetics of migrant time away from confinement to the processual aspects of the experience, where the movement of time in the narrative is seen as a movement from point A to point B, mirroring its spatial counterpart from the periphery to the center. This conventional frame renders time subordinate to spatiality. In recent years, literary imaginaries of displacement have shown a nuanced shift away from the politics of actual place and have turned toward considerations of space in its abstract and subjective dimensions. Space in migrant literature is increasingly viewed as "heterogeneous and malleable," serving as a site for articulating identity politics that challenges "discourses that see place as a stable entity" (Thieme 2).[10] This shift encourages a perspective that transcends the tendency to spatialize the time of the migrant experience, thereby allowing it to be understood through the narrative's self-reflexivity.

[10] See also Lee, "The Postcolonial Novel and Diaspora" 134, 135; Zacharias, "Space and the Postcolonial Novel."

I aim to achieve this by centering displacement in time, which, I argue, situates migrant temporality in close relation to what Kevin Potter refers to as "kinopoetics" (derived from the Greek *kinesis*, meaning "to move"). Kinopoetics, Potter writes, "is not just an analysis of how kinopolitics [politics of movement] is shown or reflected in migrant literatures; it is also a critical appraisal of the movement that literature itself enacts and makes. In other words, kinopoetics is not simply about movement; it makes movement, affectively and intensively" (11). Such a poetic sense of making movement is inseparable from the force of narrative temporality as a site of this movement. Temporal vocabulary—terms such as rupture, simultaneity, dis/continuity, anticipation, repetition, persistence, and so on—mediates the movement of meaning within migrant texts. By shaping the ways in which these texts make movement, this vocabulary produces the figure of the migrant as one capable of actively constituting modes of recognition that provide internal substance to the storyworld rather than being constituted solely by external forces.

The political aspect of migrant literature is another point of intervention from a temporalized perspective. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's notion of displacement as "not simply intended to signify dislocation," but as "a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality—that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality," I propose that the politics of migrant narratives can be understood primarily as a politics of time (*Postcolony* 15). Articulations of displaced subjectivities and identities are intricately tied to acts of self-temporalization made possible through narrative. The conventional focus on resistance and conformity as key sites for interrogating the political dimensions of migrant texts can be expanded beyond a simple examination of

how these texts "may reproduce and reinforce typical social representations and stereotypes regarding migrants" (Brownlie 8). Migrant texts also perform "political work" by reinforcing, revising, or challenging specific notions of time, such as progress, development, simultaneity, redemption, and the binaries of tradition/modernity and colonial/postcolonial. These dynamics within migrant texts are particularly significant when one considers the nature of contemporary migrant mobility, which is far from linear and is shaped by a consciousness "no longer about permanent and one-time ruptures, but transient and complex routes with multiple destinations" (Robertson 9). Such consciousness empowers migrant narratives to construct plural temporalities, thereby fostering new perspectives on cross-national and cross-ethnocultural intersections.

The question of temporal plurality offers a gateway to understanding how figures of displacement in fiction reveal the functioning of national hegemonies as temporal constructions. If migrant mobility disrupts the "sedentarist metaphysics" of the nation-state—which, as Tim Cresswell explains, involves "think[ing] of mobile people in ways that assume the moral and logical primacy of fixity in space and place"—the mobility of the migrant narrative in time can also challenge the temporal border of the national narrative (*On the Move* 26). In other words, the transnational power of migrant subjectivity is rooted in its interstitial position not only between nation-states but also between different states of temporality. Through this temporal in-betweenness, lingering pasts can be remapped, marginalized presents deconstructed, and alternative futures envisioned, as the exploration of the politics and poetics of contemporary migrant fiction in this dissertation seeks to demonstrate.

2. Literary Archive, Organizational Framework, and Key Inquiries

The dissertation examines a range of Anglophone novels and short stories by major writers of American multiethnic literature and British multicultural literature from 1996 to 2017. The archive of this dissertation includes *Admiring Silence* (1996) by the Tanzanian-British Abdulrazak Gurnah, *The Lowland* (2012) by the Indian-American Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) by the Sudanese-British Leila Aboulela, *Homegoing* (2016) by the Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi, *Exit West* (2017) by the Pakistani-British Mohsin Hamid, and *The Refugees* (2017) by the Vietnamese-American Viet Thanh Nguyen. All of these works, with the exception of Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, are twenty-first-century literature, and aside from Nguyen's short story collection, *The Refugees*, they are all novels. These two exceptions are not intended to underscore a particular historical moment or fictional genre. The selection of the works in this archive is driven primarily by thematic connections, unified under the category of contemporary fiction. All these works are migrant narratives that, I argue, represent the migrant experience by interrogating both the lived time of the migrant and the temporalities that the migrant's mobility causes to collide and intersect.

This dissertation privileges works of fiction, particularly novels, as a site for exploring representations of temporal displacement, given the intrinsic interplay between narrative and the subjective experience of time—what Paul Ricoeur describes as "the reciprocity between narrativity and temporality" (*Time* vol. 1 3). As H. Porter Abbott states, "Narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time" (3). Ricoeur, the major theorist of narrative time, asserts in Part Two of *Time and Narrative* that fiction can generate a unique experience of time, which he calls "the

fictive experience of time." This occurs because fiction, as a discourse, produces divisions between "the time of the act of narrating and the time of the things narrated." Through this divisional space, Ricoeur argues, fiction can resolve "the aporias of time," which refers to the irreconcilability of lived time with cosmological time and the irreconcilability of our experience of time as dispersed in the three categories of past, present, and future with the notion of time as one unified whole (5,6).[11] In other words, fiction is the discourse in which the absence of any transcendent position from which time can be narrated is overcome. As such, it has a unique ability to engage with and shape time-knowledge in ways that theoretical discourses cannot.

Ricoeur distinguishes between two kinds of fictional narratives in relation to time: "tales of time" and "tales about time." For him, all fictional narratives are *tales of time* "inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time." *Tales about time*, on the other hand, are those in which "it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations" (*Time* vol. 3 101). In this dissertation, I take the position that Mark Currie articulates in *About Time*, where he rejects Ricoeur's strict differentiation between time as a universal feature of narrative and time as a specific topic of narrative. Currie asserts that "it is important to see all novels as novels about time, and perhaps most important in the case of novels for which time does not seem to be what is principally at stake." He suggests that "if we say that a narrative which obeys a more conventional temporal logic is not about time, we are merely succumbing to its naturalization" (4). This dissertation approaches its examined works as novels about time in this broader sense. I consider the movement of their

[11] See Goldthorpe, "Ricoeur, Proust and the Aporias of Time" 85.

narratives within transformational time to be integral to their processes of thematizing time.

The archive of this dissertation encompasses a diverse group of writers who differ in race, ethnicity, country of birth, cultural experience, and fictional style. These authors embody a plurality of voices within contemporary migrant literature, showcasing the richness and complexity of migrant experiences across contexts. Given contemporary migration's vast and diverse geographies and literary landscapes, which largely resist being subsumed under a single critical rubric, I focus on critically acclaimed Anglophone works of fiction by writers who speak from within the social and historical landscape of postcolonial migrations from Asia and Africa to the US and the UK. These works are postcolonial migrant narratives in two ways. First, they depict migrant experiences unfolding within the postcolonial context as "the formal temporal designation" that describes the aftermath of colonialism. Second, they function through the postcolonial framework as "a historical claim about such aftermaths," which "signals that the 'after' is overdetermined by the 'before'" (Watson and Wilder 3).

The dissertation's focus on representations of migration from Asia and Africa, to the exclusion of other contemporary migration hotspots like Latin America, stems from temporal considerations. Although recent advancements have integrated postcolonial and Latin American studies, Latin America delineates a distinct temporal framework compared to the traditional focus of postcoloniality. While Latin America is part of the Global South or, formerly, the Third World, it belongs to the temporality of the New World. Unlike Asian and African nations, most Latin American nations achieved formal

political independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[12] I consider this differing historical trajectory to be significant with regard to emphasizing postcoloniality from a temporal perspective. In Asia and Africa, postcoloniality emerges as the outcome of colonial rupture, embodying a historical consciousness of displacement—one that Jhumpa Lahiri's description of newly independent India in *The Lowland* eloquently captures as "an ancient place that [is] also young, still struggling to know itself" (50).

This dissertation's exclusive focus on migrant writers from Africa and Asia necessitates a note regarding the absence of Anglo-Caribbean writings. The Caribbean diaspora, sometimes referred to as the "double diaspora," is a vibrant and significant domain of contemporary migrant literature.[13] While this dissertation does not explicitly examine texts from the Anglo-Caribbean tradition, it engages extensively with theoretical perspectives contributed by Caribbean and Caribbean-descended thinkers. The dissertation's focus on the African diaspora—shaped by the histories of colonization and slavery—intersects meaningfully with Caribbean culture and literature, which represents a central locus of this broader diaspora. Due to constraints of time and scope, the inclusion of Anglo-Caribbean migrant texts was beyond the purview of this dissertation. However, this absence underscores a compelling opportunity for future research to investigate the temporality of Anglo-Caribbean migrant literature and its distinctive contributions to discourses on diaspora and identity, particularly through the lens of time.

In my analysis, the choice to include works by migrant writers from both /or only the US and the UK is not driven by a focus on national contexts as primary frameworks. The dissertation's primary concern is not a comparative examination of migrant literature

[12] For further discussion, see Coronil, "Latin American Postcolonial Studies and Global Decolonization."
[13] See Savory, "Postcolonialism and Caribbean Literature" 233.

in the American versus British context. While I remain attentive to the specific historical and social contexts of the texts, I do not consider the US and the UK, as national spheres, to be determinative factors in the inclusion and arrangement of these works. Instead, I view them as constituting an Anglo-American transnational sphere that is a prominent site for Anglophone migrant literature. This methodological framing emphasizes the identity of the examined works as Anglophone and migrant, prioritizing their inherent characteristics over the national context of their production. This choice resonates with recent discussions about "world Anglophone literature" as a potential mode of inquiry that, as Akshya Saxena points out, "locate[s] English and its speakers in the world" and, by doing so, "offers an opportunity to trace their relations with precisely the multilingual literary and media cultures that the hegemony of metropolitan literary English threatens to subsume" (318).[14]

I use the category "migrant" as a double-sense designation for the works that this dissertation analyzes; "migrant" refers to both a social context (the author's migration background) and a literary content/form (the work's reflection on migration).[15] I base this choice on the understanding that "immigrant literature and immigrant lives are inseparable" (Mukherjee 684). As phenomenology teaches us, time is not a tangible entity that can be easily thematized; rather, it is inherently subjective. Heidegger has articulated this idea by saying, "Time itself is meaningless; time is temporal" (*Concept of Time* 21E). In light of this perspective, I contend that this dual framework of "migrant"

[14] In "Response: World Anglophone Is a Theory," Rebecca L. Walkowitz states, "The movement 'from' Postcolonial 'to' World Anglophone has involved two principal gestures: the promotion of medium (language) and the demotion of methodology, political orientation and historical analysis." (362). See also Srinivasan, "Introduction: South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone"; Wiegandt, "The Transnational in Literary Studies: Potential and Limitations of a Concept."

[15] Some critics have called for a broader category of "migration literature" that encompasses works reflecting on migration by non-migrant writers. See Walkowitz, *Immigrant Fictions*; Frank, *Migration and Literature*; Vlasta, *Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English*.

effectively captures the subjectivity of time, addressing both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the migrant experience as they are socially experienced and artistically represented.

Furthermore, I embrace the "migrant" category as an umbrella term that includes diverse migrant experiences, encompassing both voluntary and forced migration, as well as those that fall in the gray areas between them. While "migrant literature" is frequently used interchangeably with "immigrant literature," emerging insights from refugee studies complicate this equivalence by framing their politics around the differentiation between the immigrant and the refugee. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, the immigrant, as a legal status within the official structure of the state, affirms the sovereignty of the nation-state while the refugee challenges its viability.[16] Thus, I use the term "migrant" to encompass the varied experiences of migration portrayed in the works that this dissertation examines, whether those experiences pertain to immigrants or refugees.

Another key organizational concept is "contemporary," which I define, in line with most studies on migrant literature, as the post-1989 period characterized by the rise of neoliberal capitalist globalization following the end of the Cold War.[17] As David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson point out in their introduction to *Relocating Postcolonialism*, this period is the second historical frame for postcoloniality (with the mid-twentieth-century decolonization being the first). Homi Bhabha emphasizes this point, noting that "there exists, on a global scale, a growing awareness of the 'imagined community' of national belonging as a process and practice of minoritization," as is particularly evident

[16] See Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique" 930.
[17] See Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 225; Adair et al. "Introduction" *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature* 1; Wiegandt, "Introduction: Genres, Poetics and Subjectivities of Migration" 2.

in “the growing migrant, diasporic, and refugee populations of our times” (Bhabha and Comaroff 16). In relation to literature, Debjani Ganguly, in “The Postcolonial Novel in the Wake of 1989,” identifies a significant shift marked by the emergence of “the new world novel.” This novel, Ganguly asserts, “evinces a capacity, predominantly through a global informational infrastructure, to imagine the human condition on a scale larger than ever before in history and certainly beyond national and regional configurations” (36). Another paradigmatic shift of this period is what Carine M. Mardorossian identifies as a “shift from exile to migrant literature,” in which concepts of movement, rootlessness, and hybridity began to challenge “the privileged status [of exiled writers] as in-betweens, mediators between two cultures” (16). Echoing these paradigmatic shifts more than specific historical realities, I do not use the term “contemporary” in a strictly periodizing sense. Rather, I align with Theodore Martin’s perspective from *Contemporary Drift*, which defines it as “a periodizing term that doesn’t quite manage to periodize”—an oxymoronic historical category expressing “the difficulty of grasping as history something still moving through history” (2, 4).

I investigate the multifaceted interplay between displacement and temporality in this dissertation’s archive of migrant fiction by addressing the following questions: How do these works thematically and formally represent the temporal displacement of the migrant? In what ways does the depiction of a temporally displaced consciousness shape negotiations of migrant identities and constructions of migrant subjectivities? What is the relationship between representations of temporal displacement and critiques of national, cultural, and global patterns of hegemony and dominance? How do these representations enable a broader temporal mapping of the world?

3. Scholarship Overview: Time in Literary Studies of Migration

The study of migrant literature has gained significant momentum in the last years, particularly in response to the global refugee crisis of the 2010–2020 decade. Noteworthy contributions to this growing body of work include edited volumes such as *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature* by Gigi Adair, Rebecca Fasselt, and Carly McLaughlin, *The Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture* by Corina Stan and Charlotte Sussman, and *Figures of the Migrant: The Roles of Literature and the Arts in Representing Migration* by Siobhan Brownlie and Rédouane Abouddahab. Additionally, important individual scholarly works include Glenda Carpio's *Migrant Aesthetics: Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration, and the Limits of Empathy* and Kevin Potter's *Poetics of the Migrant: Migrant Literature and the Politics of Motion*. Despite the relative richness of this recent scholarship, readings of migrant displacement through the lens of temporality remain notably scarce. While time-related themes such as history, memory, and apocalypse occasionally appear in these texts, the critical framework of temporality is largely overlooked.

The only scholarly work to date on the topic of migrant temporalities is the recent 2024 edited volume *Temporalities and Subjectivities in Migration Literature in Europe* by Jopi Nyman et al. The editors situate this collection of essays

> at the intersection between border studies and migration research to examine how the imbrication of the spatial and temporal dimensions of international cross-border migration shapes individual and collective identities as articulated in fictional and factual, literary and cultural narratives that are mostly set in the peripheral borderscapes of Europe. (14)

While these essays configure migrant temporality predominantly through a spatial imaginary—evident in the recurring use of spatiotemporal concepts such as border,

crossing, and limboscape—their textual analyses offer rich and fresh perspectives on the plurality of migrant temporalities at work in both literature and culture more broadly. These insights significantly enhance our understanding of the diverse roles of temporality in migration narratives and its interpretive significance in framing migration as a marginalized experience.

When the focus is expanded beyond the migrant experience to encompass the broader category of postcolonial literature, literary studies of temporality can offer valuable insights into various aspects of the topic. Adam Barrows's work on time in world literature is essential. His book *The Cosmic Time of Empire: Modern Britain and World Literature* offers a key interdisciplinary exploration of how modernist fiction engaged with the imperial project of universal, standardized time.[18] Barrows extends this interest in the standardization of time in his chapter for Thomas Allen's *Time and Literature*, where he explores literature's engagement with "the fantasy of a world without temporal barriers, laws, or limits that enables globalization's ideology" (244). In *Time, Literature, and Cartography After the Spatial Turn*, Barrows further emphasizes the inseparability of temporal and spatial dimensions by arguing that creative narratives have a unique ability to map time, thus offering a deeper understanding of the nature of spatiotemporal experience.

While Barrows insists on a spatialized perspective on time in literature as a challenge to globalization ideologies, Pheng Cheah argues almost the opposite in *What Is a World?* for the same purpose. As I explained earlier, Cheah asserts that resisting capitalist globalization entails rejecting the reduction of time to spatial terms and instead

[18] For further exploration of the relationship between imperialism and time, see Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire.*

emphasizing the importance of conceptualizing the world in literature as a temporal category. Cheah's book not only theorizes postcolonial literature as world literature through the lens of temporality but also provides an analytical framework along with textual analyses of postcolonial works. He connects the worlding force of postcolonial literature with four key aspects. First is its ability to "track the processes of globalization that make the world and to contest this world by pointing to the temporality of another world." Second, it "does not necessarily mark the decline of the national" but, rather, reflects "the nation as part of a world." Third, it "reinvents the dynamic aspect of [classic] worldhood in Goethe, Hegel, and Marx without its teleology." Finally, it thematizes the world that globalization creates to "point to the possibility of opening onto another world" (210-212). In line with Cheah's perspective, I propose that displacement, as a form of despatialized temporality, can perform acts of worlding by disrupting the world shaped by capitalist globalization and signaling openings to new horizons.

Recent research on postcolonial historical fiction has also made noteworthy contributions to the study of postcolonial time. Hamish Dalley's *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* and Greg Forter's *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds* are outstanding examples. Dalley argues that postcolonial historical novelists "fracture linear temporalities and imperial theodicies to break open our understanding of the past" (16). Forter, on the other hand, asserts that the genre of postcolonial historical fiction functions through a temporal "double vision," which locates "post-national futures … in the unrealized residues of [the deeper] past" of colonial modernity (2). Both capture a growing appreciation for the value of the past as a site of imagination and knowledge in

postcolonial historical fiction, which denotes a transcendence to the postmodernist frame of historiographic metafiction, concerned primarily with history from the perspective of exposing its fictional nature. Amanda Lagji's 2023 study *Postcolonial Fiction and Colonial Time: Waiting for Now* is another important contribution to this expanding strand of postcolonial scholarship. The book argues that "waiting is an essential concept in the theorization of postcolonial temporalities," a colonial dimension that persists beyond independence and "continues to be evoked, revised, critiqued, and reconfigured in postcolonial fiction" (2). All these fresh critical perspectives on postcolonial temporalities demonstrate the enduring vitality of postcolonialism as a theoretical framework for understanding time in relation to subjectivity.[19]

4. Conceptual Scaffolding: Theorizing Postcolonial Times

My analysis of temporal displacement in migrant literature draws primarily on postcolonial theory, the main framework within which the migrant experience is most often theorized. Adam Barrows notes in *The Cosmic Time of Empire* that "it is perhaps only in postcolonial theory that time, as a privileged locus in investigations of identity and oppositional politics, has found a home." A "neo-Bergsonism," he writes, "marks the discourse of postcolonial time … Yet whereas Bergson conceived of the durée [lived time] as a universal human characteristic, postcolonial theorists insist on a durée that is uniquely situated within the migrant or exilic conditions of postcoloniality." He concludes,

[19] Literary studies of multiethnic American literature is a major contributor to the temporal turn in literary studies. Examples include: Daylanne K. English's *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature*; Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*; Mark Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*; Erin Murrah-Mandril's *In the Mean Time: Temporal Colonization and the Mexican American Literary Tradition*; and Mitchum Huehls' *Qualified Hope*.

> Time, wrested from historicism in postcolonial theory, is mobilized as a bulwark against assimilation into universal schemas or spatial categories. Ineffable, incommensurable, and heterogeneous, time becomes an ontological essence divorced from the telos-driven epistemologies of the West. (130)

Postcolonial studies has embraced time as a central element of its critique from the outset. As Stuart Hall notes, "[T]he 'postcolonial' signals the proliferation of histories and temporalities, the intrusion of difference and specificity into the generalizing and Eurocentric post-Enlightenment grand narratives" (248). In his foundational text *Orientalism*, Edward Said alludes to the temporal functioning of Orientalism. While it serves as a discourse reinforcing Western superiority through "imaginative geography," Said underscores that Orientalism constructs the Orient as an "unchanging," "timeless, eternal" object of knowledge, in contrast to the West, which is portrayed as dynamic and evolving (72). This use of time to construct cultural superiority is what Johannes Fabian, in *Time and the Other*, calls "the denial of coevalness." As a critique of Western anthropology, Fabian's concept explains how the non-Western other is distanced from the anthropologist's privileged time and relegated to a space of lesser development.

Perhaps nowhere in contemporary critical and cultural theory is displacement more intricately woven into temporal grammar than in Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of postcolonial difference within modernity. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha moves the question of postcolonial time beyond the binary frameworks of modernity and tradition by emphasizing modernity as an inherently ambivalent temporality. This ambivalence describes, in Bhabha's words,

> a contingent tension within modernity: a tension between the pedagogy of the symbols of progress, historicism, modernization, homogeneous empty time … and what I shall call the "sign of the present": the performativity of discursive practice, the récits of the everyday, the repetitions of the empirical, the ethics of self-enactment, the iterative signs that mark the non-synchronic passages of time in the archives of the "new." (*Location* 351)

Within this contingent space, the question of modernity, as Bhabah asserts, emerges as the question of "What do I belong to in the present?" Here, the process of identification cannot be represented in "the binary relation of archaism/modernity, inside/outside, past/present," and ambivalence becomes of utmost importance for the politics of difference. It "creates a signifying time for the inscription of cultural incommensurability where differences cannot be sublated or totalized because 'they somehow occupy the same space.'" Within this context, the subject of culture is altered from "an epistemological function to an enunciative practice," opening up possibilities for "other 'times' of cultural meaning" (*Location* 254, 255). Bhabha locates the diasporic/migrant subjectivities within this time of cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity. They inhabit the "time-lag" within the temporality of modernity, functioning as a sort of "contra-modernity." While contemporaneous with the present, these subjectivities can re-stage the past and introduce "other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition'" (*Location* 212).

Bhabha's emphasis on the temporal dimension of the inscription of cultural difference is grounded, as Simon Gikandi explains, "on the differentiation of temporality from historicism" ("Shadow of Hegel" 142). The poststructuralist epistemology underlying Bhabha's temporalized construction of the diasporic, migrant subject "seeks to detour the historicism we have inherited from modernity," not to negate it or reclaim some kind of temporality outside of it (("Shadow of Hegel" 145). In other words, it seeks to pluralize the temporality of modernity by pinpointing the ambivalence of its time as a site for cultural resistance from within. This is reflected in Bhabha's concept of the "double time" of the nation, which builds on and revises Benedict Anderson's idea of the

nation as a community where individuals imagine themselves living in a "simultaneous" time even though they do not know each other personally. They imagine their community as "a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time … steadily down (or up) history" (*Imagined* 25). Unlike Anderson, Bhabha emphasizes that the simultaneity of nationalist discourse is "more about temporality than about historicity" (*Location* 200). For Bhabha, nationalist simultaneity does not merely create a shared sense of belonging to a nation; it also produces unequal and ambivalent modes of inclusion and exclusion, determining how different communities are granted or denied national identity.

Bhabha argues that "the nation's people must be thought of in double time." This double time includes the time of nationalist pedagogy, in which people are portrayed as "historical objects," representing the "historical origin in the past" of the national narrative, and the performative time, in which people are the reproductive subjects of that narrative in the present, embodying the sign of "contemporaneity" (*Location* 208). Within this split, where the time of performance interrupts and subverts the time of pedagogy, Bhabha situates the agency of migrant and minority discourse. He asserts that "the margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis" (*Nation and Narration* 7). Bhabha's theorization, however, has faced criticism for being "hard to pin down," as Keya Ganguly notes ("Temporality and Postcolonial" 173). Thomas Allen argues that "Bhabha's theory attempts to reclaim … alternate temporal modes as sites of resistance, but in so doing it reproduces the account of these temporalities as marginal to modern nationhood" (*Republic* 9). As an attempt to account for the migrant and the marginalized, Bhabha's

theorization of displacement has marked a significant shift in postcolonial discourse, moving it from the colonial encounter to the realities of migration and diaspora within the contemporary world of nation-states.

Bhabha's theory of postcolonial time, with its emphasis on the postcolonial migrant's hybridity and newness, exemplifies a contra-modern temporality framework. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is another example of this line of temporal thinking. It frames the African diaspora along a temporality of rupture with roots, which gave rise to a plurality of hybrid Black identities that can be understood only as a counterculture to modernity. Temporalities of contra-modernity have gradually receded from their once central position within postcolonial and cultural studies. The emphasis has shifted toward accounts of heterotemporality or multitemporality. These itineraries in theorizing postcolonial time challenge the homogeneous, universalistic temporality of Euro-American modernity by affirming and reclaiming precolonial temporalities and imaginaries from diverse marginalized sites outside the North Atlantic.[20] Rooted in the notion of "the incommensurable singularity and cultural alterity of non-European forms of life," heterotemporalities are viewed by some as "risks reproducing the very civilizational thinking and its associated binaries … that postcolonial thinking initially sought to overturn" (Watson and Wilder 13). Examples of this line of thought include Walter Mignolo's ideas on "the colonialization of time"; he asserts, "Whatever the conceptualization of 'time' in the social sciences today, the humanities, or the natural sciences, it is caught and woven into the imaginary of the modern/colonial world-system" (*Darker Side* 152). Frank Wilderson's Afro-pessimism is another example. His thesis

[20] See Cheah, "Alternative Modernities and Other Times: A Critique of Heterotemporality" *What Is a World*; Watson and Wilder, "Introduction" *The Postcolonial Contemporary*.

equates Blackness with slavery and social death, arguing that "for the slave [black], historical 'time' is not possible. Social death bars the slave from access to narrative, at the level of temporality."[21]

Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* is a pivotal work in the postcolonial exploration of heterotemporality. Chakrabarty explains how modernity's regime of time, which he refers to as "historicism," "posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West" (7). For Chakrabarty, historicism refers to the ideology of progress that made European modernity "look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it." Through this "first in Europe, then elsewhere" structure, historicism writes history by marginalizing the "now" of the non-European communities to the realm of the "not-yet," thereby reinforcing the idea that the present of Europeans represents the future for non-Europeans (7, 8). In challenging historicism, Chakrabarty theorizes heterotemporality as a framework of diverse possibilities achievable only by unlearning to think of history "as a developmental process in which that which is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular" (249).

Chakrabarty's theory of heterotemporality is conceptually rooted in revising the relation between the possible and the actual. It seeks to "think the present—the 'now' that we inhabit as we speak—as irreducibly not-one." Here, the possible is not the "unrealized actual" of the "not yet" or the "incomplete transition" to which historicism relegates the non-European other. Instead, for Chakrabarty, the possible must be conceptualized "as

[21] "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption - Franklin Humanities Institute." *Franklin Humanities Institute*, 24 Aug. 2018, humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption.

that which already actually is but is present only as the 'not yet' of the actual." In other words, the historicist conception of the possible as the "not yet" of the "unrealized actual" must be replaced by a conception of the possible as the "not yet" of the lived actual itself. Chakrabarty uses the paradoxical concept of the "already-existent-not-yet" to define the meaning of heterotemporality as he understands it. With the power of the existing actual at the center, the now is thus never a totality but, rather, a "constantly fragmentary" domain (249, 250). By introducing this conceptual framework, Chakrabarty seeks to enable us to envision each historical moment as capable of producing a unique form of modernity.

Chakrabarty's concept of heterotemporality can be fully understood only by recognizing that it represents a historiographical reality. It is grounded in the assumption that historical time "is not completely independent of human systems of representation," i.e., the events are not separable from their description (74). In this sense, heterotemporality is the conceptual infrastructure through which Chakrabarty multiplies modernity in time and writes subaltern histories as resistant to and incommensurable with the time of Western historicism. The emphasis on representation within Chakrabarty's theory makes it particularly relevant for examining temporalities in literature, though it fundamentally stems from a historical philosophy. This relevance is underscored by Chakrabarty's use of literary texts, particularly autobiographies, to illustrate his concepts regarding the subaltern histories of the non-European world.

An important theoretical intervention in the discourse on postcolonial temporalities is Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World*. Cheah conceptualizes "worldling" (world-making) as a "normative force" that involves opening up an "ethicopolitical

horizon … for the existing world" (5). This force is based on an understanding of the world "as a temporal category" rather than "a spatial object produced by the material processes of globalization" (28). Cheah emphasizes postcolonial literature as a normative force of world-making, highlighting its capacity to inspire the imagination of new worlds beyond the realities it depicts. This potential arises from its resonance with the unfinished project of decolonization, which was an attempt to open up a new world and a new temporal horizon.

Cheah proposes postcolonial literature as an alternative to sociohistorical theories of heterotemporality, which he discusses through the examples of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Néstor García Canclini's theories. Cheah challenges the logic of these heterotemporalities by arguing that they "still understand temporality on the basis of presence (the presence of a non-Western cultural subject, religious or otherwise), and the temporalities they seek to retrieve remain within the order of presence." The logic of these heterotemporalities, as Cheah sees it, "is always premised on the human ability to appropriate time" (206). As a result, "[b]ecause their attempts at reworlding are repeatedly undermined by global and national capitalist calculations, the heterotemporalities they stage can only be sustained by conjuring with the in-calculable and inhuman gift of time as the original opening of a world," which can be performed through literature (14). Cheah's perspective resonates with the call made by the editors of *The Postcolonial Contemporary* to juxtapose the project of provincializing Europe/the West with "deprovincializing the Global South." Jini Kim Watson and Gary Wilder argue that this deprovincializing "should also lead us to examine how processes, contradictions, and struggles in the Global South … may be viewed as harbingers of worldwide shifts,

crucibles for new forms of worldwide social conflict, and situations from which to theorize the contemporary global situation" (15).

These theoretical approaches to postcolonial temporality serve as a broader framework for analyzing narratives of temporal displacement in the migrant literature on which this dissertation focuses. The analyzed works are not addressed as examples of one theory or another. Rather, they form a complex literary landscape that, by representing a diverse array of historical migration experiences and contexts, both deepens our understanding of theoretical propositions and complicates them, thereby offering insights that extend beyond existing frameworks. Thinking *with* and *beyond* these frameworks enriches our understanding of migrant narratives as they reshape relationships between past, present, and future from the perspective of a time still in the making.

5. Findings: Migrant Narratives and Temporal Distance

The migrant narratives that this dissertation examines depict migration as not merely a spatial activity but also a movement in time, one that redraws the temporal boundaries of both the self and the world. They present the migrant experience as a mode of being in time that disrupts the spatialized concepts of time underpinning homogenous forms of cultural or national identification. Migrant time, therefore, does not simply mediate or connect two countries or nations through a linear back-and-forth movement. Instead, it conveys a persistent state of displacement—both as an ontological condition of the migrant within the narrative's storyworld and as an epistemological reconfiguration of the relationship between past, present, and future in migratory contexts. This form of temporality articulates migrant subjectivity of one of temporal "in-betweenness," in which identity is shaped by a consciousness of displacement from the present itself,

owing to its hegemonic character and socially marginalizing function. These conceptualizations shape how the works under examination provide perspectives that untie postcolonial displacement from the worn trope of "writing back" to the West associated with traditional postcolonial literature.[22] Instead, they present nuanced depictions of migrant experiences that, while grounded in the *longue durée* of postcolonial identity, are also enriched by an acute awareness of the complexities of globalization in the contemporary era.[23]

In all these works, the displacement from the present is juxtaposed with, or becomes a space of, invocations of histories. The strong presence of history within their narratives positions the contemporary migrant as a figure who challenges "the reduction to the present"—a concept Fredric Jameson employs to characterize the temporal imagination of contemporary culture.[24] By resisting the reduction of time to a singular, present-oriented temporality, these narratives highlight the importance of historical depth as a space for envisioning the wholeness of migrant identities. Migrant temporalities thus serve as a force for both horizontal and vertical intersections in time, breaking through simultaneous present temporalities while also mobilizing historical temporalities.

6. Chapter Description

The first chapter, titled "Immigrant Temporalities of Beginning in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*," explores these two novels as immigrant narratives centered around the concept of immigrant beginning.

[22] Adair et al., *Routledge Companion* 11.
[23] Texts with this orientation are sometimes referred to as post-postcolonial; see Jay, *Global Matters* 95, 96. More recently, another designation has emerged: "world Anglophone literature," which has been the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion; see *Interventions*, Volume 20, Issue 3 (2018).
[24] Jameson, "The End of Temporality" 708.

Admiring Silence and *The Lowland* depict postcolonial stories of migration—to the UK (in the former) and to the US (in the latter)—starting around the same historical period of the 1960s. Both novels present the historical moment of decolonization and the formation of the postcolonial nation in Tanzania and India, respectively, as the chronological starting point for the events and portray migration as a direct consequence of the political violence associated with nation-building. The immigrant experience in this portrayal unfolds as a record of how the ravages wrought by the moment of national beginning haunt and implicate the immigrant subject's attempts to begin anew away from home. The chapter investigates how the two novels produce the immigrant experience in temporal terms by reflecting on the nuances of the beginning as both an experience and a concept. It argues that both works portray the immigrant experience as one of perpetual beginning, positioning this notion as a counterhegemonic force within the immigrant narrative. In doing so, they challenge the logic of hegemonic national and colonial narratives, which are depicted as operating through teleological understandings of beginnings.

The second chapter, titled "Temporalizing History: Parallel Temporalities in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," explores the temporal double vision underlying the parallelism in these two semi-historical novels between contemporary immigrant narratives and deep histories of colonial modernity: the onset of the transatlantic slave trade in eighteenth-century West Africa in the former and the nineteenth-century resistance of Imam Shamil of Dagestan to Imperial Russia's conquest of the Caucasus in the latter. The chapter explores how these parallel temporalities facilitate the construction of immigrant identities in the two novels and how

they allow us to reimagine fiction's relationship to history through the specific lens of the immigrant experience. The argument of the chapter focuses on reading these two texts as a fictional mode of writing history that challenges geographical frameworks and instead embeds history within lived experience, thus writing history as individual time. In doing so, both novels cultivate a corrective imaginary that challenges the pessimistic and radical temporalities of breakage and discontinuity often found in dominant binary perceptions of African immigrant identities (as explored in *Homegoing*) and Muslim immigrant identities (as addressed in *The Kindness of Enemies*).

The third chapter, "Citizens of Time: Representations of Refugee Temporality in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Viet Than Nguyen's *The Refugees*," extends the triad of fictional representations of migration, space, and time to the refugee experience. Both works narrate stories of mass refuge apart from the encounter with the nation-state's regime of territorial borders. *Exit West* portrays a magical realist world where migration is facilitated by magical doors that allow people to move between countries instantaneously. Meanwhile, *The Refugees* presents the stories of Vietnamese refugees through the lens of their present lives in the US, where they remain haunted by ghosts and memories of their escape from the long-gone country. The chapter argues that the two works situate the refugee figure between nations not only spatially but also temporally, caught in the interstices between nation-states as well as between different states of temporality. While the physical crossing of national borders is always a temporary experience for refugees, *Exit West* and *The Refugees* emphasize the enduring nature of their temporal crossing, framing the refugee experience as a persistent state of

being (once a refugee, always a refugee). They portray refugeeness as an identity defined by its perpetual state of flux and uncertainty rather than by stability and permanence.

Chapter One: Immigrant Temporalities of Beginning in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

1. Introduction: Perpetual Beginnings

One of the most prevalent tropes in journalistic and non-governmental organization discourse on immigrants is the association of migration with the idea of starting anew, with immigrants often described as individuals in search of new beginnings. Within the scope of such discourse, immigrant new beginnings might not seem problematic, as the discourse centers mainly on the practical aspects of making a change. However, this notion becomes significantly more complex when examined in fictional narratives of the immigrant experience. As Edward Said points out in his seminal work, *Beginnings*, narrative beginnings are "the first step in the intentional production of meaning." They are contradictory and "retrospective" constructions that occur only in language (5). Hillis Miller further elucidates this contradiction, noting that "the paradox of beginnings is that one must have something solidly present and pre-existent, some generative source or authority, on which the development of a new story may be based" (57). This paradox highlights the ways in which "beginnings evoke authority, tradition, and filiation, all ideas upon which the narratives of patriarchy, racism, and nationalism have heavily relied" (Romagnolo xiii). Thus, the idea of beginning as a constructed concept lies at the heart of interrogating hegemony.

Recognizing the intrinsic link between beginnings as a construct and hegemony highlights the importance of examining how the discourse of the marginalized engage with and redefine the concept of beginnings. As Homi Bhabha argues, the intervention of the immigrant perspective, as a minority discourse, lies in antagonizing the nation's

"tendency to totalize the social in a homogenous, empty time." Consequently, for Bhabha, the questioning of this minority discourse "is not a repetitive rhetoric of the 'end' of society but a meditation on the disposition of space and time from which the narrative of the nation must *begin*" (*Location* 223). Drawing on this understanding, this chapter examines the representations of beginning in contemporary migrant fiction, focusing on the temporal politics they enact. It aims to do so by questioning how these representations conceptualize the immigrant experience in temporal terms, how such conceptualizations facilitate fictional constructions of immigrant subjectivity and identity, and what contradictions in the texture of hegemonic narratives these conceptualizations reveal.

The chapter tackles these questions by examining the Tanzanian British Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and the Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, two novelistic works of contemporary migrant fiction that depict postcolonial stories of migration—to the UK (in the former) and to the US (in the latter)—starting around the same historical period of the 1960s. Both novels present the historical moment of decolonization and the formation of the postcolonial nation in Tanzania and India as the chronological starting point for the events and portray migration as a direct consequence of the political violence associated with nation-building. The immigrant experience in this portrayal unfolds as a record of how the ravages wrought by the moment of national beginning haunt and implicate the immigrant subject's attempts to begin anew away from their home.

Addressing this conceptual commonality, I argue that, despite their divergent political and ideological orientations, *Admiring Silence* and *The Lowland* portray the

immigrant experience as one of perpetual beginning, thereby exposing the hegemonic, constructed boundaries of the present. *Admiring Silence* transforms the migratory space, usually associated with actual beginnings, into a narrative space of fabricated ones, embodied by the protagonist/narrator's continuous fabrication of his childhood story. The narrator's fabricated beginnings in the novel, I argue, reflect an image of an immigrant subjectivity that is doubly displaced in time, caught between the Black nationalist temporality of the Tanzanian state and the British multiculturalist temporality of assimilation. This displacement not only exposes power's constructions of the past but also highlights how these constructions of the past are, fundamentally, constructions of the present as well. *Admiring Silence* thus allows us to see the past and present as intertwined in the sense that the "present daily fabricates the past … it requires" (Hartog 114). Viewed through this perspective, the fabricated beginnings in *The Lowland* are a narrative materialization of both the expulsion from the past and the inaccessibility of the present.

Unlike *Admiring Silence*, *The Lowland* employs the immigrant perpetual beginning not as a narrative mapping of an inaccessible, exclusionary present but, rather, as a revolutionary act of reclaiming the present for the individual self. Depicting a migratory journey from 1960s India to the US across three generations, the novel is a feminist narrative premised upon liberating the present from the futuristic dictates of patriarchy as entrenched within family, revolution, and nation. Lahiri crafts an immigrant female protagonist whose subjectivity is anchored in a sense of perpetual beginning that resonates with Elizabeth Grosz's concept of feminist time as "a temporality directed to a future that is unattainable and unknowable in the present" (*Time Travels* 1). While this

concept grounds the novel's deconstruction of the teleological narratives of futurity, it also accommodates its assimilative embrace of American time as a form of triumphant present in which individualistic self-determination is achieved.

By exploring the perpetual beginning as a central expression of the immigrant experience in *Admiring Silence* and *The Lowland*, this chapter demonstrates how the two novels give intelligibility to the immigrant's time as a space for negotiating identity and subjectivity. The two novels offer narratological and epistemological enactments of the concept of perpetual beginning in a way that fleshes out what Bhabha calls the immigrant's "indeterminate temporality of the in-between," where "the past is not original [and] the present is not simply transitory" (*Location* 313, 326). In doing so, they mobilize the politics of time in migrant fiction beyond the conventional, spatialized paradigm of assimilation, with its linear teleology. In addition, they illustrate the power embedded in the discourse of beginning as a counterhegemonic effect of the immigrant narrative. This power deconstructs hegemonic constructions of national and patriarchal temporalities while also grounding performances of subjectivity and claims of agency.[25]

2. *Admiring Silence*: To Begin from No Beginning

Admiring Silence tells the life story of an unnamed Afro-Arab middle-aged narrator from Zanzibar who lives as an immigrant in the UK. He left his homeland in his youth, driven by the possibility of receiving a better education as well as the consequences of the racial and political violence of the Africanist anti-Arab Zanzibar revolution that broke out in 1964, which led to the downfall of the Sultan of Zanzibar and his Arab government

[25] The power of beginnings in narrative fiction has only recently gained critical attention through perspectives that aim to transcend the formalistic considerations of narrative theory and give beginnings the historical, theoretical, and ideological analysis they require. See Richardson *Narrative Beginnings*; Romagnolo *Opening Acts*.

and paved the way for the establishment of the Tanzanian nation.[26] He lives with a liberal-minded English woman named Emma, with whom he falls in love shortly after his arrival, and has a daughter. Over the years, he experiences both the racial hatred surrounding him and self-disgust at his attempts to assimilate. However, through silence and fabricated stories, the narrator keeps his present separate from his past. While choosing not to tell his family at home about Emma and his daughter, he makes up stories about his idyllic family for Emma and about the British Empire's benevolence for her old father.[27]

Upon receiving a letter from his family informing him of a general amnesty declared for Zanzibar citizens who had left the country illegally, the narrator undertakes a temporary return to his homeland after having spent seventeen years in England. The return unites the two worlds and reveals their truth to the reader but not to the characters in the novel. However, although the narrator's return represents a literal reunion with his family, it becomes more of "an archaeological project" that deepens his feelings of detachment and disappointment (*Admiring* 153). He refuses to work with the new corrupt government, declines the marriage plan that his family has arranged for him, and returns to England to discover that Emma has found a new lover and that his daughter is leaving home. The return and all of its consequences leave him in a state of complete solitude by the end of the novel. However, this very end presents the possibility of a new relationship with an Indian woman whom the narrator meets on his flight back to England. Similar to

[26] As Gurnh himself explained in his other novel, *By The Sea*, Zanzibaris of Arab descent were persecuted after the 1964 Revolution: "Their crime was the ignoble history of Oman in these parts, and that was not a connection they were allowed to give up. In other respects they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya, and they were sons of indigenes, but after their treatment at the hands of various commanding officers, they were eager to leave, and spoke as despisingly of their persecutors as their persecutors did of them" (225).
[27] His fabricated stories are reminiscent of the protagonist in Tayeb Salih's postcolonial literary classic, *Season of Migration to the North*.

the narrator's situation, the woman's family fled Kenya because of hostility toward non-African communities after independence.

The story has a disorderly and unreliable narration, which speaks mainly to the shadow story of the narrator's father. The father, newly married to the narrator's mother, left Zanzibar shortly after she conceived the narrator. This sudden disappearance penetrates the narrator's multiple constructions of his past. Nobody knows why his father left, where he went, or whether he is dead or alive. His escape leaves the family in shame; as a result, the father's uncle, Hashim, must marry the narrator's mother and become his stepfather. On his return from England, the narrator interrogates his mother to obtain more information about his father's escape, but his efforts are to no avail. His mother knows no more than anybody else except, she emphasizes, that his father changed dramatically after she became pregnant. She and the family realize that uncovering the father's story—and not entering into the marriage they had expected—is the true purpose behind the narrator's return. When the narrator rejects their marriage plan and reveals his relationship with Emma in England, the family declares him lost, just like his father.

Admiring Silence is a text that explores themes associated with the immigrant experience: alienation and loneliness generated by the experience of the ex-colonized's migration to the metropolis, where the enduring life of colonial history, which the immigrant experiences in the form of racism and failed expectations, deepens the sense of identity fragmentation and complicates the very meaning of home. The novel is one narrative journey within Gurnah's habitual explorations of the complexities of contemporary displacement. Nine of his ten novels are narratives of migration from East Africa (usually Zanzibar) to Europe. Critical scholarship on Gurnah's oeuvre has

illuminated his consistent focus on displacement and the associated inquiries into questions of identity it entails. According to Simon Lewis, Gurnah writes novels that "complicate the assumption that being a colonized native of a place implies a sense of national belonging in the postcolonial state" (61). However, Gurnah's anti-nationalist stance, as noted by Philip Whyte, does not "[take] the form of an explicit championing of the perspectives opened up by cultural hybridity and the ebullience of a multiracial society" (11). Erik Falk illuminates Gurnah's nuanced fictional perspective by underscoring that, while Gurnah's fiction "consistently complicates ideas which link an author firmly to a specific place," it also challenges "the seemingly opposite generalizing notion of the 'postcolonial,' which flattens specific histories" (153). In this context, the question of narrative beginnings in *Admiring Silence* emerges as a crucial lens for examining Gurnah's articulation of postcolonial immigrant identity within the ambivalent discursive space between strict patterns of localized and generalized identification.

Critical scholarship on Gurnah indicates that his ambivalent perspective on the question of identity often relies on the detachment of the individual immigrant. However, it is a detachment tempered by "[the] relationality with the Other" against the universalisms of both imperialism and nationalism (Steiner 127). This relationality channels Gurnah's peculiar articulation of an eastern African diaspora, where he seeks to "demote the black Atlantic as the normative constellation of the African diaspora" (Mirmotahari 63). As an example of what Shanti Moorthy calls *Littoral Cosmopolitanism*, Gurnah's works insist on eastward routes of the African diaspora, highlighting the Indian Ocean as a diasporic space that people from Arabia, Persia, India,

and mainland Africa have shared for centuries.[28] In Gurnah's fiction, Africa functions as neither the origin to which one returns nor the moment of equilibrium that a narrative aims to restore. Instead, his fiction diversifies Africa through a literary perspective that points to the diasporic history of eastern Africa while tracing contemporary trajectories of migration.

What stands out in the novel, particularly in relation to this analysis's focus on beginnings, is its depiction of a doubly alienated immigrant subject. The novel's protagonist/narrator experiences displacement not only from his personal past due to migration but also from his communal history as a result of the hegemony of colonial and national narratives. Added to that, the novel narratologically encodes this double alienation through a narrative discourse propelled by silences and fabrications. As Felicity Hand points out, "The narrator's storytelling … becomes a metaphor at one and the same time for immigrant adaptation to new surroundings and for the discursive nature of postcolonial identity itself" (44). [29] In alignment with this overarching characterization, I present my analysis of the novel as a means of delving deeply into this metaphor.

Beginning, I argue, is the crux of understanding how the metaphor of storytelling in *Admiring Silence* functions on the thematic level. More precisely, the notion of what I refer to as "beginning from no beginning" best captures the novel's formal and thematic complexities, unveiling the singularity of its temporal politics as a narrative of displacement. On this ground, my analysis of *Admiring Silence* will start by exploring the dual role of its formal beginning. This involves demonstrating how the narrator's

[28] For more about the centrality of the Indian Ocean to Gurnah's fictional project, see Datta "Swahili Transmodernity and the Indian Ocean:" For a larger overview of the Indian Ocean as a critical paradigm, see Gupta et al. *Eyes Across the Water*
[29] This aspect is emphasized in scholarly studies such as Barasa and Makokha "Weaving Exilic Narratives"; Kaigai "At the Margins."

discursive choice to begin his narrative from no beginning in time resonates with his exploration of his diasporic identity as defined by the lack of a beginning narrative. Subsequently, I will illustrate how this lack underwrites the narrator's fabrications of his past during his immigrant life in England, in reflection of an experience of temporal subalternity. In the final section, I will emphasize the narrator's confrontation, as a returning immigrant, with the corrupt postcolonial state and its politics of living on borrowed time—a confrontation that reinforces his feeling of enduring displacement.

Formal Beginning and Duality of Signification

To discuss beginning as a theme in *Admiring Silence*, one must address the novel's formal beginning in the first place. This is not only because the novel is overtly a narratologically complex narrative but, more importantly, because the authorial deployment of this type of beginning implies a thematic significance. The novel's opening lines confront us, as readers, with a narrative that consciously begins from no beginning. Starting in medias res, the narrator says,

> I have found myself leaning heavily on this pain. At first I tried to silence it, thinking it would go and leave me to my agitated content. That it would linger for a season … Far from going, it became more clear, more precisely located, concrete, an object that occupied space within me, cockroachy, dark and intimate, emitting thick, stinking fumes that reeked of loneliness and terror. (*Admiring* 7)

While the pain described here pertains literally to the narrator's physical heart ailment, as we later discover, the abstract and metaphorical language clearly alludes to a figurative pain—specifically, the pain of displacement. It is striking that in this "opening act," the narrator refrains from specifying a beginning in time for his experience of pain, using the

past-perfect to solidify an impression of what seems to be an eternal, existential pain.[30] The phrase "found myself" also solidifies the sense that the source of this pain lies beyond the boundaries of the narrator's self-perception.

The interpretive force embedded in the narrator's refusal to anchor the story of his pain in an original frame of beginning stems from the nature of *Admiring Silence* as a homodiegetic narrative. In this type of narrative discourse, where the narrator is a character who tells the story from their own perspective, the beginning becomes intertwined with narrative perspective. As contextualist narratologists have argued, narrative perspective is integral to the textual performance of identity and subjectivity. It can reveal "textual possibilities [that] are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity" (Mezei 71). When perceived as a form of identity performance, the narrator's "beginning from no beginning" unveils the peculiarity of his identity struggle as "strictly an Indian Ocean lad" coming from a "littoral society"—to use Michael Pearson's concept—that was victimized and destroyed by the oppressive formation of the Africanist nation-state in postcolonial Zanzibar (*Admiring* 14).[31] This embrace of Indian Oceanness as a form of belonging aligns with the broader symbolism of the Indian Ocean in Gurnah's works, which, as Sreya Datta states, underscores "the inhabitation of the time of a non-Eurocentric modernity" (2). Yet, what *Admiring Silence* shows, in particular, is that this inhabitation of a time outside the national modernity does not imply the existence of an alternative, collective temporality in the present. It represents only the identification with the nonexistence of such a temporality. Just like the paradoxical logic

[30] Catherine Romagnolo posits the concept of the "opening act" as referring to the entanglement between the formal beginning and conceptual beginning in a narrative; see "Introduction" *Opening Acts*.
[31] Michael Pearson suggests that the concept of the littoral is an organizing principle for comprehending the character, unity, and history of the Indian Ocean world. See his "Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems."

underlying the idea of beginning from no beginning, the narrator's identity in *Admiring Silence* signifies a presence without a present, with the present here referring to the simultaneity of the imagined nation's homogeneous, empty time.[32]

The sense of beginning from no beginning, enacted discursively through *Admiring Silence*'s formal opening, immediately takes center stage in the narrative as the overarching reality behind the narrator's struggle. In the novel's early pages, the narrator underscores the fact that he failed to find a way to tell Emma his personal story. This emphasizes the challenge of beginning as the core of this difficulty. He states,

> Sooner or later I am going to have to go back to the beginning and tell this story properly. I can't quite fix on the beginning yet, where it is as such. When I think I've found a good position from which to start, I am tempted by the possibility that everything would seem clearer if I began with what led up to it. In my mind, I take up various starting positions—some before I was born, some after, some yesterday, others in the living present—but after a few minutes of reflection I am thoroughly sick of each of them. They all seem calculated and transparent. I stumble about in this sullen thicket, hoping that I will bump into the moment of release. (*Admiring* 20)

Although the narrative does not explain why this is the case at this point, the fact that this metafictional reflection is triggered by Emma's mention of Holy Matrimony bestowed upon Africans by the British is quite revealing. The narrator remarks, "Holy Matrimony also touched on a problem which was always with me" (21). On a personal, direct level, it touches on the problem of his father's enigmatic disappearance after the mother's pregnancy—the event that prevents the narrator from telling his story entirely from the beginning. On the historical and allegorical levels, Holy Matrimony indicates the colonial interdependence between the British and the Sultan of Zanzibar and his Arab government—an interdependence that facilitated the exploitation of the African majority,

[32] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

leading to the anti-Arab Zanzibar Revolution of 1964, only one month after the declaration of independence.

Within these lines of allegorical interpretation, the father's disappearance takes on a dual significance in relation to the narrative's beginning. On the one hand, it incarnates the colonial rupture out of which the narrator erupts into modernity as a postcolonial subject. On the other hand, the lack of any account of this event echoes the narrator's historical positionality as a postcolonial Zanzibarian of Arab descent for whom the postcolonial nation represents the expulsion not only from the heterogeneous, diasporic history of his homeland but also from its present. His inability to capture a beginning for his story is, therefore, a mere articulation of the inability to locate his identity within the nation's constructed—"calculated and transparent"—temporality.

Fabricated Beginnings

The novel unfolds as a demonstration of the narrator's attempts to narratively overcome this impossibility of beginning through fabrications of the past. These fabrications are not limited to the narrator's interplay with the characters around him; they also entangle the reader in a mode of dialogue with the text and its context. The narrator continually revises his account of childhood in Zanzibar, eventually disclosing, toward the end of the novel, the mysterious disappearance of his father. These fabrications embody an alternative mode of self-articulation that operates by being at odds with what is articulated. On a narratological level, this process of repeatedly returning to the beginning through fabrications falls under what Gerard Genette calls "the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis," which constitute "one of the main aspects of narrative temporality" (113).

While narrative frequency or redundancy is typically associated with presenting multiple perspectives and, consequently, multiple temporalities, the narrator's fabrication-driven redundancy in the homodiegetic narrative of *Admiring Silence*instead reflects an elusive temporality that resists certainty. Precisely, it represents a displacement from the past itself, with the narrative seeming to haunt the past as a reflection of being haunted by it.

Haunting the past is the overarching idea that can encapsulate the narrator's immigrant experience in England as an experience of temporal subalternity. More than anything else, this experience is shaped by the metropolitan desire for an exoticized, racially differentiated past, which places the narrator's past at the disposal of a hegemonic present. In particular, two characters—Emma and her father, Mr. Willoughby—are involved in haunting the narrator's past, each in a distinctive but related way. The father exemplifies colonial nostalgia. As a retiree who once worked "with companies that traded in the dark corners of the world," he craves stories of everyday colonial heroism and benevolence (*Admiring* 34). The narrator feeds Mr. Willoughby's colonial nostalgia with made-up stories focused on his upbringing in colonial Zanzibar, including the European education official who adopted him and gave him "huge meals to eat every day and a second-hand bicycle," the free milk he drank as a child, "flavoured with cardamom and cinnamon, and generously sugared," which native students received in the school, and the English hospital sister who saved his life from "a tropical ague" (28, 30, 35). While the narrator uses these naked fabrications to ridicule Mr. Willoughby, it is remarkable that they all play with the colonial trope of rescue and nurture, which, as Maria Olaussen points out, translates the colonial urge to "place the European at the

origin of the narrative" (Olaussen 66). The essence of this colonial rescue trope lies in the construction of the colonizer as the sole giver of a new beginning.

The semi-caricaturist type of interplay between the narrator and Mr. Willoughby aims only to complicate the conceptualization of the immigrant narrative as a new beginning by recalling the imperial legacy. In this sense, Mr. Willoughby's moments of colonial nostalgia are simply a gateway to the more extensive and complicated contest over the narrator's past, which is represented in his relationship with Emma. When the two first meet, Emma is driven by an intense curiosity about the narrator's past that stems from her radically liberal sympathy for him as a "victim of historical oppression" (*Admiring* 67). The narrator says, "When we first knew each other, Emma was full of questions about me and about my home. She was so beautiful and so full of life … that I could not imagine that she really wanted to know about the calloused and stiffened memories that attached me to my past" (37). These words map the relation between the two by marking a contrast between Emma's fullness of life, which ties her to the lively present, and the narrator's "calloused and stiffened" past. They foreshadow the dominant force that will define their relationship for years to come, with the narrator embodying the past and Emma symbolizing the present.

Unlike her father's straightforward pursuit of affirming his belief in colonialist supremacy through the narrator as a "darkie," Emma's approach to the narrator's past is rooted in a paradoxical desire to know about it (*Admiring* 27). She wants to distance herself from this past by granting formal freedom for its articulation. This is why she gives the narrator "so much room that [he] could only fill it with invention"—a room adorning him "with authority over the whole world south of the Mediterranean and east

of the Atlantic" (68). Emma's action of granting the narrator excessive authority over his past is meant to reproduce the alienness of this past in a way that symbolically resonates with what Stuart Hall calls the "collective amnesia about … empire." Hall uses this notion to refer to how "[m]ost British people looked at … 'children of empire' as if they could not imagine where 'they' had come from, why, or what possible connection they could have with Britain"; accordingly, they interpret their encounter with postcolonial immigrants "as 'a new beginning'" (*Multicultural Question* 105). However, while Emma allows this freedom in order to alienate the narrator's past, the narrator fabricates his past to familiarize it; "I had embellished my story to make it less messy" and "to make us appear less petty to each other, to make our lives seem noble and ordered" (*Admiring* 38). Fabrication, in this sense, suggests an underlying insecurity regarding an alienating present whose uncertainties are magnified by immigrant marginality.

In this sense, the relationship between the narrator and Emma manifests itself as an interplay of self-temporalization. This very interplay explains the centrality of the concept of narrative to the novel's thematic concern. *Admiring Silence* encompasses more than an unreliable, homodiegetic narrator who weaves fabrications; it also puts him in a relationship with Emma, who is "dead keen on the shape of narratives (and went on to take it up as her PhD project)" (*Admiring* 38). Her PhD focuses on "the semiotics of dedicated narrative," which she explains by saying, "Not all narratives carry the burden of events … They are not all stories" (82). While there is no further explanation of what this definition means, the nature of Emma's interest in the narrator's past can be viewed as an applied manifestation. She focuses on the narrative shape of the narrator's past as an alien past and not its content as a story. This is why, at first, she gives him ample room

to fill his narrative with fabrications and then stops paying attention to his stories and never questions his truthfulness, even though he himself expects that she knows his stories are "adjusted to reward and satisfy [him] in the telling" (38). All these aspects suggest that, for Emma, the narrator embodies the past, regardless of his stories and their truthfulness. Pastness, in this sense, is an intrinsic, existential quality of the narrator as the African Other in Emma's perception. Meanwhile, he engages in fabrication in order to assimilate into Emma's present; his fabrications serve as a manifestation of a reproduced pastness and, consequently, a "dedicated" otherness.

Relegating the narrator to a timeless past is integral to the workings of Emma's presentist narrative. In this self-contained perception, the freedom that Emma offers to the narrator's past does not reflect a recognition of its subjectivity as a past; the narrator's past is allowed to neither inform nor influence the omnipotent present of Emma's narrative. While granting the narrator authority over his past, Emma simultaneously exerts a powerful control over his present, holding "all the arrangements … in her hands" (*Admiring* 16). In doing so, she asserts control over the active present, confining the protagonist to a powerless past under the guise of false authority. The power differentials between the two are further demonstrated in Emma's insatiable appetite for importing the narrator's past into her present. She refers to places and people from the narrator's homeland with a striking familiarity; "She talked of them as if they were predictable and ordinary, which was not how they felt to me," the narrator notes (38). If the narrator's fabrications represent a form of "mimicry" reflecting how, as Tina Steiner argues, "the narrator cannot translate his past into the present," the ease with which Emma talks of the narrator's past demonstrates her ability to translate this past into her own present

("Mimicry" 303). For example, the narrator describes the way Emma talks about his uncle, saying,

> It made my uncle seem present, acclimatized to England's curt self-regard, as fluent and comfortable in its chitchat as any other person. It made my uncle seem normal and unremarkable, not a stern, slightly irritable man who is always too busy making money, and who never fails to observe a single prayer everyday. (*Admiring* 38)

Clearly, Emma's mode of translation conveys a sense of authority, as it aligns with what the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti calls domestication; he defines this as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (2). Emma takes the narrator's past and reintroduces it to him in a formula of her own, making this past an undistinguished part of her performance of the present. In other words, it performs a mode of translation that embodies her hegemonic present and its ability to subjugate the narrator's past by denying it its historical difference.

The narrator's use of fabrications in his relationship with both Mr. Willoughby and Emma, though in different forms, points to a shared characteristic between the two. This characteristic is, to borrow Walter Mignolo's term, "the colonization of time."[33] It is compelling to perceive both Mr. Willoughby and Emma as figurative representations signifying the continuity between the British Empire and contemporary multicultural Britain. As has been shown, Mr. Willoughby embodies what Niklas Luhmann refers to as "retrogressive time," a manifestation of the Enlightenment narrative of progress that delivers the past "from the necessity of being grounded in a beginning event" (Luhmann 131). Emma, on the other hand, enacts a liberal, postmodern "reduction to the present," to

[33] Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 178.

use Fredric Jameson's concept from "The End of Temporality." She enforces the present as a perpetual beginning, one that acknowledges the past but denies its subjectivity. This postmodernist mark of Emma's consciousness is evident in the theoretical orientations of her PhD thesis, in which "Foucault and Derrida dominated her discourse," taking the place of "Lukács and Benjamin and Heidegger" (*Admiring* 32). However, the difference between Emma and her father is a matter of narrative shape, not of content. For the protagonist, both embody an oppressive temporality, leaving no room for his authentic experience of the past to speak in the present and have authority to signify within it.

The othering represented in Emma's and Mr. Willoughby's approaches to the narrator's past is rooted in the concept of beginning as "a principle of differentiation," to use Said's term (*Beginnings* 51). It is the binding thread that ties the postcolonial and the immigrant aspects in the narrator's story. Mr. Willoughby, who takes pleasure in listening to the narrator's tales of his early life in Africa as "one of nature's gentlemen" (*Admiring* 27), embodies the colonial notion of uplifting the "backward," "the time-less other" out of the realm of nature and giving them a beginning in history (Nanni 3). The same desire for subjectivity resonates in Emma's efforts to present the narrator's voice. As an example of what Gayatri Spivak identifies as "first-world intellectual[s'] [interest] in the voice of the Other," Emma represents a neocolonial discourse that otherizes by positioning the postcolonial encounter in the metropolis as a beginning for the immigrant to find their voice within the Western regime of representation ("Can Subaltern" 79). However, this beginning does not produce the new; rather, it perpetuates the old by reproducing alterity. Emma affirms this notion when she tells the narrator, "The story exists because it has to, and it needs you to be these things so we can know who we are

… We need you too much, and we need you as you are" (*Admiring* 20). Accordingly, the beginning that Emma's narrative offers to the narrator as an immigrant in England is as counterfeit as his fabricated stories of childhood.

Remarkably, this dialectic of the fabricated past and the fabricated representation between Emma and the narrator comes to an end with the birth of their daughter, Amelia. The arrival of the baby—the outcome of an "unplanned" pregnancy—embodies the end of the imaginative encounter between Emma and the narrator, represented in Emma's fetishization of the narrator's past and his desire for assimilation into her present; it "provided miraculous closure to the narrative fragment," as the narrator underscores (*Admiring* 33). Following Amelia's birth, Emma sets aside her thesis (a symbol of her relationship with the narrator), and her interest in the narrator dramatically diminishes. The narrator begins to feel "invisible" to her; whenever he speaks, it seems as if he is "speaking in an incomprehensible tongue" (34, 35). It is this particular end of fantasizing otherness that places *Admiring Silence* in intertextual dialogue with the postcolonial classic *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. In Salih's work, the protagonist Mustafa Saeed, an Afro-Arab immigrant in the UK, ends the story of the metropolitan fetishization of his racial background by killing his English wife during sexual intercourse. Conversely, Gurnah replaces this trope of death and end, which is no less imaginative than the fetishization of cultural differences, with the trope of life and birth. Yet, such a trope does not convey a celebratory idea of reproduction and continuity; instead, it represents life in its very sense of being a lived reality, not a fantasy. This is exemplified in the prolonged, struggling relationship between the narrator and Emma after parenthood as opposed to their initial, transient exoticization of each other.

The end of the 17-year relationship between Emma and the narrator comes as a paradoxical return to the question of beginning. Upon returning from his visit to Zanzibar, the narrator discovers that, without an explicable reason, Emma has left him for another man. She offers him a justification of a narratological nature, emphasizing that their life together is "a narrative which had refused closure" and that she is now "at the beginning of another story, one which she was choosing for herself, not a tale she had stumbled into and then could not find a way out of" (*Admiring* 219). Remarkably, these are almost the same words that the narrator used to describe his struggle to find a beginning for his story. The similarity, however, highlights an important difference between the two characters' narratives: the narrator's beginning-oriented narrative and Emma's ending-oriented narrative. While the former symbolizes the "retroactive" temporality of postcolonial difference, embodied by the narrator's severed connection to the past, the latter represents the temporality of Western multiculturalism, which functions as a tool for the "management of [the] diversity" that the presence of minorities and immigrants imposes (Gunew 22, 24). As depicted in the narrator's relationship with Emma, this version of multiculturalism constructs the inclusivity of its present by exempting immigrants from their historical development.

Emma's failure to incorporate the narrator into her narrative is confirmed by the simultaneity of her abandonment of him and the quitting of her PhD project. The combination of these results allows us to perceive the narrator's fabrications not only as a manifestation of the narrator's subalternity but also as bearing a certain element of resistance. Gurnah's fiction often features such paradoxical articulations of oppression and resistance through characters who "act in paradoxical ways within social structures

that frequently leave little room for choice" (Steiner and Olaussen 1-2). In *Admiring Silence*, one can read the narrator's fabrications as a counter-performance to Emma's "performance of the present" (Bhabha, *Location* 10). They expose the inaccessibility of the present offered by Emma by revealing its fabricated sense of openness and pluralism. Through his fabrications, the narrator engages in a process akin to what Franz Fanon follows in *The Fact of Blackness*, where Fanon, as elucidated by Bhabha, "distantiates [the metaphysical ideas of progress or racism or rationality] by repeating these ideas, makes them uncanny by displacing them in a number of culturally and contradictory and discursively estranged locations" (*Location* 340). While the fabrications vividly depict the narrator's subalternity, they remain largely a passive form of resistance. Their purpose is not to empower the narrator's past to signify within Emma's present but, rather, to maintain a distance between his individual past and her hegemonic narrative.

The narrator's articulation of identity resonates with this mode of self-temporalization. He defines his identity by articulating what he is not rather than explicitly expressing what he is. In this context, fabrications embody a rejection of self-assertion within any collective form of identity, with identities of this sort being, for the narrator, simply "incurable diseases" (*Admiring* 13). In this sense, the narrator fits neatly into Simon Lewis's categorization of some of Gurnah's characters as "apatrides" who show "nonidentity" rather than the duality or hybridity of identity commonly ascribed to transnational immigrants (qt. in Bosman 37). This category of nonidentity comes very close to the idea of subalternity once one understands subalternity in Gayatri Spivak's terms as "a position without identity" ("Speculations" 476).[34] Gurnah's decision to depict

[34] Gurnah does not introduce himself under any label of belonging, whether based on nationality or minority, or even connected to a literary category. See his interview with Fabienne Roth et al.

the narrator without identity markers—i.e., name and nationality—only confirms his nonidentity status.

Borrowed Beginnings

The entanglement between the hegemony of beginnings and constructions of the past in *Admiring Silence* goes beyond the critique of the Western narrative manipulation of the immigrant's time. The novel levels a parallel critique against the postcolonial nation, whose narrative of the beginning equally alienates the narrator from his own past. The narrator returns to Zanzibar in the 1990s, a period referred to in modern Tanzania's history as the Third Stage of the revolution, during which the state "embraced economic liberalism with a vengeance" (Bissell 220). The narrator captures the spirit of this period by registering the new government's uneven treatment of the historical buildings in Zanzibar. The government left the Arab neighborhoods in the old town—which were looted and destroyed during the African nationalist upheaval—in a state of disrepair and chose a different location for its regime of historicity. It embarked on a project to renovate abandoned colonial buildings and the European quarter "to its period splendor." For new government officials, these colonial buildings "were part of history but … had been turned into hovels by people who cared nothing about their past" (*Admiring* 157). In this example of how "power forgets the past and constructs a new one," as Gurnah states in an essay titled "An Idea of the Past," the diasporic history of the Zanzibarian littoral society is to be forgotten, giving way to the construction of a national past borrowed from colonial modernity.

The concept of temporal borrowing provides an interpretive paradigm for unveiling the significance underlying the narrator's experience of returning to his

homeland after the general amnesty was declared for expatriates. The concept channels the other face of the narrator's temporal displacement as experienced at home. In Zanzibar, the narrator finds himself trapped in a situation similar to what he experienced in England. His past, as an immigrant returning from England, is exoticized by the officials of the new government in their envisioning of a new beginning. Despite the narrator's modest educational accomplishments in England, which qualify him only to be a secondary school teacher, and notwithstanding the fact that his own daughter declared him "a failure," the Permanent Secretary fantasizes about the narrator's hard work and success in England. The Secretary attempts to leverage these fantasies to persuade the narrator to participate in a project to translate European classics; he tells the narrator's brother, "We need people like him to come back, to rebuild the country" (*Admiring* 162). The initiation of a national plan with a translation project of this nature only reveals the falsehood and self-contradiction characterizing the government's imagined new beginning. Driven by economic liberalism, the project is merely another borrowed beginning, much like its nationalist predecessor—Benedict Anderson notes that the national paradigm was drawn from the European experience, which became "everywhere modularly imagined" (*Imagined* 113).

The narrator's return to Zanzibar underscores the irony inherent in these two paradigms of national beginning. Whereas the post-independence paradigm could be imagined only by displacing people like him, the current one is imagined by retrieving him as a returning immigrant from Europe; he is now regarded as a valuable human resource. In both cases, the narrator is the victim of the effort of the people in power to construct the past they require. Hence, when the new government offers him a position,

they are, in fact, offering him a position within their new narrative, one largely akin to his position in Emma's narrative. The narrator registers this analogy by commenting on the government's offer; he uses the same words that Emma once said to him: "Of course, they needed me there. It helped them know who they were." His immigrant identity is desirable as part of a hegemonic project of self-temporalization. The Permanent Secretary wants "people like him … to rebuild the country to something like it was and to move it forward into prosperity" (*Admiring* 162). In this "double time of nation," whose movement simultaneously reconstructs the past and the future, the narrator is expected to perform another fabricated past as an immigrant, one that makes the nation the "prodigious, living principle of ... contemporaneity" (Bhabha, *Location* 208). Like his experience in England, the narrator's real past is relegated to silence within this new positionality in order to allow the hegemonic narrative of the nation to claim the present for itself.

The difference between these two narrative positionalities lies in the fact that while the narrator's immigrant alterity is employed to reproduce a culturally and racially taken-for-granted British contemporaneity, the officials of the new Tanzanian government seek to utilize it as a medium for borrowed contemporaneity. The Permanent Secretary, Amur Malik, asks the narrator to be part of their project to translate "[t]he great books of the world," which "would probably want to begin with Shakespeare, Marx, Tolstoy and Hemingway." When the narrator remarks, "These great thoughts all seem to be from Europe and its dispersals," and asks, "Would you consider translating great thoughts from anywhere else?", Amur Malik responds by saying, "I understand what you mean, but we have to be contemporary." Tellingly, the narrator emphasizes that

"he said the word in English" (*Admiring* 164, 165). This emphasis on contemporaneity reveals that the translation project is, essentially, a project of translating temporality, one in which contemporaneity is paradoxically derived from the European past. It thus represents a reversed or self-imposed "denial of coevalness," to use Johannes Fabian's concept.[35]

The story of the translation project reflects the degree to which contemporaneity is a hegemonizing concept within the ideology of progress in political modernity. It represents a continual process of borrowing or translating Western time in accordance with what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the historicist structure of global historical time, "first in Europe, then elsewhere" (*Provincializing* 7). In this way, the privilege of being together in the present of modernity is established upon the sharing of one universal past—the European past. Gurnah's use of the metaphor of European classics in this context is significant. It mirrors how the European past is treated like a classic, "a work of enduring value" and "a fantasized point of origin" (Mukherjee, *What is Classic* 29). However, for the corrupt government, adopting this version of contemporaneity is not a mere ideological decision but, rather, a strategy of securing funds from European cultural foundations, just as the government is renovating colonial buildings for "tourist potential" (*Admiring* 203). Here, the future is tethered to the reproduction of the European past and the promotion of "colonial nostalgia" in a way that makes the postcolonial state's claims of modernization and dependency one and the same.[36]

From this standpoint, the new government does exactly what the narrator himself does in his relationship with Emma: fabricate the past for the sake of desired integration

[35] *Time and the Other*
[36] Bissell, "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia."

into a Western-dominated present. While both parties' fabrications manifest a severed connection with the past, they are a consequence of a victimized past in the case of the narrator and an act of victimizing the past in the case of the postcolonial national state. The state's systematic forgetting of the past and constructing of another one is underscored in the metaphor of keeping water and sewage pipelines throughout Zanzibar blocked while prioritizing the renovation of the colonial quarter. This literal blockage emblematizes the state of historical blockage in postcolonial Zanzibar—the state of "going nowhere in particular, the postcolonial condition," as the narrator describes it (*Admiring* 141). In another instance, the narrator's half-brother, Akbar, emphasizes the impossibility of a beginning to explain, to the narrator, why the family has not fixed their bathroom: "There is no water … The waste pipe itself is blocked, so are the sewers. Where do you want me to begin?" (127). As much as Akbar's words articulate his society's irrecoverable rupture from its own history, the figurative image of blocked water and sewage pipelines reveals a non-romanticizing view of that history, acknowledging it as a blend of both good and bad content.

The impossibility of finding an authoritative point of beginning within this historical context is the lesson of the narrator's return to Zanzibar. Akbar articulates the reality of the narrator's return by saying, "'I thought you'd come back to get married … Not to carry out an archaeological project'" (*Admiring* 153). Contrary to his family's expectations, the narrator's return is propelled by the prospect of going back to the beginning and unraveling the mystery of his past—his father's escape. His interrogations of his mother about the subject only diminish his final hope of solving that mystery—a persistent longing that he has carried throughout his immigrant life in England. The

return itself is tied to the prospect that the general amnesty issued by the Tanzanian government will enable the Zanzibari immigrants in Europe, who fled the Zanzibar Revolution, to return home and reconnect with their ruptured past.

As the analysis above demonstrates, both prospects prove to be illusions for the narrator. His return only serves to affirm the contrary: "I felt like a refugee from my life. The transformations of things I had known and places which I had lived with differently in my mind for years seemed like an expulsion from my past" (*Admiring* 195). The return to the homeland's geography only affirms the enduring sense of his displacement, as the goal of going back to an explanatory beginning in time that unravels the mystery of his father's disappearance proves unattainable. In this way, the disappearance of the father—an attachment figure in psychoanalytic terms—symbolizes the two-sided reality of the protagonist's displacement.[37] It signifies, on the one hand, the severed connection to the past experienced by a marginalized postcolonial subject, displaced by the nation-building narrative, while implying, on the other hand, the potential for self-determination.

With this conclusion, the return liberates the narrator from aspirations toward authoritative, collective beginnings, transforming his displacement into a solitary space of endless self-discovery. It reveals for him, as a doubly diasporic individual, a life filled with contingent new beginnings. He rejects his family's arranged marriage proposal—another preordained beginning—and, during his flight back to London, forms a potential romantic connection with an Indian woman who, like him, shares a diasporic link to Africa.

[37] See Kim Jones, "The Role of Father in Psychoanalytic Theory: Historical and Contemporary Trends."

He rejects his family's marriage plan, another preordained beginning, and, during his flight back to London, develops a potential romantic connection with an Indian woman who, like him, has a diasporic connection to Africa. These incidents signify not only the reclaiming of subjectivity in the narrative but also an embrace of a diasporic conception of relational identity.[38] However, the most outstanding manifestation of this new paradigm is the narrator's own narrative. In this retrospective narrative, he takes the freedom to craft multiple accounts of his life story, and the reader does not realize, until the novel's conclusion, that these accounts are modifications of the enigma of his father's disappearance. Although they seem deceptive, they are not. "I hate deception," the narrator says early in the novel (*Admiring* 16). They are, in fact, valid accounts of the beginning of his life story, as the mystery of the father's disappearance renders that story perpetually open. Throughout these multiple accounts, the events and actions remain almost the same, with only the identities of the actors changing. In this process, the narrator does not engage in deception; rather, he presents a consciously non-essentializing narrative, one that seeks to challenge the notion of fixed identities through its very form.

3. *The Lowland*: To Inhabit the Perpetual Beginning

The Lowland is a family saga recounting the disintegration of the Bengali Mitra family over the course of three generations. Intertwining political violence with the intricacies of personal lives, the novel opens in the post-independence India of the 1950s, specifically in Calcutta. It follows the journey of three characters from the post-

[38] Relationality is a central narrative practice in Gurnah's fiction and has been interpreted in various ways. Steiner, for instance, associates Gurnah's relationality with a conscious disengagement from community, while Datta emphasizes that in Gurnah's novels, relationality embodies "an ethic of community, where community is the practice of perceiving the world relationally" (1).

independence generation: Subhash, who is capable but non-charismatic; his younger brother Udayan, who is charismatic yet irresponsible; and Gauri, an independent young woman drawn to philosophical pursuits. Gauri eventually marries both brothers, first Udayan and then Subhash after Udayan's death.

Despite being very close all their lives, the brothers, who are only fifteen months apart, take different paths in life. Subhash pursues a career as a scientist in the US, while Udayan becomes a militant member of the Naxalites, a radical group of communists who oppose the Indian government and advocate for the rights of poor peasants. Udayan's life is ended abruptly by a tragic extrajudicial execution by the police, leaveing Gauri a pregnant widow after only two years of a love marriage that both their families opposed.

Having lost his brother for a futuristic cause, Subhash returns to India to support his parents but ends up rescuing Gauri from her own diminished future as a widow in the hostile environment of his parents' house. Subhash replaces his brother by marrying Gauri and takes her back to the US, where she gives birth to Bela and begins pursuing a graduate degree in philosophy. After twelve unhappy but relatively calm years of living together in Rhode Island, Gauri decides to abandon Subhash and Bela while they are on a trip to India. She departs for a teaching job in California, choosing a solitary academic life over the life of motherhood and severing all ties to her past in the process. Gauri's shocking departure deeply impacts Bela, who becomes emotionally withdrawn, especially in her relationship with Subhash, although she still believes he is her biological father.

Bela's story gives substance to the novel's conclusion. After completing a college degree in environmental science, she embraces environmental radicalism, creating a

nomadic life for herself. She lives on farms, participates in manual labor, and has a baby daughter without being in a relationship with the child's father. When Subhash reveals the truth about Bela's biological father, she initially feels strong rage but ultimately comes to terms with the truth. After several years, Gauri unexpectedly stops by Subhash's house on her way to London, only to be dismissed by Bela, who asserts that Gauri is "nothing" to her (Lahiri 383). Knowing that Bela is now aware of the truth about her biological father, Gauri suddenly feels motivated to go to India. There, she visits the Mitras' house, which has undergone a total renovation, and the lowland where Udayan was executed has been built up. This complete change confirms to Gauri that the hard past she once knew no longer exists. Despite experiencing a sense of relief, she considers suicide the night before her flight back to California. Ultimately, however, she chooses life. Upon her return to the US, she finds a letter from Bela. The novel concludes with the disclosure of the details surrounding Udayan's execution, revealing Gauri's unintentional complicity with him in a political assassination—an event that has haunted her throughout the years.

Like Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, Lahiri's *The Lowland* intersects themes of political violence in the postcolonial nation, family and generational dynamics, and migration. While the term "beginning" is less explicit in *The Lowland*, the concept aligns more closely with the idea of initiating change within the novel. As Said notes, beginning is "both something one does and something one thinks about" (*Beginnings* xv). As outlined in the introduction of this chapter, *The Lowland*'s narrative unfolds as a series of different yet interrelated projects of replacement. These projects function as embodied constructions of beginning, encapsulating the novel's exploration of the question of time.

Despite the extensive scholarly analysis of *The Lowland*, the novel's exploration of time and its connection to individual identity and immigration has been largely overlooked. In a short review of the novel in *Time Magazine*, the American novelist and journalist Lev Grossman offers the following insightful remark,

> The true subject of *The Lowland* is time. Lahiri tracks, with the patience and tenacity of a biologist researching long-term migrations, the emotional and geographical distances that time opens up between people, the things that get lost in those spaces, and the rare and surprising things that endure. In *The Lowland*, we are all emigrants, not from one country to another but from the present to the future. ("Novel of Time and Loss")

Echoing Grossman's observation, Kamil Naicker, in a chapter titled "Time and Tide: Topographies of Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*," emphasizes that Lahiri uses water as a motif that '"liquefies' the structure of the narrative, framing memory as something that is 'washed away' and 'reconstituted' in the decades after a traumatic event." In this narrative of liquefaction, Naicker writes, "consecutive time is replaced with a tidal structure in which history recedes and reoccurs through the years" (155). While these insights focus primarily on the emotional realm, I seek, in this analysis, to broaden the exploration of time by highlighting its significance in the novel's controversial representation of South Asian immigrant subjectivity.

Several critical analyses of *The Lowland* align with the view that Lahiri's fiction reinforces a universalist notion of U.S. multiculturalism. As Rajini Srikanth contends, Lahiri's works "offer a comforting version of 'difference' within the twenty-first-century cultural politics of the United States" (Srikanth 51).[39] For example, Esha Shah stresses the novel's "epoch-defining ambition" that narrativizes "the hyper-individualistic self-

[39] For a detailed overview of the critical reception of Lahiri's fiction, see the introduction in Dhingra and Cheung's *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri*.

emerging in the post-ideological era" (Shah 30). This view resonates with Michael K. Walonen's argument that the novel "offers a vision of contemporary revolt … compatible with the abiding individualist ethos and retrenchment of the state that are central to neoliberalism" (Walonen 285). Urmila Seshagiri goes even further by asserting that Lahiri is "an American realist," not "a writer of cosmopolitan, international, or global fiction." She argues that *The Lowland* features "a New England regionalism that contains the consciousness of a nation" ("Jhumpa Lahiri's Real America").

The critical views of Binod Poudyal, Kamil Naicker, and Delphine Munos represent the opposing end of the spectrum. In direct contrast to the kind of perspective that Seshagiri proposes, Poudyal reads *The Lowland* as "'neo-cosmopolitan fiction' invested in the imagination of a transnational and global community" (16).[40] Less concerned with showcasing Lahiri's cosmopolitanism, Naicker and Munos essentially reject the miscasting of the novel's female protagonist, Gauri, in what the former refers to as the "hackneyed [assimilationist] script," the "ready-made binaries," in the latter's words (Munos 549). Such framing, according to Naicker, "ignore[s] the complexities and contradictions with which Lahiri has invested the character" (162).

I aim to contribute to this critical discussion by arguing that examining the question of time in the novel is crucial for evaluating these conflicting perspectives. Through this lens, *The Lowland* emerges as an emancipatory, assimilationist immigrant narrative. However, what sets the novel apart from the conventional, progressive narrative of assimilation is its politics of anti-futurity, wherein assimilation is depicted as a liberation of the individual's present from the burden of social future expectations. If

[40] The divide between the national and the cosmopolitan is not as stark as it seems in these contrasting interpretations. As Timothy Brennan asserts, "Cosmopolitanism is local while denying its local character" (660).

Lahiri's *The Lowland*, as Seshagiri argues, gives us "a portrait of an entire nation through its evocation of a single region," I argue that this emphasis on American geography is juxtaposed with an analogous emphasis on American temporality. Drawing upon the idea that "all statements about the future depend on the society in which they are formulated," I emphasize how the novel features a temporalized migratory emancipation (Luhmann 63). This emancipation illustrates the act of breaking free from oppressive patriarchal futurity—entrenched in the trilogy of family, nation, and revolution—through the liberated and liberating American present.

Within the framework of this end-of-history portrayal of American time, *The Lowland* presents a triumphant migratory present that causes the novel to diverge from teleological immigrant narratives in the sense of imagining a future devoid of futurity. In the novel, the immigrant desire for a self-sufficient present echoes what Kavita Daiya, in her call for "Provincializing America," refers to as "the raced subject's desire for America as home" (270).[41] I employ the phrase "inhabiting the perpetual beginning," as indicated in this section's title, to delineate the process of assimilating into American temporality as envisioned in *The Lowland*. In this context, the politics of time in the novel resonates with what Thomas Allen identifies in *A Republic in Time* as a "nationalist rhetoric that produces the United States as a republic whose real territory is more temporal than spatial" (18). Thus, the concept of perpetual beginning frames America as a home in time, as envisioned within the parameters of *The Lowland*'s immigrant narrative.

[41] Following Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "provincializing Europe," Kavita Daiya calls for "provincializing America" by urging Asian American studies to engage with postcolonial critique in order to "challenge the erasure of global realities in the US in the name of American national assimilation, in the name of a discourse based on the raced subject's desire for America as 'home'" (270).

In the following analysis, my primary focus will be on Gauri as the novel's central protagonist. I will begin by illuminating how Gauri is characterized as a figure whose perception of time is the defining aspect of her consciousness. I will interrogate these representations of Gauri's consciousness to capture how the beginning of her story embodies a particular positionality, one that reflects her cultural background while also expressing her singularity. Next, I will outline Gauri's encounter with futurity in relation to the two projects of replacement undertaken by the brothers: Udayan's political revolution and Subhash's familial revolution. Despite their stark difference, these two revolutions, as I will show, are based on asserting claims on her own time through different modes of what can be called, following Lee Edelman in *No Future*, "reproductive futurism."[42] In the final part of the analysis, I will discuss Gauri's revolutionary act of abandoning her child, emphasizing how, by rejecting projections of the future, it signifies a reclaiming of her own time. Arguing that Gauri's act of revolution reproduces American time as a space of individualistic self-determination, I will highlight how the experience of mature Bela ultimately sanctions Gauri's revolution against futurity.

Replacements as Beginnings

Gauri's narrative is the central storyline through which the essence of *The Lowland*'s politics of time can be captured. This significance stems not only from the fact that Gauri is the novel's main protagonist but also from the specificity of both her academic training as a student and (later) a professor of the philosophy of time, as well as

[42] Edelman, "Introduction."

from her gendered experience as a woman oppressed by the futurity of the patriarchal social order. Through Gauri, we also come to perceive the similarities and differences between the projects of replacement carried out by Udayan and Subhash, who are linked not only by brotherhood but also by their marriages to her. In each of these marriages, Gauri's subjectivity as a wife is relegated to serving the prospects of a failed replacement project, only to ultimately embody the consciousness of "the loss that would never be replaced" (Lahiri 360). This distinguishes Gauri's revolution from Udayan's and Subhash's revolutions in the end.

Just as Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* is narratively driven by a series of fabrications, *The Lowland*'s narrative is propelled by a series of replacements, both collective and individual. Each member of the trio—Gauri, Udayan, and Subhash—is either seeking to replace someone or something or grappling with the feeling of being replaced by someone or something. Udayan joins the Naxalite movement striving "for one system to replace another," while Subhash, upon learning that Udayan has married Gauri, feels "replaced by her" (Lahiri 27, 264). He feels "replaced ... a second time" when Bela withdraws from him to develop a close relationship with her psychological therapist (264). Prior to that, "[h]e ... replaced Udayan and turned into her father" (324). Gauri also feels "[t]hat she, too, was a replacement" when she discovers that Subhash had a relationship with an American woman before her (163). In one way or another, these personal forms of replacement are the remarkable repercussions of Udayan's political project of replacement.

Replacement thus emerges as a central trope in *The Lowland*'s narrative and, consequently, as a reservoir of its temporal processes. It describes a type of futurity

rooted in a preconceived modal of the future, where moving forward is tied to turning back and where a new beginning is a form of repetition. As Udayan's Maoist ideology demonstrates, he firmly believes in instigating, for India, a new future that has "already worked" in China: "Mao changed China," he tells Subhash (Lahiri 29). The overlap between revolutionary newness and repetition in Udayan's imagination is further echoed in his aspiration to emulate Che; he "want[s] to see more of India … the way Che … traveled through South America" (71). On the other hand, Subhash, who insists to Udayan that "India isn't China," undertakes his familial project of replacing his brother with a comparable blindness to the fact that he is not Udayan, "expecting him and Gauri and Bela to carry on as a family. For Gauri to be a mother to Bela, and to remain a wife to him" (29, 182). Although personal, Subhash's project of replacement is, in a way, fueled by the charismatic character of his younger brother, who is always "forging ahead of Subhash" and "challenging him to follow" (30, 57). We are also told that Subhash never "had a sense of himself without Udayan" (7). In this sense, Udayan is Subhash's own Mao and Che, but in a way that ultimately underscore Subhash's passivity. Subhash's marriage to Gauri and adoption of Bela embody his underlying desire to stay connected to Udayan and to the self-perception that this connection once shaped.

These projects of replacement receive a conceptual form through the portrayal of Gauri's perception of time, which makes her something of a temporally fictionalized figure. Lahiri makes clear that Gauri possesses an inherently acute conceptual sensitivity to time that is central to the sophistication of her personality: "[S]he had been born with a map of time in her mind." The reference to Gauri's map of time is juxtaposed with the delineation that "her strongest image was always of time, both past and future; it was an

immediate horizon, at once orienting and containing her" (Lahiri 132). The present is noticeably absent in Gauri's map of time. It embodies a figure of lack in a way that echoes the logic of the two brothers' projects of replacement, in which the future is preconceived as a repetition of a certain past.

During her two years of love marriage to Udayan, Gauri experiences how futurity suspends the present. Udayan's ideological influence on Gauri is evident in his incorporation of her into his revolutionary vision for the future. He regulates Gauri's body temporally, suspending her reproductive capacity until the revolution succeeds; he "asked her to keep track of her periods in the pages of her diary, telling him when it was safe" to touch her (Lahiri 131). Ironically, Udayan breaks this rule when he finds himself in an extremely unsafe situation—hunted by the police amid the disintegration of the Naxalite militia to which he belongs. In the few weeks leading up to Udayan's killing, the couple loses track of the days, and the result is Gauri's unintended pregnancy.

Describing Gauri's pregnancy as unintended does not capture the full picture of this pivotal aspect of the narrative of Udayan and Gauri's relationship. While Udayan's violation of his revolutionary temporality can feasibly be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the revolution's failure, an expression of what Naicker calls "the loss of his faith in what 'was to be,'" it does not signify a loss of faith in the idea of the future itself (160). Conversely, it affirms Udayan's persistent attachment to the idea of the future as he replaces one project of replacement with another: revolution with reproduction. The continuity between the two is reflected in the way reproduction extends Udayan's control over Gauri's female body. These dynamics of their relationship are underscored by Gauri's sentiment toward the baby. From the onset of her pregnancy,

Gauri feels that "[the] baby's lifetime, so scant, [is] already outdistancing and outpacing her own" (Lahiri 132). Such an unexpected shift at the end of Udayan's story from revolutionary futurism to reproductive futurism dramatically emphasizes the contradictory coexistence of these two visions throughout his life. Despite being "so scornful of convention" as a result of his revolutionary politics, Udayan adheres to patriarchal gender roles within the domestic sphere, where Gauri performs traditional wifely duties such as cooking and cleaning (57). His revolutionary agenda does not shake the conventional chasm between the personal and the political.

Placing Gauri's pregnancy within the context of Udayan's extended version of futurity accounts for her decision to abandon her daughter later in the US. Essentially, Gauri abandons Bela to escape from Udayan's alternative future, in which she has been unwillingly entangled, sacrificing her own time in the process. In the wake of Udayan's killing, Gauri finds herself in a new reality; his death "formed a grave in her mind's eye" with the vanishing expectation of revolution that shaped their present from the beginning of their relationship (Lahiri 132). Lahiri describes Gauri's map of time at that moment by saying,

> To the right was the recent past: the year she'd met Udayan, and before that, all the years she'd lived without knowing him. There was the year she was born, 1948, prefaced by all the years and centuries that came before … To the left was the future, the place where her death, unknown but certain, was an end point. In less than nine months a baby would come. But its life had already started, its heart already beating, represented by a separate line creeping forward. (132)

Notably, between birth and death, Udayan and the baby are the only inhabitants of Gauri's imagination; Udayan represents the past, while the baby embodies the future. Gauri herself is strikingly absent in this temporal map, akin to the absence of the present moment in her consciousness. Compared to the tangible identity of both past and future,

"[o]nly the present moment, lacking any perspective, elude[s] her grasp. It [is] like a blind spot, just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision" (132). The intangibility of the present is linked here to the intangibility of Gauri's own self-perception, a fusion that establishes the present as the primary locus of individual identity.

Between the Past and the Future

Lahiri's focus on Gauri's conceptualization of time as a pregnant widow holds particular significance when contextualized within the broader history of literary representations of the Bengali/Hindu widow. In "Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Subject," Dipesh Chakrabarty underscores how modern Bengali novelists "brought the question of the widow's interiority into general view" by "allowing the widow to experience love, but not before love had been theorized as a spiritual struggle to free desire from any suggestion of physicality. Reason was pressed into service on the side of the spiritual" (*Provincializing* 133, 136). In *The Lowland*, the defining aspect of the widow's interiority is not the spiritual forces of heterosexual love but, rather, the forces of the mind. Lahiri's mode of writing Gauri's widowhood, as "the desire for freedom and self-expression," centers on valorizing her acute awareness of her existential experience of time as a widow (*Provincializing* 133). Strikingly, this awareness is catalyzed by the very demise of the spiritual love that Udayan's death symbolizes.

The force of the mind in Gauri's case, or her "intellectual labor," as Nadiminti calls it, reproduces her widowhood as a reunion of reason and passion, which were separated during her marriage to Udayan.[43] This conceptual reunion, when manifested as

[43] Nadiminti, "A Betrayal of Everything" 247.

a tangible reality in the US, unveils the migratory undertones embedded within the novel's construction of widowhood. Gauri's widowhood represents a temporal displacement within the social order, and the emergence of her heightened awareness of time following Udayan's death is simply a natural response to this form of displacement. In this sense, the novel represents widowhood as paving the way for Gauri's eventual separation from the national family and pursuit of an immigrant individualistic self-expression.

Gauri's widowhood, complicated by pregnancy, makes clear that her present is not a time but a liminal space between the past and the future. It is a form of in-betweenness recalling Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future*—a book that aptly illuminates the type of struggle that Gauri experiences in *The Lowland.* In her book's introduction, Arendt uses a parable by Kafka, titled "He," to draw a picture of a present that resembles Gauri's present—one lacking identity, defined as merely "[an] interval between past and future" or "a gap in time." The protagonist in Kafka's parable "has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead." While he battles both antagonists, which are clearly the past and the future, "[h]is dream … is that some time in an unguarded moment … he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other" (*Past and Future* 11). Lahiri's portrayal of Gauri, who herself is a reader of Arendt, aligns with the struggle of Kafka's protagonist; however, the difference is that what remains a dream in Kafka's parable becomes reality in Lahiri's novel.

Gauri's dual fight with the past and the future is epitomized by her gendered struggle with widowhood on one side and motherhood on the other. Widowhood, as a social regulation that the patriarchal Mitra family has imposed on her, represents the force of the past. It condemns Gauri to a life deprived of all good things: colors, non-vegetarian food, and even the space to grieve: "She is unable to cry" (Lahiri 129). In a profound sense, she is stripped of her temporal agency, relegated to a present that is destined to serve as a perpetual extension of the past. The literal image of her positionality is mirrored in the way she is forced to resemble other widows in the family, "[w]omen three times her age" (130). Like her in-laws, Udayan's Naxalite comrades expect Gauri to embrace eternal widowhood. Her remarriage upsets them; they view it as signifying a lack of respect for the martyr Udayan's memory. Their stance reflects the gendered roles imposed upon Naxalite women, who "as 'wives' and 'widows' … were made to perform symbolic and actual roles that effectively renewed middle-class codes and expectations of femininity in the political domain" (Roy 192). Consequently, the political widowhood expected of Gauri is, essentially, a continuation of the social widowhood dictated by patriarchal family norms.

On the other hand, motherhood symbolically embodies the future—the other oppressive force of time with which Gauri finds herself in conflict. Gauri develops a particular sense of the future only after her pregnancy. Lahiri underscores this reality by saying, "After Udayan's death, there was an acute awareness of time, of the future looming, accelerating. The baby's lifetime, so scant, already outdistancing and outpacing her own. This was the logic of parenthood" (Lahiri 173). The baby here emerges as a question about the future, a reality that is not limited to Gauri alone. Udayan's parents

and Subhash are also driven, in their treatment of Gauri, by the futuristic concerns created by the imminent arrival of the baby. For the parents, Gauri matters only because of the future she carries inside her womb—a future of which she, herself, will not be part, as they plan to take the child and expel Gauri from the house. Their decision drives Subhash to overcome his passivity and perform "his own act of revolution" by marrying Gauri and taking her to Rhode Island (191). Subhash's revolutionary act is thus premised on preventing Gauri's separation from what he perceives as her natural future as a mother: the baby.

Although it appears to be a selfless act of rescue, Subhash's marriage to Gauri ultimately shares similar aspects with his parents' intentions for Gauri. Reproductive futurism drives both parties' investment in the child. Through the figure of "the Child as the emblem of futurity," *The Lowland* subtly unveils how reproductive futurism, as Edelman describes it, "generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition" (4, 60). In Subhash's case, the impulse to perpetuate sameness manifests itself first in his project of replacing Udayan as Gauri's husband and second in his ultimate judgment of Gauri, which intriguingly echoes his mother's earlier judgment of her. Years after the couple relocates to Rhode Island, Gauri starts leaving Bela alone at home while she goes on outings. Subhash condemns her for neglecting her motherly duties, declaring, "My mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you" (Lahiri 211). Subhash's embrace of this negative view of Gauri as a mother, despite his broad tolerance of her other choices and the semi-egalitarian nature of their domestic life, reveals a patriarchal perspective on

motherhood. In this way, Gauri's role as wife lays bare the gendered limitations of Subhash's revolution against his parents, much like it did with Udayan's political revolution. The futurism that underwrites both revolutions is always purchased at Gauri's expense, particularly at the expense of her time as a wife and as a mother.

The Lowland portrays not only Gauri's social oppression but also her migratory flight from a temporalized perspective. Gauri regards her flight to the US as a form of travel in time; "On the plane time had been irrelevant but also the only thing that mattered; it was time not space, she'd been aware of traveling through" (Lahiri 149). Lahiri employs the plane as a trope to capture the conceptual image of Gauri's travel in time. On the plane, Gauri "sat among so many passengers, captive, awaiting their destinations. Most of them, Like Gauri, freed in an atmosphere of their own" (149). In this image, the plane seats symbolize a temporality that gives its inhabitants freedom by holding them captive. The outward contradiction in this statement dissolves when the passengers' freedom is understood as being achieved through their unboundedness to contribute to the plane's movement toward its destination. While the plane figuratively embodies the cosmological movement of time, i.e., the linear, relentless movement of time toward the future, the seat here embodies a self-enclosed present moment, detached from any work of futurity. Gauri prefers this form of detachment: "She preferred being on the plane, detached from the earth, the illusion of sitting still" (148). The plane, as a material embodiment of this concept of time, foreshadows the trajectory of Gauri's subsequent experiences in America.

The scene of Gauri's first encounter with America illustrates an opposition between the futurity of the baby she carries and the new horizon that America represents.

During the trip from the airport to Subhash's residence in Rhode Island, Gauri cannot shake the feeling that "she contain[s] a ghost, as Udayan [is]," referring to her unborn child (149). The notion of being pregnant with a ghost indicates the haunting quality of the future of which Gauri conceives; it is the future, not the past as is usual, that haunts her. The ghostliness of Gauri's unborn child aligns with Avery F. Gordon's concept that "haunting … is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known." However, the child does not symbolize the unknown or the "concealed" that "demands its due," as Gordon describes, but rather embodies the pre-known itself (xvi). The pre-known in Gauri's case speaks to the reality that with the child being unaware of her biological father, the past of Udayan will persistently inhabit Gauri's future. The narrative affirms this understanding of how Gauri foresees her future by noting that when the couple passes through a small city named "Providence," Gauri knows the meaning of the word, "the future beheld before it was experienced" (Lahiri 149). This form of haunting future, moved by reproductive futurism, signifies a paradoxical cycle in which the past emerges from the future.

In contrast to this past-future continuity that Gauri's unborn child embodies, the image of American temporality emphasizes the primacy and clarity of the present. Picturing the sky along the road from the airport to Rhode Island, Lahiri writes, "It was the middle of the day, the sun directly overhead. A bright blue sky, transparent clouds. A time of day lacking mystery, only an assertion of the day itself. As if the sky were not meant to darken, the day not meant to end" (Lahiri 149). As this picture suggests, the temporal landscape of America asserts itself with a sense of self-assured stillness devoid of anticipation. If, as Frances Bartkowski asserts, "the work of anticipation [is] motivated

by anxiety," this symbolic portrait of the American temporality as grounded in a transparent present can be viewed as suggesting a sense of equilibrium and resolution (10). In contrast to the historical anxieties that Gauri's narrative represents—concerning independence, revolution, and postcolonial migration—the American temporality is portrayed as a dream for Gauri.

Liberating American Beginnings

During her first years in Rhode Island, the liberating potential of American time remains an unrealized horizon for Gauri. Subhash brings her to the US with the hope of giving her "an opportunity to begin again," yet motherhood hinders Gauri's ability to begin anew (Lahiri 143). The futurity accompanying her child prevents Gauri from living the American present. Like the obstructive force of the future in Kafka's parable, Bela "blocks the road ahead" (*Past and Future* 7). Her dependence as a child restricts Gauri mentally, physically, and, in particular, temporally. Whenever she is with Bela, Gauri "[is] aware of time not passing" (Lahiri 195). She becomes increasingly aware of the time consumed by her motherly relationship with Bela as she begins leaving Bela alone at home during her errands: "Half an hour's careful preparation, to allow for five minutes away" (209). During these outings, Gauri finds herself "disoriented by the sense of freedom," which gradually leads her to extend the duration of her outings, transforming them into moments of introspection, a "[t]ime to speculate that, without Bela or Subhash, her life might be a different thing" (210). Gauri's outings thus represent an intertwining of the sense of freedom with the concept of free time.

By deserting Bela and Subhash, Gauri enacts her own revolution, driven by the pursuit of "a room of one's own" in time. Her revolution interrupts the repetitive

sameness of reproductive futurity, initiating a new beginning in the Arendtian sense, one that embodies the "insertion of man into time [by] break[ing] up the unidirectional flow of time" (*Past and Future* 11). "Every new beginning," Arendt suggests, "is by nature a miracle when seen and experienced from the standpoint of the processes it necessarily interrupts" (*Promise of Politics* 112). When Gauri moves to California, "this land of bright light and sharp shadows," everything around her seems to tell her "to begin again" (Lahiri 286). This image of California is not an arbitrary one; it evokes imagery analogous to Rhode Island's "transparent," "bright blue sky," thereby establishing a sense of continuity and unity within the broader American national geography. This is a vivid example of what Seshagiri finds, in *The Lowland*, a national regionalism emphasizing the "unified character of New England, and, by extension, of America itself." However, it resonates beyond geographical continuity, suggesting also a continuity of American time—one defined by the clarity of the present moment to the mind's eye rather than by foresight and anticipation.

The peculiarity of Gauri's new beginning in California lies in its rejection of any kind of futurity. It is characterized by the deliberate eschewing of what Grosz calls "the temptation to predict, to forecast, to extrapolate trends of the present into the future" (2). Gauri secures a blank future through isolation,

> Isolation offered its own form of companionship … The promise that she would find things where she put them, that there would be no interruption, no surprise … it was something upon which she'd come to depend, with which she'd entered by now into a relationship, more satisfying and enduring than the relationships she'd experienced in either of her marriages. (Lahiri 287)

More than a lifestyle, isolation constitutes Gauri's medium of self-temporalization. She limits her relations with men to friendships, never allowing "herself to reach the point where they might complicate her life" (287). The complication she fears is simply

heteronormative futurity, given that heterosexual relations, as José Esteban Muñoz points out, are structurally imbricated with futurity.[44] Gauri's stance in this regard is affirmed by the only sexual relationship she has during her time in California: a fleeting homosexual relationship with her former advisee, Lorna. The relationship, markedly, denotes a moment taken lightly rather than one built on the prospect of endurance. This makes it a coronation of Gauri's feminist version of the reduction-to-present.

Within the parameters of this presentism, Gauri's beginning in California is not "[a] beginning of something but of somebody," to use Arendt's words (*Human Condition* 177). Its revolutionary essence lies in its being a continuously self-aware inhabitation of that "speck that [keeps] blinking, brightening and diminishing, something neither alive nor dead," which is called the present (Lahiri 181). If Udayan's and Subhash's revolutions seek to repeat a particular past, Gauri revolts by repeating/perpetuating the act of beginning itself. This idea aligns more closely with the Kierkegaardian sense of revolution that Slavoj Žižek elucidates: "A revolutionary process is not a gradual progress but a repetitive movement, a movement of repeating the beginning, again and again" ("Begin from the Beginning" 45). In this way, Gauri perpetuates the unpredictability of the future, where "unpredictability is not lack of foresight" but, rather, a confirmation of the restoration of the agency to act and the resurgence of the self as a beginner (*Past and Future* 60). Her beginning is thus more of a conceptual project, enacted as a redefining of her sense of self-identity.

Lahiri presents Gauri's reclaiming of agency through an isolated academic life as less a character transformation and more an assertion of her true character. The desire for

[44] See *Cruising Utopia* 49.

autonomy and philosophical introspection is a persistent aspect of her character; this desire is the defining quality of her personality from the outset of her story in the novel. Early in her relationship with Udayan, we are told, "Without him she was reminded of herself again. A person most at ease with her books, spending afternoons filling her notebooks in the cool high-ceilinged reading room of Presidency's library" (Lahiri 72). This reality suggests that Gauri's relationship with Udayan, grounded in love, has eclipsed her sense of self. From this standpoint, her "disavowal of what queer theorist Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism' in favor of 'feminist intellectual labor,'" as Kalyan Nadiminti argues, is not an act of replacement (Nadiminti 242). It is instead an act of restoring the individual self from the oppressive projects of collective futurity into which she has been entrapped.

While this aspect has been the cornerstone of the critical perspective defending Gauri's character against being framed as an American assimilationist narrative, it asserts such framing rather than refuting it. Naicker, for example, defends Gauri from the charge of imbibing the "American craze for individuality, by emphasizing that her "motives are more intimate and longer-lived than any 'American craze' can account for" (163). As I suggested above, it is true that Gauri's motives were prominent before her time in America. However, this does not undermine the fact of her Americanization; quite the opposite, it affirms it. Gauri's experience universalizes America by presenting it as the time when her individual motives find fulfillment. If these motives are depicted as fundamentally universal and human, their fulfillment in the narrative is uniquely American. Gauri's narrative arc denotes a personalized version of the neoliberal end of history, where "the temporal domain of the future would give way to a perpetual,

unchanging present defined by American … values" (Dunmire 15).[45] In this domain, Gauri is depicted as the sole author of her time and life. For thirty years, she lives in a flattened temporality free of disruptions, with aging being the only aspect of change that her narrative reflects.

The narrative swiftly traverses thirty years of Gauri's life, allowing room for the account of her daughter Bela's adulthood. Despite the rift between them, Bela's narrative, I argue, is an extension of her mother's. Gauri's withdrawal from her daughter's life disrupts the notion of generational continuity within the family, giving Bela the space to cultivate her distinct identity beyond the confines of futurity. This is what happens, as Bela leads a life of self-reliance and emancipation from normative expectations—a life rooted in minimalist nomadism and agricultural labor instead of academic accomplishment. Like Gauri's non-normative interest in studying philosophy in India, Bela's manual labor challenges the stereotypical image of the high-achieving professional associated with South Asian Americans. More importantly, Bela leaves Subhash for a reason similar to her mother's: She requires "a certain amount of time to herself" (Lahiri 270). During her time away from Subhash, she lives "without insurance, without heed for her future," preferring to reside among people who operate on "different schedules"—people with "pasts they don't care to discuss" (311). Bela's rejection of futurity also involves a rejection of any form of heteronormative "romantic relationship that's endured for any length of time." When she conceives a child, the matter remains unknown to the father, who is known only to Bela (313). By separating the child from the frame of

[45] This reading resonates with Michael K. Walonen's and Esha Shah's readings of the novel in highlighting a post-ideological, neoliberal subjectivity at work in *The Lowland*.

heteronormative reproduction, Bela decouples the future from futurity, thereby echoing her mother's anti-futuristic revolution itself.

Furthermore, Bela's narrative epitomizes the American temporality into which she was born. Lahiri's depiction of Bela's childhood perception of time is based mainly on the alterity between the American and Bengali conceptions of time. To four-year-old Bela, the notion of the past is strikingly short. She uses "yesterday" for "whatever was no longer the case." We are also told, "It was the English word she used. It was in English that the past was unilateral; in Bengali, the word for yesterday, *kal*, was also the word for tomorrow" (Lahiri 178). This linguistic representation of Indian/Bengali time blurs the distinction between past and future—an aspect reminiscent of the logic of reproductive futurism as depicted throughout the novel. Bela's concept of tomorrow, on the other hand, is a different one; "time flow[s] for Bela in the opposite direction. *The day after yesterday*, she sometimes say[s]" (178). While the text does not mention what Bela means by this formulation, she is clearly referring to the notion of today. Angelo Monaco has interpreted this formulation as reflecting how "Bela juxtaposes past, present, and future" (230). However, what distinguishes this juxtaposition is its emphasis on the overarching primacy of the present time. This is evident in the use of the adverb "after," with its chronologically futuristic overtones, along with the word "yesterday," to convey the notion of today. In Bela's childhood map of time, both the past and the future dissolve in the present.

As an articulation of American time, Bela's childhood map of time resonates in contrast to Gauri's map of time as shaped by her Indian upbringing. Bela's juxtaposition of time expresses the unification and wholeness of American time, unlike Gauri's map of

time, where "each concept exist[s] in its own topography, three-dimensional, physical" (Lahiri 132). Gauri's map of time resonates with the complicated reality of postcolonial India and its "fractious politics" as "an ancient place that was also young, still struggling to know itself" (50). The portrayal of these two contrasting upbringings underscores a connection between geography and temporality: a theme foreshadowed earlier in the novel by Gauri's reference to "Einstein's contribution [to the theory of time]," which proposes that "time and space [are] intertwined" (181). From this standpoint, Gauri's journey of reclaiming her individuality by embracing a presentist concept of time, bestowed upon Bela by her American birth, illustrates how Bela's narrative serves as a benchmark for acknowledging Gauri's successful assimilation.

As an emblem of free, individual American time, Bela brings both closure and redemption to the Mitra family's history of replacement. She replaces the logic of replacement and its repetitive beginnings with the logic of redefinition. Through redefinitions, she reconstructs the inter-generational dynamics of the family based on free, individualistic connectivity rather than the biological temporality of reproduction. In Subhash's case, Bela redefines their relationship by embracing him as her father even though she had previously left in anger upon discovering that he was not her biological parent. By the end of the novel, we learn that she has sent a letter to Gauri. This happens despite the fact that Bela had dismissed Gauri from the house when they met again after many years apart and declared that Gauri was dead to her. In relation to Udayan, Bela shares "a spirit of opposition" rooted in universalism (Lahiri 272). Yet she redefines such concepts through what can be identified as her "eco-cosmopolitanism," a term that Ursula K. Heise proposes to describe "an environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism" that "is an

attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (59, 61). From this standpoint, Bela's apolitical eco-cosmopolitanism signifies a dismissal of Udayan's communist political ideology—a paradigm shift from the Maoist "law of history" in "Mother India" to the ecological temporality of Mother Earth (Lahiri 39).[46]

The ultimate assertion that *The Lowland* is an immigrant narrative of assimilation is embodied in Gauri's journey back to Kolkata. Her return deviates from the idea of nurturing cultural roots or familial connections typically associated with what Patricia Chu refers to as "diasporic visits" (Chu 34).[47] Visiting India was not part of Gauri's initial plans, but her meeting with Bela, who "[put] an end to Udayan" by revealing that she knows the truth about him, unexpectedly prompts her to consider the trip (Lahiri 383). The return thus comes as a confirmation of Udayan's death in Gauri's perception.[48] In Kolkata, the only connection she feels to Udayan is "the bond of not existing"—in other words, a shared future past.[49] Gauri journeys through the city more as a tourist, and local people glance at her in her "American clothing and shoes," thereby confirming her situatedness in her own present, one that is different from their own (391). Internally, she feels the same; "her mind [is] blank. It holds [s] only the present moment, nothing else" (396). When she stops by the Mitras' old house, the building is not what she expected, "aged but standing;" it has changed entirely, "look[ing] younger," and all the details she

[46] I use the concept of Mother India, drawing upon Sumathi Ramaswamy's title, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, which is an argument about the evolution of Indian nationalism. The invocation of the nationalist idea becomes particularly relevant within the context of Udayan's Maoist ideology, as Maoism is commonly perceived as a form of communism infused with nationalism.
[47] According to Chu, diasporic visits aim "to maintain ties with family and friends, to transmit familial and cultural ties to their offspring, to tour, and to vacation" (34).
[48] This sense of the death of an epoch aligns Gauri's return with other forms of return prevalent in Lahiri's oeuvre—returns driven by death. As is evident in Subhash's returns to India or even in the returns from Lahiri's earlier novel, *The Namesake*, returns for Lahiri's characters are driven mainly by the death of a parent or family member. In a sense, they are mourning returns.
[49] "Future Past" is a concept famously utilized by Reinhart Koselleck; see *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time.*

remembers "[are] no longer there" (392). The house, which the parents had built with the expectation that Subhash and Udayan would "grow old in the house they had built for them," represents a symbol of future-building in the novel (182). Its younger appearance now signifies a shift in time—a novel time declaring the demise of the futurism the house once epitomized.

Although the end of *The Lowland* takes place in India, Lahiri does not give that nation any temporal agency to contribute to the narrative resolution. It is the American time that settles the intergenerational struggle and liberates immigrant characters by offering new beginnings within a perpetually redemptive present. The difference between India and America is also embedded in the way Lahiri narrates the events in each place. Not only are the events in India largely political, but they also transpire in a historically specific world. Most of the chapters in the first half of the novel begin with a precise date, whereas the events that take place in the US remain temporally floating, untethered to specific dates or a collective historical context. The US thus appears as whole and timeless in the privileged, end-of-history sense of the word. This image of American time resonates with what Thomas Allen calls the immersion of mainstream national American culture in "an ideological belief in its own transcendence of history" (*Republic* 20). Such a transcendence echoes the nature of American exceptionalism, which, unlike national narratives of nations forged in anti-colonial struggles (like India), is, as Ian Tyrrell points out, "not a fanciful story of cultural or national origins in itself" (49). Hence, Lahiri's temporalized narrative of assimilation appeals to the universalized concept of American individual liberty as offering liberation from the reproductive beginnings of the postcolonial nation.

The Lowland enacts American transcendence by drawing the boundaries between the political and the personal in a way that reinforces America as a space where individual experiences remain insulated from the broader historical context of political events. For example, the narrative fleetingly mentions protests against the Vietnam and 2003 Iraq wars, yet without any connection to or impact on the daily lives of its immigrant characters.[50] They remain securely removed from these simultaneously national and global disrupting realities, in stark contrast to their experiences in India, where the disintegration of the Mitra family is, in the first place, the effect of political turmoil. A striking affirmation of this positionality lies in the novel's complete omission of the events of 9/11—a moment that erased the racial specificity of South Asian Americans, transforming them, as Dayia asserts, "from model minority [to] potential terrorists" (*Violent Belongings* 201). In this way, Lahiri's immigrant characters stand safe in the national gaze as they are framed within an apolitical, individualistic temporality of assimilation.

4. Conclusion: Endings as Beginnings

The representations of the theme of beginning in *Admiring Silence* and *The Lowland* show a clear divergence in terms of the politics of assimilation. The former presents a narrative of unsuccessful assimilation into both the homeland and the host nations, leading to the embrace of diasporic identity. In contrast, *The Lowland* represents a South-Asian American assimilation narrative centered around the restoration of the individual self. However, the significance of the thematization of immigrant beginnings

[50] Lahiri, *The Lowland* 34, 299.

in the two novels extends beyond merely addressing the question of assimilation. If, as Marc Augé suggests, "it is very difficult to make time into a principle of intelligibility, let alone a principle of identity," *Admiring Silence* and *The Lowland* succeed in this difficult task by focusing on the concept of beginning (Augé 25). As the analysis has demonstrated, they emphasize the temporal aspects of the immigrant experience, shedding light on its anxious relationship, as a personal beginning, with collective beginnings associated with family and nation. By doing so, they complicate and redraw not only the boundaries of ethnic, cultural, and national belongings but also the boundaries of the displacement itself.

Each novel's anchoring of the immigrant narrative to the birth of the postcolonial nation-state extends displacement beyond spatial migration. It redraws the temporal boundaries of displacement in a way that challenges the conventional perception of migration as epistemologically ingrained in what John Agnew refers to as "the territorial trap" of the nation-state.[51] Spatial mobility, it can be said, represents only an intense expression of the temporal displacement that the postcolonial immigrant subject experiences, rather than being its originator. In Gurnah's novel, the protagonist narrator is the historical outcome of the "epistemic violence," as per Spivak's concept, enacted by the Zanzibar revolution and the subsequent formation of the Tanzanian nation-state.[52] In resonance with the physical violence of the revolution, which forcibly displaces the Arab ethnic minority community from its location, this epistemic violence expels the narrator from the materiality of his own past, thereby erasing the diasporic history of West Africa in the name of Afro-nationalism.

[51] See Agnew, "The Territorial Trap."
[52] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Comparably, Lahiri cites the simultaneous partition and independence of India to contextualize a revolution that resulted in the dispersion of the Mitra family rather than achieving its aspiration of a fully independent India; "India was still a semicolonial country," says Udayan (Lahiri 30). Lahiri positions this post-independence violence and dispersal as a continuation of the violence and internal mass displacement on which India's partition and independence were established. In a sense, this reference to the intertwining of the violence of national formation and displacement in *The Lowland* and *Admiring Silence* reminds us of what Dayia calls "the structural absence of the refugee in the study of nationalism" (*Violent Belongings* 17). However, it is a reference that focuses more on highlighting how violent national beginnings continue to produce various forms of displacement beyond the initial moment of the nation's birth. Displacement, in this sense, is not only an effect of the formation of the nation but also a continuous consequence of its existence.

The temporalized paradigm of displacement in both novels depicts the postcolonial beginning as a violent rupture, revealing a paradoxical reality of a place that is old and new at the same time. For the novels' marginalized ethnic and gendered subjectivities, displacement emerges as a consequence of the narrative and social constructions of national time before it manifests as a departure from the territoriality of the nation. This displacement signifies not an expulsion from the nationally constructed present altogether but, rather, a form of subjugation through which the social and narrative hegemony of national temporality reproduces itself via the oppressed. *Admiring Silence* enacts this meaning through an immigrant subject whose displacement—shaped by power dynamics and their effects on reconstructing the past—becomes essential for

reinforcing the domination of the present. Gauri's oppression as a woman is defined in even clearer temporal terms. She embodies the reproductive role assigned to women as "bearers of the collective" within the social construct of national patriarchy by serving as the bearer of the future (Yuval-Davis 26). The protagonists in the two novels experience these hegemonic constructions—whether related to the past or the future—as a form of displacement from the present itself.

The narrative endings in Gurnah's and Lahiri's novels offer further insight into the significance of their evocation of the birth of the postcolonial nation as a chronological beginning of their immigrant narratives. As Frank Kermode suggests in *The Sense of an Ending*, fictions are those "coherent patterns" that "by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle" (17). The endings of both novels are provisioned as a new beginning, wherein the protagonists are left with no attachment to anything other than themselves. Gurnah's protagonist is declared lost by his Zanzibarian family and is deserted by his English wife and daughter, whereas *The Lowland* ends with Gauri dismissing the idea of suicide and opting for life during the final night of her visit to Kolkata—a visit that affirms for her the death of Udayan in her memory. Remarkable in this context is that both novels juxtapose this particular closure with their protagonists' return from their homeland after long years away. It is then the second departure from home, rather than the first one, that brings about a new beginning, one in which the notion of returning to the homeland represents not a restoration of roots but, rather, a movement forward. In this way, the two novels decouple the idea of the immigrant's new beginning from the spatial frame of mobility,

delineating it as a temporal consciousness that emerges from lived experience—a process of becoming rather than being.

By invoking postcolonial national beginnings as a narrative paradigm, *Admiring Silence* and *The Lowland* ultimately deconstruct these beginnings rather than reinforce them. The ending of *Admiring Silence* enacts the separation from national temporality by opening up the past as embodied in the protagonist's disclosure, upon his realization that the story of his father's disappearance will remain a mystery, that he—the protagonist—has been fabricating his own past. *The Lowland*'s ending, on the other hand, centers around opening up the future, as Gauri confirms her liberation from reproductive futurism and its logic of replacement and repetition. Through this portrayal of displaced ethnic and gendered subjectivities, both works disrupt the essentialist notion of the nation as an originating, fixed beginning that underpins a constructed present. *Admiring Silence* performs this disruption by demonstrating how the omission of certain beginnings in the past and the invention of others form the narratological infrastructure of a constructed national present. In the case of *The Lowland*, the narrative unpacks how such a constructed present is socially reproduced through what can be called constructions of reproductive beginnings, in which the social continuity between the past and the future is to be maintained primarily through the gendered roles assigned to women.

The immigrant narratives in both novels challenge the hegemonic beginnings of the imagined community through a pluralistic concept of beginning. This concept is construed as "an internal indication of change, which helps underline the agent's essential freedom and potential" rather than as an external force of constituting subjectivity through narrative and social time (Leander 16). It embodies openness and newness by

rejecting the limiting of individual subjectivity through beginnings that reproduce homogenizing pasts and project uniform futures. Gurnah illuminates a sense of openness by confounding historical beginnings with fabricated ones in his narrative. The narrative produces a diasporic subject who is ultimately proven unable to be either Tanzanian or English and whose migration represents an expulsion from the diasporic history of West Africa rather than an extension of it. Lahiri's perpetual beginning, on the other hand, is established by universalizing the American temporality as free and post-national, with assimilation equating to a reclamation of one's self-identity and the achievement of individual liberation.

Chapter Two: Parallel Temporalities: Temporalization of History in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*

1. Introduction: Old Histories and New Identities

The preceding chapter examined two novels that portray immigrant experiences of time as tied to the history of the birth of the postcolonial nation-state. Within that relatively narrow temporal frame, those novels operate through a mode of historicity that resonates with what Greg Forter identifies in *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction* as "the historicity of the present moment," a concept prevalent in canonical postcolonial novels. In this book, Forter theorizes a distinct genre of contemporary postcolonial historical fiction that departs from the canonical mode of historicity by focusing on a "deeper past." This departure, Forter contends, is driven by "an intuition that the 'historicity of the present moment' … must be supplemented by an explicit exploration of the colonial past if we are to untangle the meaning of our present and invent a genuinely postcolonial future" (1, 2). This chapter explores two contemporary immigrant novels, *Homegoing* (2016) by Ghanaian American author Yaa Gyasi and *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) by Sudanese British author Leila Aboulela, that intertwine present-day immigrant experiences with earlier histories of colonial modernity: the onset of the transatlantic slave trade in eighteenth-century West Africa in the former and the nineteenth-century resistance of Imam Shamil of Dagestan against Imperial Russia's conquest of the Caucasus in the latter.

These deeper histories are channeled through a parallel narrative structure, juxtaposing two interrelated, simultaneous historical storylines. In *Homegoing*, one

family is divided into two branches across the Atlantic, while in *The Kindness of Enemies*, two abductions occur on opposite sides of the war. The texts further emphasize this narrative parallelism through metahistorical self-reflection. In *Homegoing*, a Ghanaian history teacher tells his students that "history is storytelling" and urges them to always ask, "Whose story am I missing?" (226). Similarly, in *The Kindness of Enemies*, the narrator conveys Imam Shamil's reaction to hearing his former Russian enemies' accounts of the Caucasian War by remarking, "To recount history in parallel is intellectually fulfilling" (312). Thus, the two texts exhibit a dual structure of parallelism: historical storylines unfold alongside one another while being embedded within a broader framework that mirrors present-day storylines. This chapter explores how these parallel temporalities reflect the cultural context depicted in each novel. It also examines how they facilitate the construction of immigrant identities, both formally and thematically, while contributing to broader conceptualizations of redemption for oppressed communities. Finally, the chapter considers how the politics of time in each novel allow us to reimagine fiction's relationship to history through the specific lens of the immigrant experience.

I argue that, by employing parallel temporalities, *Homegoing* and *The Kindness of Enemies* invite a reading that broadens the prospect of historical representation by addressing the narrative production of what Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, calls the "third time – properly historical time –" where "the reinscription of lived time on cosmic time" takes place. It is thus not the past and present realities themselves that are at stake in the two novels but, rather, the "procedures of connection" that bring them together within a unified system of signification (*Vol.3* 99). When viewed as a procedure

of connection, narrative parallelism in both novels enacts what I refer to as "a temporalization of history." By this term, I underline a fictional mode of writing history that challenges geographical frameworks and instead embeds history within lived experience, thus writing history as individual time. The two novels, by transforming experience into a "chronotope" of history—to use Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, which literally means "time space"—illustrate that historical time is not a homogenous linear narrative of progress,[53] or, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, that "historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself" (*Provincializing* 16). Instead, they portray it as a plurality of human modes of temporalizing the sense of being in the world—a concept that the narrative in each novel facilitates through textual enactment of simultaneity, intersection, persistence, and continuity, thereby forging nonlinear connections across the discontinuities of spatialized histories.

While contesting the linear narrative of modernity's "empty, homogeneous time," temporalizing history in *Homegoing* and *The Kindness of Enemies* fundamentally facilitates the articulation of new immigrant identities.[54] Both the former, as an African American immigrant narrative, and the latter, as a work of Muslim immigrant fiction, use parallel temporalities to broaden the perspective on the social realities with which they critically engage. In doing so, they cultivate a corrective imaginary that challenges the pessimistic and radical temporalities of breakage and discontinuity inherent in dominant, binary perceptions of African immigrant and Muslim immigrant identities.

In *Homegoing*, this binarism manifests itself in the divide between Africans and African

[53] Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope describes "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*Dialogic Imagination* 84).
[54] Walter Benjamin coined the concept of "empty, homogeneous time" in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

Americans, while in *The Kindness of Enemies*, it appears between secular Muslims and radical/fundamentalist Muslims.

While the parallel structure of the two novels might formally set them apart from conventional historical novels, it actually emphasizes the thematic intersection of their politics of time with the duality of perspective that is characteristic of postcolonial historical fiction. In his aforementioned book, Forter refers to this duality of perspective as "the genre's double vision," arguing that it

> develops critical maps of colonialism that are global in their reach—that oblige us to think beyond both the nation and recent, mono-oceanic paradigms for superseding it; and it engages in the utopian project of constellating alternative, post-national futures, which the genre locates in the unrealized residues of a past that persists within yet disrupts the "homogeneous, empty time" of colonial modernity. (2)

The notion of duality also reverberates in Hamish Dalley's *The Postcolonial Historical Novel*, which argues for "a twenty-first-century postcolonial realist aesthetics" that "makes it coherent for writers to claim that their fictional narratives be read as ethically engaged interpretations of the actual past and, as such, a meaningful source of knowledge about history" (5).[55] Both theoretical evocations see duality as expanding the scope of the fictional mediation of history beyond the postmodern trope of what Linda Hutcheon, in her theory of "Historiographic Metafiction," cites as "problematiz[ing] the very possibility of historical knowledge" (106). Duality thus expresses a self-reflexivity that, while pointing to the implications of the rewriting of history, attends to fiction's capacity for probing the alterity of the past and projecting interpretations for the future. As Andrew James Johnston and Kai Wiegandt point out in *The Return of the Historical Novel*, a new phase in the critical reception of historical fiction emphasizes

[55] Hamish Dalley and Greg Forter's studies are the only full studies to date on the subject of the postcolonial historical novel.

> a notion of the past that seeks to understand temporal difference as a fundamental category of cultural experience, while recognizing, at the same time, that any awareness of the otherness of the past must inevitably be directed by the concerns and the discursive constraints prevailing in the present. (14)

The centrality of past-present dynamics in these various assessments of contemporary historical fiction reflects the critical role that the question of temporality plays in historical representation. In a minor literature such as migrant fiction, in which the present is also a locus of alterity, this role should further enable the spotlighting of fictional acts of cultural and ethnic self-temporalization at the heart of literary mediations of history.

This chapter intervenes by arguing that narrative parallelism in *Homegoing* and *The Kindness of Enemies* exemplifies a distinct form of double-vision historicity. This historicity mobilizes the in-betweenness of the immigrant experience as a temporal in-betweenness, wherein identity is configured at the intersection of past and present. Unlike the conventional "dual-focus narratives" that Rick Altman describes in *A Theory of Narrative*, where "parallelism induces comparison of the two sides" that "ends when the two sides are reduced to one," the parallel structures of temporality in *Homegoing* and *The Kindness of Enemies* seek to represent a "Third Space"(Altman 55).[56] However, the two novels' third space is enacted primarily as an internal critique of homogenous constructions of immigrant identity, reflecting the literary perspective each novel comes to represent: *Homegoing* as an Afropolitan text and *The Kindness of Enemies* as a narrative committed to an Islamic worldview shaped by migratory, minoritarian status.

[56] As theorized by Homi Bhabha, the "Third Space" refers to an in-between space located between existing referential systems and binaries, where the production of meaning "is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You," the self and the other, but takes place in the "realm of the beyond" (*Location of Culture* 4, 52-56).

2. *Homegoing*: The Parallel of Old and New African Diaspora

The discussion of parallelism in *Homegoing* should first be grounded in Yaa Gyasi's duality of identity as an immigrant born in Ghana and raised in Alabama, as "immigrant literature and immigrant lives are inseparable" (B. Mukherjee 684). Gyasi is a writer from what Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu describe as "The New African Diaspora," which refers to "the more recent," "postcolonial" diaspora—"the diaspora of imperialism"— compared to the "precolonial" old African diaspora, which is "the diaspora of enslavement" (5). This new population of global African immigrants has precipitated, particularly in the U.S., a "crisis in terminology" regarding what its members should be called and how they should be related to and distinguished from African Americans of the Old Diaspora, whose roots trace back to the Atlantic slave trade (Li 7). The writers of this new African diaspora are now widely called Afropolitans, with Afropolitanism describing "the social imaginary of a generation of Africans born outside the continent but connected to it through familial and cultural genealogies" (Gikandi 9). This strongly stated link to the continent, i.e., as an awareness of origin, distinguishes Afropolitan writing from the dominant narrative of the African diaspora, which is shaped by Gilroy's influential paradigm of *The Black Atlantic* and its hegemonic focus on "Middle Passage Blackness" (Wright 217–233). Afropolitanism emphasizes the cultural hybridity of the global African immigrant while also portraying twenty-first century Africa in a world of movement, thus countering the oversimplifications of African history and rejecting victimhood narratives.[57]

[57] For more about Afropolitanism, see Taiye Selasi's "Bye, Bye Babar"; Simon Gikandi's "Foreword: On Afropolitanism"; Chielozona Eze's "We, Afropolitans"; Obadias Ndaba's "Afropolitanism and Its Discontents"; and Betiel Wasihun's "Afropolitan Writing."

Homegoing narrates, through alternating vignettes and a polyphonic structure, the stories of seven generations of one family divided into two by the Atlantic slave trade in Africa and America. Effia and Esi, the respective ancestors of these branches, are half-sisters born in eighteenth century Ghana to Maame, who, in the novel's first scene, sets a fire in the woods to escape slavery under Cobbe. Maame leaves just-born Effia, the result of her rape by Cobbe, to be raised by an abusive stepmother. Maame leaves, for Effia, a black stone pendant that Effia will later pass down to her children. Effia's greedy stepmother schemes to marry her off to James Collins, the British governor of Cape Coast Castle. The marriage facilitates a strong collaboration—between the British and the Fante people of Effia's village—in the slave trade. The Fantes raid the Asante village where Maame relocated, remarried, and gave birth to a daughter, Esi. Esi is enslaved during the raid and sold to the British, whereas her mother chooses to end her life rather than face enslavement by the Fantes again. Unbeknownst to each other, Effia and Esi end up in Cape Coast Castle—Effia as a wife in the comfortable upper levels and Esi as a captive in the underground dungeons. Before being deported to America on a slave ship, Esi is raped by one of the soldiers and loses the black stone that her mother gave her. Effia's marriage results in a son named Quey, while Esi's rape leads to the birth of Ness.

Effia's branch reflects the history of African complicity in the Atlantic slave trade as well as the impact of colonization. The biracial Quey feels out of place both in the Castle and in London, where his father sent him. Upon his return from London, he joins the enslavement business to avoid being perceived as weak. His son, James Richard, succeeds in escaping the business by faking his death and lives a life marked by misery and silence. Abena, inheriting her father James Richard's misery, turns to a missionary

church for help after a lifetime of bad luck with her illicit lover. She is killed by the missionary during her baptism. Abena's daughter, Akua, is raised within the missionary church as the child of a sinner, which eventually drives her to defy the church's teachings and strike out independently. After marriage, Akua becomes haunted by recurring dreams of a firewoman, which ultimately drives her to set her hut ablaze. In the process, she kills her two daughters and scars both her own body and that of her infant son, Yaw. Yaw subsequently harbors a lifelong resentment toward his mother while dedicating himself intellectually to his work as a history teacher and to securing independence for Ghana. In his fifties, Yaw marries his housemaid, Esther, who convinces him to reconcile with his mother before the couple emigrates to the U.S. Their daughter, Marjorie, is born in Alabama.

Esi's lineage chronicles the lives of those who endured slavery on a plantation and their descendants who live haunted by the repercussions of that history. Esi's daughter, Ness, and her husband, Sam, die while attempting to escape from the plantation. Their infant son, Kojo, is the only survivor of that attempt. He grows up in Baltimore and builds a family – a wife, six children, and a seventh (whom they call H) on the way – only to witness its destruction by the Fugitive Slave Act. H is born on a southern plantation after his mother's kidnapping and gains freedom following the Civil War. However, he is quickly jailed and, for nine years, leased as a convict laborer to a mining company. Willie, H's daughter, migrates with her husband, Robert, to Harlem, where Robert – who has extremely light skin – leaves her after he starts to pass as white. Robert's disappearance leads their son, Sonny, to become increasingly angry – a rage that intensifies as he protests against segregation. Sonny turns to drugs after losing faith in the

possibility of change—a loss fueled by his harmful relationship with a singer named Amani, which ultimately leads to the birth of their son, Marcus.

Marjorie and Marcus represent the present generation and the unrecognized reunion of the two branches. The narrative does not reveal the story of Marjorie's parents' immigration to the U.S. A second-generation immigrant, Marjorie is initially presented as struggling to make friends in high school because her race and ethnic background differ from those of the other students. However, her summer visits to Ghana and her semi-spiritual relationship with her grandmother Akua, also called Old Lady, help anchor her during her youth. She reappears as a graduate student in Marcus's chapter, where the two become friends. Marcus is pursuing a PhD at Stanford but is struggling to complete his dissertation on the history of convict labor in Alabama. Amid his struggles, Marjorie suggests to Marcus that they visit the Cape Coast beach in Ghana. While there, they enter Cape Coast Castle, meeting their ancestral past and overcome their respective fears of fire and water.

Critical scholarship on *Homegoing*, while substantial, has not sufficiently addressed the relationship between the novel's narrative parallelism and its politics of time. Dominique Haensell is, to date, the only critic to significantly address *Homegoing*'s historiographical and temporal politics. In *Making Black History*, she reads the novel as performing the "Afropolitan gesture … [of] lateralizing the Black Atlantic by foregrounding Africa" (151). Haensell briefly explores how the novel's parallel narrative creates "a sense of Black diasporic simultaneity" in which "a sense of historical heteronomy" marks the "'meanwhile' of Benedict Anderson's imagined community" (192). However, the study's historiographical focus relegates the significance of this

simultaneity to its reflection of an Afropolitan regime of historicity, thereby marginalizing the question of individual immigrant identity.

In line with Brian Yothers's assertion that *Homegoing* is "a novel of the immigrant experience from start to finish," I argue that reconfiguring the novel's parallel temporalities around the figure of the immigrant clarifies a politics of time that temporalizes history by representing it as individual time (209). In doing so, Gyasi expands the time zone of the African diaspora by portraying the collision of spatialized histories that divide Africa and its diaspora to allow for the articulation of a new African diasporic subjectivity. This articulation recalls Achille Mbembe's concept of "reinterpret[ing] subjectivity as time," which involves "opening the way for self-styling" by breaking with "a conception of identity as geography—in other words, of time as space" ("African Modes" 242, 271). Similarly, Michelle M. Wright introduces the concept of "Epiphenomenal time, or the 'now,' through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted" to redefine Blackness as "phenomenological" ("when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed") rather than as solely a fixed historical construct (what) (3, 4). The aim is to include those who "perceive and perform themselves as Black but do not share that linear timeline [of the Middle Passage narrative]" (14). These nascent theoretical frameworks, which utilize critical time to narratively encompass the multifaceted spectrum of contemporary Black and African identities, find fictional expression in *Homegoing*'s parallel temporalities.

In what follows, I will first demonstrate the centrality of the perspective of Marjorie, as the sole immigrant figure, to the novel's configurations of historical time, wherein returning to the African past becomes essential for reclaiming time for a new

immigrant subjectivity. Accordingly, I will demonstrate how the novel uses fire and water as tropes to represent the divergent temporalities of the African diaspora—the old and the new—and imagine a possibility of reconciliation. The reconciliation, as will be shown, is grounded in a redrawing of the temporal boundaries of slavery based on the lived experiences of the individuals involved, which enables the simultaneous recentering of Africa within the paradigm of diaspora and the breaking of the African silence on slavery.

Marjorie and the Scarred African Present

Despite the wide historical span enveloping its two storylines, *Homegoing* features no history in the epochal or public sense of the word. It includes no dates except for that pertaining to an incident at the start of the novel, meant primarily to establish the temporal setting of the events. This single instance highlights Effia's personal history of beatings by her stepmother, confirming Lara Choksey's assertion that *Homegoing* "dwell[s] in the time of the body" (123). I argue that the novel dwells in the time of a specific type of body: the mobile body. The novel's fourteen major characters all move from one place to another, and movement is always coupled with a questioning of the sense of individual identity.

The present generation in the *Homegoing* saga is centered on Marjorie. Gyasi dedicates a chapter to her coming-of-age story and further assigns to her a significant space in the chapter on her generational counterpart, Marcus. The opening scene of Marjorie's chapter reflects the anxiety that defines her identity as a second-generation Ghanaian immigrant in the U.S. During her family's regular summer visit to Ghana, a Ghanaian boy around her age chases Marjorie, saying, "I take you to see Castle, to the

Cape Coast Castle, Five cedis. You come from America?" Angrily, Marjorie shouts, "I'm from Ghana, stupid. Can't you see?" (264). This fleeting interaction underscores a dissonance between Marjorie's self-perception and the geographical markers of her identity, preluding her struggle to define belonging. At its core, this struggle centers on the challenge of understanding identity when fixed geographies fail to fully account for who she is.

Marjorie's disruption of geographies of identity underpins the temporal construction of her subjectivity in the novel. Her character is initially presented as temporally distanced from the history of pain endured by her father and grandmother—a history physically marked by their burn scars and symbolically representing the colonization of Africa. We are told that "because Marjorie had no scars that resembled those, she could never bring herself to complain of pain" (Gyasi 265). Paradoxically, while Marjorie's recognition of the immense pain represented by her father's and grandmother's scars situates her in a different moment from them, it also hinders her ability to express her own pain.

The contrast between the hypervisibility of Marjorie's family's history of pain and the invisibility of her personal experience of pain is vividly highlighted in the story of her ringworm. After two weeks of concealing the painful ringworm on the back of her knee, Marjorie finally reveals the matter to her parents. Her father, Yaw, rushes Marjorie to the hospital, where the orderly, startled by the father's scar, mistakenly assumes that he is the patient in need of help. The orderly imposes victimhood on Yaw even though he suffers no pain. This reaction echoes the stereotype of "the figure of the African as a victimized and wounded subject" in need of help and saving (Mbembe, "African Modes"

251). However, it intersects in some sense with Marjorie's internalization of her father's victimhood. Both Marjorie and the orderly perceive Yaw's scarred body as a symbol of ahistorical, ontological suffering, resulting in Marjorie's current pain being eclipsed in both situations. Implied here is the idea that narratives of African victimhood mentally overwhelm and temporally displace the diverse realities of Africans today, whether these narratives are internalized by Africans themselves or imposed by others.

Within this framework, scars function as a narrative trope in *Homegoing*, channeling its imagination of the connection between African immigrants and African history. The depiction of scars underscores the significance of the temporal perspective on subjectivity, which, by relativizing collective history, allows for the provincialization of the dominant narrative of African victimhood. If temporality is "a division which reunites," as Jean-Paul Sartre describes in his phenomenological concept of time—a "succession" defined by the "before-after" relationship—then the scars of Yaw and Old Lady function similarly as temporal constructs, embodying this unifying division. The Sartrean notion that "by virtue of separation—by separating man from his pain or the object of his pain—time cures" is evident in Yaw's experience with the orderly (130, 131). His scars engage in the act of separating by marking the pastness of pain yet simultaneously unite by affirming a scarred present.

Another vivid example resides in the picture of Old Lady's scarred body. The narrator captures Marjorie's perception of this scarred body with the observation: "Looking at her grandmother's hands now, it was almost impossible to distinguish scarred from wrinkled skin. The whole landscape of the woman's body has transformed into a ruin; the young woman had been toppled, leaving this" (Gyasi 265). In this

depiction of Old Lady's skin being united by aging, aging represents the ultimate effect of time as an experience of change, showing that even the scarred present is not eternal. Although the same fire scarred Old Lady and her son Yaw, the representation of their scarred bodies reflects different experiences shaped by the distinct "epiphenomenal time"—the different now—that each one inhabits. The bodily mediation of the experience of time, as illustrated by both characters, underscores the fact that the individual's lived time continually mediates history, as symbolized by the scars. Consequently, its meaning becomes an ongoing process of negotiating the past within the ever-changing present.

This very temporal logic underpins the construction of Marjorie as a new subjectivity. Her inability to differentiate between Old Lady's scars and wrinkles reflects her situatedness in her own now. As a second-generation immigrant, she is distanced in time from the history that Old Lady's scarred body symbolizes—the history of colonization in Ghana. This symbolism is evident in the way Old Lady is described as "so old, they said, she could recite the entire history of Ghana from memory alone" (Gyasi 265). However, just as time reunites by dividing, Old Lady's and Yaw's scars connect Marjorie to the history they embody. She receives the scars not as distant stories from the past but as a lived fear of fire that effectively scars her own experience in the present. In her childhood, she feared that "the nightmares [of the firewoman of her grandmother's dreams] would come to her too … but the nightmares never came, and so, with time, her fear of fire waned" (274). Marjorie's inheritance of her grandmother's memory of the firewoman is less a psychological struggle than a reflection of her historical position, clearly placing Marjorie within a "postmemory" temporality. As proposed by Marianne

Hirsch, postmemory describes a generational transmission of memory that "works through indirection and multiple mediations" and corresponds to "identification with" as opposed to "identification as" (83, 85). Accordingly, postmemory clarifies Marjorie's connection to Africa and its people's history of injustice and violence. It signifies a means of identifying with this history without being paralyzed by it in the form of a victim identity.

Historicity of New Diaspora

In this light, Marjorie appears more like a thesis on historicity from the perspective of the New Diaspora experience rather than as a typical fictional character. A vivid representation of this historicity appears in the story of Marjorie's father's history book and her perception of it. Yaw, the history teacher, dedicates his entire intellectual life to writing a single book. This work, titled *The Ruins of a Nation Begins in the Homes of Its People*, ends up exploring the history of slavery and colonization in Africa (Gyasi 270). In its early stages, the book is titled *Let the Africans Own Africa*, reflecting Yaw's revolutionary agenda during the late colonial period in the Gold Coast, which later became Ghana (222). He wants the book to be "an academic rage," echoing the rage of the Black Americans he admires from the civil rights movement. However, the book is getting "unruly" with the prospect of Ghana's independence; instead of rage, "all [Yaw] could seem to muster was a long-winded whine" (229). National independence in the form of a nation-state provincializes his meta-narrative of African unity—a narrative that clearly reflects the Pan-Africanist/Black nationalist sentiment of the time. He throws out nearly half of the pages that he already wrote, and "[n]ow even the title offended him." Ultimately, he puts the book away because he does not want to "do something rash"

(222). The newly established nation thus raises a question of historical particularity, offering a view of things through a smaller-scale lens. This reality is dramatized by his friend Edward and Edward's wife, who urge him to find a wife instead of focusing on his book of revolution: "What good is independence to you if you don't have someone to cook your dinner?" (223). Thus, they highlight for him the individual aspect that the collective moment is overshadowing.

The book's final title—*The Ruins of a Nation Begins in the Homes of Its People*—reflects a journey from universality to particularity, from the public to the personal, from the entirety of the continent to the homes of its ordinary people, and from a teleological imagination to a revisionist questioning of historical beginnings. As Yaw's "lifework," this book of history remains unread by anyone, signifying that the meaning of history is deeply intertwined with one's own lived experience of time. This reality reflects the notions that history, as a linear collective narrative, lacks closure and that closure exists only in a personal sense, when history is perceived as an individual story. The entanglement of the historical and the personal is reflected in Marjorie's inability to read the book. Despite being a bookworm, she cannot make it beyond two pages. Yaw explains to her that "it [is] something she wouldn't understand until she [is] much older," for "people need time in order to be able to see things clearly" (Gyasi 270). His remark suggests that history is not a finished project or a transcendental repository of knowledge about the past. Rather, it is an ongoing process of continuous unfolding that takes place within the lived time of individuals. History is thus revealed to be a multiplicity of experiences expressed through the lives of individuals in the present moment.

In this way, *Homegoing* establishes a sense of historicity by suggesting a transition from history, as an account, to what David Carr refers to as "the experience of the historical" (1). While a teacher in Ghana, Yaw uses the personal anecdote of his scar to deliver, to his students, the message that "[h]istory is storytelling" (225). He asks the students to share what they have heard about how he got his scar, then responds to them by saying, "We cannot know which story is correct because we were not there." When a student asks how he got the scar, the narration shifts from educational dialogue to inner feelings, registering how Yaw "resisted the urge to put his hand up to the left side of his face," where the scar feels to him like "a map." The narrator notes that "the map of Yaw's scarred skin had led him nowhere. He had not married. He would not lead. Edweso [his hometown] had come with him," although he is sent away from it because of the shame his scar represents. This description does not indicate how he got the scar; "I was only a baby. All I know is what I've heard," Yaw says (227). Instead, it details what the scar signifies as a lived experience for him, functioning in his consciousness as a map of the present. It reflects the accumulated difficulties he has faced over time, rather than serving as an ontological marker of a specific past. Thus, it is not the scar that is in question but, rather, the person who bears it, and this person is not the passive infant who received the scar but the middle-aged Yaw who has lived with it for fifty years.

Temporality of Original Sin

The emphasis on the experience of the historical in *Homegoing* establishes history as accessible through fictional representation, consequently allowing this mode of representation to challenge and decentralize dominant historical narratives. The novel explores the history of local slavery in Africa by bringing the domestic experiences of

African people— as both captors and captives—to the center of the narrative instead of fictionalizing public histories of the colonial encounter. The opening scene, where Maame sets a fire to escape Cobbe's enslavement, anchors the origin of her story in acts of localized violence. Through this moment, the novel establishes a referential temporality that recenters Africa as the starting point for reimagining the historical narrative of slavery. This is echoed in Cobbe's reaction to the loss of seven of his yams to the fire; he "lost seven yams, and … felt each loss as a blow to his own family." The seven yams symbolize the seven generations of his descendants narrated in the novel—descendants who will be haunted by what he did. "He know[s] then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued" (Gyasi 3). The word "line" refers not only to the family line but also to the narrative line itself. The narrative portrays fire as a curse that haunts the story of every character in Effia's branch, i.e., the continental branch, thereby emphasizing the importance of remembering and confronting the past as a pathway to the future.

Homegoing employs the trope of fire to redraw the temporal boundaries of transatlantic slavery, linking the Middle Passage to its antecedent, the First Passage. As Walter Johnson points out, the First Passage is "often elided from historians' accounts of the slave trade, many of which focus solely on the Middle Passage, treating the trade as if it were something that began on the West Coast of Africa" (150). The story of Esi's captivity is set against the silencing of the continuity between the two passages. Gyasi dwells on the depiction of Esi's captive march, which begins in the interior of West Africa and lasts for many days until it reaches Fanteland, the coastal land of her captors.

There, Esi is sold to British traders, taken to Cape Coast Castle, and later transported across the Atlantic to America. The map of Esi's march reveals the multiple temporalities involved in enslavement, demonstrating that it neither begins nor ends in the same place for the different parties involved: the captives, the captors, the British traders, and, later, the American masters.

From the standpoint of Esi's experience, the First and Middle Passages denote a continuum of one temporality, defined by an irrevocable loss of time. Gyasi depicts the march less as a territorial separation from one's home and more as a loss of ownership over one's own body and time. Esi and the captives "walked all day" and sometimes "both day and night," and "the ones who couldn't keep up were beaten with sticks until suddenly, like magic, they could." Under these brutal conditions, "the sores on Esi's feet had no time to heal, so soon were they reopened" (44). Here, losing ownership of time is depicted as an unbroken continuum of day and night. For the enslaved, day and night no longer represent distinct lived experiences of time—a notion reinforced by Esi's horrific experience in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle: "Esi was no longer able to tell what time. The mud walls of the dungeon made all time equal. There was no sunlight. Darkness was day and night and everything in between" (30). From this perspective, the march and the dungeons become a unified temporal experience.

Flattened time reflects not only the material reality of Esi's temporal experience of enslavement but also her inner consciousness. In the dungeons, she remembers the past in order to forget the Castle, "but she [does] not expect joy." The Castle is Hell, and "Hell was a place of remembering; each beautiful moment passed through the mind's eye until it fell to the ground like a rotten mango, perfectly useless, uselessly perfect"—a stagnant,

dead time, completely disjointed from the present and offering no projection of the future (Gyasi 28). The time of enslavement figures in her consciousness only in two categories: before and now. We are told that "Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before the Castle, she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust. Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin air" (31). This is a temporality of "social death," to use Orlando Patterson's famous definition of slavery.[58] The final scene of the chapter confirms Esi's "natal alienation" and her status as a "genealogical isolate" (Patterson 5). As she is herded onto the slave ship, Esi realizes that, in the mud of the dungeons, she has lost the stone that her mother had given her on the night of her captivity. It is "a black stone, glimmering with gold. Smooth," symbolizing the rich heritage and smooth life she once enjoyed as Big Man's daughter (Gyasi 42). This spectacular image of the stone amplifies the sense of loss and the severed connection to the past.

The fact that Esi's chapter concludes as she steps onto the slave ship, leaving her Middle Passage experience untold despite her confirmed survival, carries significant implications for the temporal boundaries of the slave narrative. Ness, Esi's daughter, recalls her mother's stories about "the Big Boat" and "the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth" (Gyasi 70). This image of the Atlantic as a site of death, "a well-excavated grave," aligns with the concept of the Middle Passage as "the locus of impossible speech" and a "silence in the archive," to use Saidiya Hartman's terms (*Losing Mother* 136; "Venus in

[58] According to Patterson, "[The slave] had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory" (*Slavery and Social Death* 5).

Two Acts" 3). However, unlike Hartman, who proposes "critical fabulation" as a method of writing "a history of an unrecoverable past" by imagining "what might have happened," Gyasi shifts the focus of Esi's slave narrative primarily to the events preceding the Middle Passage, while maintaining a connection to its aftermath ("Two Acts" 11, 12). In Mississippi, Esi insists on speaking only in her native language, Twi, and ensures that her daughter, Ness, does the same, even in the face of her master's punishment. Language becomes a symbol of cultural heritage that survives the Middle Passage, although Ness will lose it after being separated from her mother. Yet, she does not lose the memory of it.

In this sense, *Homegoing* resonates with the call for "a spatial and temporal continuum of a Middle Passage sensibility" wherein the Middle Passage "emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas" (Diedrich et al. 8). Esi's narrative, while acknowledging it as an archival silence, omits the Middle Passage as a means of challenging the very idea that this silence equates to historical isolation. The novel reinforces this idea by focusing on the Castle as a chronotope of transatlantic slavery, deviating from Paul Gilroy's famous employment of the slave ship as a chronotope in *The Black Atlantic*. The Castle in *Homegoing* shares striking similarities with the common image of slave ships as structures of hegemony and subjugation. Enslaved people, referred to as "cargo," are packed into underground dungeons, their bodies piled upon one another. They can breathe only from "small holes" from above (Gyasi 17). Situated above are cannons and the living quarters of traders and soldiers. These quarters form a stark contrast with the dungeons, which are depicted as places of disease, death, and waste.

The resemblance, however, underscores a conceptual distinction in how Africa's position is perceived within the imagination of slavery. The ship, which Gilroy describes as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion... [that] focuses attention on the middle passage," symbolizes separation from Africa (*Black Atlantic* 4). In this paradigm of separation, "slavery itself become[s] frozen … always wrenched out of a historically specific continuum" (Dayan 7). It leaves unchallenged the notion that Africa is "a site of origin and purity, uncontaminated by those histories of the modern that have lent Black Atlantic cultures their distinctive character" (Piot 156). The Castle in *Homegoing* challenges this silencing of Africa as a significant entity within the Black Atlantic by positioning Africa as a site of "contamination," a concept from Gilroy, and as a "point of entanglement," a term from Edward Glissant (*Black Atlantic* 32; *Caribbean Discourse* 26). As its coastal location suggests, the Castle is the point where clashes and encounters, intertwinements and frictions between Africa and Western modernity intersect. The parallel lives of Effia and Esi within the Castle, occupying overlapping yet different temporalities, the interracial children born from Effia's marriage and Esi's rape, and the eventual transatlantic separation all underscore a complex interplay of cultural contamination and entanglement.

Therefore, Gyasi's decentralization of Africa within the paradigm of the diaspora should not be seen as establishing a linear notion of origin. Instead, it emphasizes a perspective that envisions Africa as an integral part of the diasporic consciousness. Against this backdrop, the meeting between Marjorie and Marcus, representing the contemporary generation of the two branches, becomes a symbol of diasporic reconciliation.

Parallel Temporalities of Fire and Water

At the beginning of this analysis, I demonstrated how the narrative employs "epiphenomenal time," or the present moment, to underscore Marjorie's temporal distance from her father's and grandmother's continental African experiences, thereby highlighting the newness of her African subjectivity. The same dynamic applies to her relationship with the American racial reality in which she lives. Marjorie finds herself in a situation in which her pre-immigration ethnic and national identity is subsumed under U.S. Blackness, which interprets race as identity. Meanwhile, in Ghana, blackness is "an interpretation of race as skin color" (Gyasi 269). The anxious state of inhabiting the now of American Blackness while lacking its history defines Marjorie's experience of exclusion as an African immigrant. Her African American classmates bully her and mockingly call her "White Girl" because she sounds "like a white girl" to them (269). Simply because she is racially black, she is expected to conform to a normative Black identity—pressured to be "African Americanized."[59] If her connection to her family's history positions her in a displaced past, this disregard for her different historical background roots her subjectivity in a displaced present. In both instances, her identity challenges the spatialized temporalities associated with normative identities.

At first, Marjorie exhibits a similar perception of exclusive identity by hesitating to accept the African American label. When Mrs. Pinkston, her favorite teacher, asks her to participate in a Black cultural event and talk about what being African American means to her, Marjorie responds, "But I'm not African American" (Gyasi 273). Mrs. Pinkston responds to this denial by emphasizing Blackness as a "continual updating

[59] Clark, "Questions of identity" 261

of intersecting interpellations in the 'now,'" in Wright's words (172). She explains to Marjorie that "here in this country, it doesn't matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You're here now, and here black is black is black" (Gyasi 273). Marjorie's failed romantic relationship with Graham, a German immigrant boy who eventually leaves her under the pressure of his white classmates, proves Mrs. Pinkston's characterization. Thus, migrancy, which Marjorie views as the primary commonality between herself and Graham, fails to transcend American color lines. Graham's father and the school principal denounce his choice of Marjorie as a prom date despite Graham's assertion that she is "not like other black girls"—a justification that, to Marjorie, sounds like "been worse" (280). This incident, after which Marjorie gives up Graham, illustrates how the cultural difference of Marjorie's Blackness is also denied on the opposite end of the American racial spectrum. Outside her family, her African identity is held hostage by others' perceptions of Blackness.

These high school experiences of exclusion and racial discrimination pave the way for the crystallization of Marjorie's diasporic identity as one who does the cultural work of expanding what American Blackness means. The poem that she delivers at the Black cultural event serves as her identity manifesto, remarkably centered on her connection as an African immigrant to African Americans. She defines Atlantic Blackness as a simultaneous constellation: "Split the Castle open, / find me, find you. / We, two, felt sand / wind, air. / … We, two, black. / Me, you. / … We, two, wade. / The waters seem different / but are same." This simultaneity is grounded in a diasporic perspective in which cultural identity is a matter of "difference within unity" (Edwards 65). The Castle, symbolizing Africa in the poem, acts as a focal point, establishing the

connection between the simultaneous constellations of Blackness. Meanwhile, wading in water, symbolizing the Atlantic Ocean, reflects the construction of diasporic Blackness as a dynamic intersection rather than a fixed category—a concept that aligns with Wright's notion of Blackness "as the site of intersection (rather than as a common denominator by which all Blackness can be subsumed)" (111). Here, Blackness is reconceptualized beyond the historical singularity of the Middle Passage and understood as a space of intersection in what Franz Fanon calls "the lived experience of the Black man" (89). As the poem's watery imagery of connectivity suggests, diasporic Blackness is not a linear spacetime shaped by a vertical relationship. Rather, it is a horizontal connection, a negotiation of identification within the open spacetime of the here and now.

This temporality of water, in which the now of identity cannot be reduced to spatialized, linear histories, underpins the novel's imaginative reconciliation between the Old and New Diasporas as represented by Marjorie and Marcus's relationship. Marcus's story is, first and foremost, a confrontation with the complexities and challenges inherent in African American history. Driven by "the need for studying and knowing his family," he chooses the path of "research and … writing" as a means of "looking for family and searching for answers in a more tangible way." He sees historical research as a more reliable path to uncovering the family's past than what his grandmother, Ma Willie, believes to be "the gift of visions" that she thinks he possesses. She holds this belief because he once shared with her his imaginative reconstructions of his ancestors: "he would imagine so hard that at times he thought he could see them" (Gyasi 290). In other words, he shifts from his lived experience of the past to seeking the past as a record of linear events that, through the practice of history, can be retrieved and explained.

Marcus begins studying the history of convict labor for his PhD dissertation only to find himself lost in a flattened African American temporality. His exploration of the topic is motivated by the memory of his great-grandfather, H, who, in the wake of the formal abolition of slavery, had years of his lifetime stolen by the convict labor system. H is not only the starting point for Marcus's historical research but also the family's earliest known ancestor. This fact blurs the lines between the academic and the personal in Marcus's historical investigation. The narrator explains Marcus's dilemma with his research by stating, "[T]he deeper into the research he got, the bigger the project got." The story of H and his generation is inherently intertwined with, and repeated by, every other generation, including his own, as he is also "an accumulation of these times" (Gyasi 296). Because of this historical dilemma, we are told,

> [H]e'd get so angry that he'd slam the research book on the table of the beautiful but deadly silent Lane Reading Room of Green Library of Stanford University. And if he slammed the book down, then everyone in the room would stare and all they would see would be his skin and his anger, and they'd think they knew something about him, and it would be the same something that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison, only it would be different too, less obvious than it once was. (289, 290)

In this temporality of "the afterlife of slavery," in which old relations of power persist in various new forms, Marcus cannot help but perceive time as flattened rather than progressive (Hartman, *Lose Mother* 6). Time only accumulates the traces of an unresolved past, a past that interrupts the present, not as a force of cultural affinity but as a fabric of the lived experience itself.

From this standpoint, Marcus's struggle with African American temporality stems from its resistance to tangibility in the form of history. As both a scholar and someone experiencing it firsthand, he grapples with a past that is, in itself, "a refusal to labor

within the limits of history" (Goffe 110). The narrative portrays this aspect of Marcus's experience through his fear of the ocean. He explains this fear to Marjorie by saying: "It's because of all that space. It's because everywhere I look, I see blue, and I have no idea where it begins. When I'm out there, I stay as close as I can to the sand, because at least then I know where it ends" (Gyasi 296). The uncharted, flattened topography of the Atlantic Ocean mirrors Marcus's struggle with his severed consciousness of roots and ancestral genealogy.

Marjorie's entry into Marcus's life offers the potential to satisfy his yearning for ancestral connection and, in doing so, to resolve his identity struggle. In Marcus's consciousness, she becomes linked to a childhood memory of being lost and then found by his mother: "It was the same feeling he got whenever he saw Marjorie. Like she had, somehow, found him" (Gyasi 293). This feeling reflects the survival of heritage bonds through personal sensibility rather than through a traceable genealogical connection. It suggests that Black reunion can emerge from within the individual's lived experience of time rather than from history, from the feeling of commonalities among groups of African descent rather than from a singular, essentialized narrative of their ancestral ties.

In this mode of connectivity, Blackness is freed from the shackles of ancestry and amalgamates a conscious choice of identification with African heritage. This is powerfully illustrated by the story of Marjorie and Marcus's companionship in Pratt City, the place where Marcus's great-grandfather H worked and lived as a convict laborer. Marcus's research visit to Pratt City proves to be a dead end: "Pratt City was long gone, and he wasn't going to find what he was looking for in the ruins of that place" (Gyasi 296). As a historical site for Marcus's search for roots, the ruins of the city embody

another silence in the archive, where "the archive is ... a tomb" (Hartman, "Two Acts" 2). The ensuing question, then, is: If "what [Marcus] wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that [Marjorie], and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside of it," what remains for him after this realization of the intangibility of history? This question paves the way for understanding how *Homegoing* distinctly exemplifies the divergence of its Afropolitan articulation of identity from what is now widely termed Afro-pessimism—a highly influential theoretical framework for interpreting Blackness/Anti-Blackness.

The sense of historical stillness echoed in Marcus's nonredemptive historical search for roots intersects with Frank Wilderson's core Afro-pessimist argument about the impossibility of redemption for Black people. The leading Afro-pessimist theorist equates Blackness with slavery and social death, arguing that "there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life" to return to for Black redemption. He asserts that "for the slave [black], historical 'time' is not possible. Social death bars the slave from access to narrative, at the level of temporality." Consequently, "the narrative arc of the slave who is Black (unlike Orlando Patterson's generic slave who may be of any race) is not an arc at all, but a flat line." Thus, the slave/Black cannot be historicized or redeemed, as "[h]istoricity and redemption are inextricably bound. Both are inherently anti-Black." Marjorie and Marcus's trip to Cape Coast, Ghana, should be understood in contrast to this radical, pessimistic view of Black temporality and identity.

The replacement of a research visit to Pratt City with a tourist journey to Cape Coast represents a shift in the approach offered to address Marcus's predicament with the inaccessible history of his ancestors. In Wright's terms, this shift suggests a move from a "vertical" interpellation of Blackness, focused on a specific chronological and geographical frame as in Marcus's research, to a "horizontal" interpellation rooted in the "Epiphenomenal time" of lived experience (10, 11). The trip to Ghana forges a horizontal connection across the Atlantic, creating a sense of simultaneity that expands Marcus's feeling of the time beyond the geographical frame of African American history. This sense of de-spatialization is emphasized by the fact that Marcus is traveling outside the borders of the U.S. for the first time: "I don't think anyone in my family's ever left the country" (Gyasi 296). Marjorie proposes the trip after Marcus reveals his fear of the ocean—a fear that symbolizes his severed consciousness of roots. As their destination, she specifies not Africa or the Castle but, rather, the beach in Cape Coast. Emphasizing its difference, she says, "I bet you would like the beach in Cape Coast … It's beautiful there. Not like anything you would see in America" (296). The trip is thus motivated not by a historical quest but by the desire to have a different personal experience. Therefore, the trip should not be conflated with the traditional diasporic return to Africa, which reflects a collective, generational sentiment, whether intended as a quest for redemption by retracing ancestors' roots or as a means of mourning at the place where they were first enslaved.[60]

[60] In *Losing Your Mother*, Hartman identifies two distinct waves of African American return trips to Africa: her generation, who arrived in Africa with "the dungeon [of Cape Coast Castle] as [their] prime destination," and the earlier generation, "who, motivated by Alex Haley's *Roots*, had traveled to Ghana and other parts of West Africa to reclaim their African patrimony" (41).

In Cape Coast, Marcus experiences his ancestors' past as intricately woven into the fabric of the present moment that his journey embodies. His visit to the Castle is entirely unplanned and is not even considered by Marjorie. The idea comes from the young boys and girls who chase Black tourists and offer to take them to "see slave castle." When Marcus asks Marjorie if she has ever seen the Castle, she replies, "No, actually. I've never been. That's what the black tourists do when they come here." At that moment, Marcus decides to visit the Castle, saying, "Well, I'm black. And I'm a tourist" (Gyasi 297). This dialogue reveals that Marcus and Marjorie have different perceptions of their Blackness based on each one's unique spacetime in the here and now. While Marcus retains Black as his identity, Marjorie does not identify as Black when she is at home in Ghana.

A defining event that underscores Marcus's identity difference occurs during the tour of the Castle. He cannot endure the underground female dungeon, so, in violation of the tour's instructions, he hurriedly pushes through "The Door of No Return" (Gyasi 299). This is the door through which, seven generations ago, his ancestor Esi and millions of other enslaved Africans were taken to be shipped across the Atlantic. On the one hand, Marcus's exit through the door symbolizes his refusal to become a tourist in a place steeped in his ancestors' suffering. On the other hand, it represents a reckoning with Esi, his ancestor, but one that does not involve reenacting the conception of Esi's exit from the door. If the door's openness in Esi's story symbolizes the fact that there is no return to home, heritage, or the pre-slavery world, its closedness in Marcus's story implies that there is no return to Africa for Marcus as a descendant of the Old Diaspora. Consequently, while Esi's forced exit through the door signifies ultimate alienation and

the negation of subjectivity, Marcus's defiant exit affirms the opposite, representing a reclamation of subjectivity in the name of reconnecting with the African diaspora.

From this perspective, Marcus's journey to Cape Coast represents not a diasporic return—a return to roots—but, rather, a return to the African diaspora as a paradigm. What he experiences in the Castle reframes Esi's past through his own, creating an unanticipated return experience in which the present moment becomes a means of imagining the past while envisioning new futures. This fact is vividly illustrated in the novel's final scene: Marcus exiting the Door of No Return and immersing himself in the Atlantic for the first time. Here, the Atlantic embodies the now moment of diasporic intersection to which Marcus returns.

This return to the diaspora offers a renewed sense of possibility and redemption. Marcus now views the Atlantic not as an object of fear but, rather, as a symbol of openness and diversity, a "vast expanse of time and space." As he lifts his head and looks at the water before him, he sees only boats with flags of "no nationality, of every nationality" (Gyasi 299, 300). While this image of the ocean symbolizes hope in the future, the Atlantic also reconnects Marcus with the past. When Marjorie joins him in the sea, she gives him the black stone from her neck. It is one of the two identical stones that Mamme had left for her daughters, Effia and Esi. Esi had lost her stone in the dungeon of enslavement, while Effia had passed hers down through generations. It eventually reached Marjorie through her grandmother, Old Lady. The black stone embodies a shared heritage—Mamme's heritage—that reaches her descendant Marcus not through a linear progression from Esi's lineage but, rather, through the simultaneous branch of Effia's. As

Marjorie places the stone around Marcus's neck, she says, "Welcome home" (300). This declaration signifies the diaspora as home as symbolized by the water of the Atlantic.

Homegoing's use of the Atlantic as a motif for diasporic redemption reflects an attempt to revitalize the framework of the diaspora as a vibrant, inclusive medium for articulating global African identities in the twenty-first century. It does so during a time when "the Black Atlantic" has been the predominant narrative of the African diaspora. As Brent Hayes Edwards points out in *The Uses of Diaspora*, "The issue, of course, is the stakes of the 'Black Atlantic' as a term that—particularly in the adoption of Gilroy's work in the U.S. academy—often usurps the space that might otherwise be reserved for the diaspora," though at the same time, it "loses the broad range of the term diaspora" (61, 36). Gyasi's Atlantic revises the imposition, within the notion of the Black Atlantic, of "an assumption of geographical specificity (what we might term a hemispheric limit) and a 'racial' context on a field that might be much more broad and more various" (Edwards 62). By reimagining the Atlantic as a point of intersection for diverse African experiences, Gyasi "provincializes" the Black Atlantic as a normative historical narrative of the African diaspora.

The reclamation of the African diaspora as a simultaneous temporality is fundamental to *Homegoing*'s construction of African immigrant identity in the U.S. Marjorie and Marcus's relationship demonstrates that the distinctiveness of this identity stems from how African immigrants relate to history and lineage differently than African Americans. At the same time, it suggests unity with the African American experience due to the inescapability of a racialized Black identity in the U.S. The Africans of the new diaspora, as represented by Marjorie, bridge the gap created by the two histories of

slavery and colonization that divide Africans on both sides of the Atlantic. They rekindle a sense of diasporic redemption by inverting the traditional notion of returning to Africa to reclaim one's roots. Instead, they bring Africa as an imaginative heritage to African Americans in the U.S. and expand the cultural meaning of Blackness. Marjorie's dual specialization in African literature and African American literature – two subjects she "could feel inside of her" – exemplifies this broadened conception of African diasporic identity (Gyasi 295). The term "literature" is crucial because it symbolically highlights the power of individual imagination as the foundation of that identity, contrasting sharply with the chronological narratives of historical identity that Marcus's research exemplifies.

In this sense, Marjorie's identity and the identity of *Homegoing* as a work of fiction become one and the same. The novel intricately reflects Marjorie's internal reclamation of both African and African American identities through a simultaneous exploration of these experiences across time. The narrative's formal structure encodes the concurrent nature of this exploration through its fourteen vignettes, arranged in a fractured progression, or, in other words, a continuity without linearity. While chronologically ordered, each vignette is formally isolated from the others by shifts in storyline. Nevertheless, these vignettes are interconnected, with each containing untold remnants of the previous one and unanticipated implications for the next. No vignette exists as an isolated, self-contained moment in time. This narrative structure embodies what Stuart Hall terms "thinking conjuncturally," which involves "thinking of historical moments as conjunctures, a series of overlapping, interlocking but non-corresponding 'histories.'" By doing so, the novel enables the construction of "a genealogy, not a

history" ("Diaspora Artists" 3). *Homegoing* demonstrates this temporal thinking by centering on family genealogy as a means of narrating history and by prioritizing the lived experience of time over epochal configurations.

The semantics of this genealogy are remarkably gendered, as it focuses on the maternal lineage, feminizing the concept of ancestry. Nonki Motahane et al. have pointed out that "the novel strategically deploys the motif of female descent to refract and 'disclose' the interstice between being and becoming black (African and African American) in modern-day America" (11). Alternatively, the female-centered genealogy can be understood as a representation of Africa's diasporic motherhood. This motherhood, however, does not suggest essentialist origins; instead, it reflects the novel's historicity of continuity without linearity. Maame and her daughters, Effia and Esi, are unknown to their descendants, yet the descendants' lives remain connected to their legacy through the haunting fears of fire and water. Along the same line, *Homegoing* positions Africa as a mother figure within the diasporic context—a mother to whom different collective and individual identities across the diaspora are connected in various ways.

3. *The Kindness of Enemies*: Translations of Identity Time

Similar to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (*KOE*) features another form of temporal parallelism that intertwines history with the present, thereby shedding light on themes of home, return, and identity within the context of the Muslim immigrant experience. The British-Sudanese author—the first-ever winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing—was born in 1964 in Cairo, raised in Khartoum, and moved to the UK for graduate studies in 1987. She is renowned for her fiction, which centers on the lives of ordinary, traditional-believing Muslims, for whom faith is a

significant part of their identity—a group that predominantly secular Anglophone Muslim and Arab writings often overlook or unsympathetically represent.[61] Furthermore, Aboulela endorses an Islamic moral and religious worldview that "promote[s] the legitimacy of what can be termed 'a faith-based subject position,'" as Billy Gray points out (146). This positions her as "a school of one," according to Geoffrey Nash, and her fiction as "a minor literature within a minor literature," as Wail Hassan describes it, given the predominantly secular nature of Anglophone Arab literature (Nash 44; Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives* 180).

KOE features two narratives. At the heart of each is a story of captivity in both factual and figurative senses. One narrative is set in the present day and follows Natasha (Hussein) Wilson, an immigrant living in the UK. She is an avowedly atheistic and secular historian, born in Khartoum to a Sudanese father and a Georgian mother. When she was a little girl, Natasha moved to the UK with her mother, who left her father for a Polish lover. In her pursuit of assimilation into British society, she changed her last name from Hussein to Wilson. The other narrative is set in the nineteenth century and revolves around Imam Shamil of Dagestan, the Sufi leader who led the Muslim military resistance against imperial Russia. Natasha is a professor, and her academic research focuses on the history of Shamil's resistance and the British support for his cause. The novel begins with Natasha describing her visit to the home of two descendants of Shamil: her favorite student, Oz (short for Osama), and his mother, Malak. During Natasha's unplanned two-night stay caused by a snowstorm, the police arrest Oz at home on suspicion of radicalization because he has downloaded radical material.

[61] See Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* 26.

Oz's arrest dramatically impacts Natasha's life, revealing the precarious and fragile nature of the assimilated identity she had worked tirelessly to build. She is compelled to confront the rising Islamophobia in Britain and to reconsider her own identity. The police seize her electronic devices, search her office, and interrogate her about why Oz's name did not appear in her reports on students vulnerable to radicalization. The reader learns that Natasha opportunistically accepted the position of native informant and received training to monitor Muslim students—a task that her colleagues rejected as spying. While shaking her work and social status, Oz's arrest strengthens Natasha's relationship with Malak, who indirectly introduces her to Sufi teachings and practices and sets her on a path of spiritual self-rediscovery. Natasha's journey takes on a redemptive trajectory with her first return visit to Sudan and her participation in Malak's Sufi practice circle in London.

The historical storyline begins with eight-year-old Jamaleldin, Shamil's eldest son, being held captive by the Russians. The Russians send Jamaleldin to St. Petersburg to be raised as the tsar's godson in preparation for him to rule Chechnya and Dagestan on the tsar's behalf after the defeat of his father. Years pass, during which time Jamaleldin enjoys modern life in St. Petersburg and dedicates himself to becoming a Russian officer and gentleman. In retaliation, Shamil takes Georgian Princess Anna Elinichna, along with her two children and a French nanny, hostage in exchange for the return of his son. Despite her initial feelings of animosity, Anna finds herself involuntarily sympathetic to Shamil's struggle against the Russians to protect his land and people as well as nostalgic for the once-independent Georgia. Similarly, Jamaleldin has mixed feelings. While he misses his father and brother, he cannot help but embrace

the modern life of Russia. After the compromise is achieved, he leverages his status as an outsider in the two warring worlds to which he belongs in order to promote peace, though his efforts are in vain. In both worlds, his loyalty comes under suspicion, particularly by his father, who assigns him to reeducation. Jamaleldin dies of illness shortly after his return, and his father, Shamil, accepts defeat and surrenders to the Russians. Shamil spends the rest of his life in exile in Moscow, experiencing what the title of the novel suggests—the kindness of enemies—before dying on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Reflecting its structure of parallel temporalities, *KOE* is not only a historical novel, albeit in a relative sense, but also a thematic exploration of historiography and historical thinking through characters that engage with history in various ways. Critical scholarship has overlooked this important aspect of the novel. The question of the novel's temporality and historicity has been overshadowed by the critical focus on the dialectics of the sacred and the secular, particularly the novel's articulation of a Sufi perspective. In "From the Secular to the Sacred: The Influence of Sufism on the Work of Leila Aboulela," Billy Gray discusses the novel as a manifestation of Aboulela's thematic investment in Sufism. He notes that "the importance of the Teacher-Disciple relationship, the value of intentional suffering, and the spiritual significance of prayer hold particular significance for many of her characters" (165). Along similar lines, Saleh Chaoui emphasizes *KOE*'s Sufi spirituality as a decolonial act, arguing that the novel "establishes a decolonial platform that articulates religious and spiritual acuities that thus far have remained sidelined in secular discourses" (273). While aligning with the perspective that emphasizes the Sufism that appears in the work, this chapter specifically explores how

the Sufi perspective shapes *KOE*'s imagination of parallel temporalities and underlies its temporalization of history—writing history as an individual experience of time. I argue that Aboulela employs this parallelism to challenge the binary logic of the secular/radical ideological divide that dominates contemporary representations of immigrant Muslim experiences and to instead articulate a Muslim faith-based identity rooted in a Sufi/spiritual concept of time.

Sufism, at its core, is a temporal perspective of transcendence. It is traditionally defined as "the science of openings [al-futūa: revelations, illuminations, spiritual 'conquests']" in which the believer opens their heart to God, and God wills the process of "opening up" the believer's heart to divine inspiration (Elmarsafy 2). This process "unveils" the inner, spiritual truth of existence for the believer, freeing the soul from the confines of the "World of Testimony," which refers to the perceptible world, and granting access to the "World of Mystery" or "that which is not accessible to sight" (Geoffrey 2). The Sufi state of spirituality is grounded in achieving the unity of time, as it allows for "breaking through to eternity" such that the Sufis "relive their primeval moment with God, here and now, in the instant of ecstasy, even as they anticipate their ultimate destiny" (Böwering, "Time" 61). In this sense, the Sufi moment "captures time by drawing Eternity from its edge in pre and post-existence into the moment of the mystical experience" (61). It signifies a state of transcendence in which the individual's present moment of spiritual reality transcends and supersedes the outer reality of historical experience.

In the following sections, I will begin by arguing that the relationship between the historical storyline and the present-day storyline in *KOE* is a process of temporal

translation. I will analyze how Aboulela presents her present-day characters, Natasha, Oz, and Malak, as engaging in translations of Imam Shamil's historical experience. These translations reflect various ideological perspectives while mirroring the three characters' personal experiences and struggles, thereby intertwining the personal with the ideological and political. Through this analysis, I will demonstrate that Aboulela portrays both secular and radical perspectives as analogous modes of translating history, each prioritizing political and public aspects while sidelining the spiritual dimension. In contrast, Aboulela presents Malak's Sufi perspective as an alternative to the untranslatability of the spiritual in both secular and radical views. It reclaims historical time as a space for divine translation—a continuum of divinely ordained spiritual testing—rather than human translation. I conclude by questioning Aboulela's Sufi framework of Muslim immigrant identity as apolitical and as one that confines subjectivity to the private temporality of individual conscience.

The theme of translation, whether linguistic or cultural, is a defining element of Aboulela's fiction. Her most acclaimed novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2004), both enacted a poetics of translation on multiple levels—form, theme, and discourse. This has earned Aboulela recognition as a foundational example of what Wail Hassan theorizes as "Translational Literature."[62] Along the same lines, *KOE* engages with the theme of translation but from a temporal perspective. The novel's two storylines, though formally and chronologically separate, are discursively juxtaposed through a translational logic in which the present-day storyline serves as a translational space for the historical one.

[62] See Hassan, "Translational Literature and the Pleasures of Exile."

The translational lens can account for the narratological choice of a third-person omniscient narrator for the historical storyline, in contrast to Natasha's first-person point of view in the present-day storyline. This choice signifies a conscious departure from interpretation in the narration of Shamil's story, thereby endowing the historical narrative with a heightened sense of authority and authenticity. It manifests the idea that "to be an interpreter, one cannot be omniscient; to be an omniscient being, one cannot be in a position to interpret. To interpret, or to be omniscient, that is the question" (Wong 189). In this sense, it also underscores that all the present-day characters—Natasha, Oz, and Malak—act as interpreters, each translating Imam Shamil's history into the present in their own distinct way. Unlike the historical storyline's literal interpreters, who facilitate communication between Shamil and his adversaries in real-time, Natasha, Oz, and Malak translate not language but history, carrying Shamil across the gap of time. By engaging Natasha, Oz, and Malak in these roles of temporal translation, Aboulela represents the ideological spectrum that underpins the novel's exploration of Muslim immigrant identity. On this representative spectrum, Natasha embodies the secular perspective, Oz represents the radical Muslim youth, and Malak stands for the traditional Sufi Muslim viewpoint.

Secular Translation of Time

Natasha is not only the narrator of the present-day storyline but also the central figure in the trilogy. Her story is one of transformation; she evolves from a detached secular historian into a *murid*—a Sufi follower—seeking spiritual enlightenment. Her relationship with Malak transforms Shamil, for her, from a mere object of historical research into a *tariqa*—a spiritual path toward inner knowledge of the self. The

movement of Shamil's history from the public realm (academic research) to the personal realm (faith) in Natasha's story is foreshadowed in Oz's invitation for her to visit his mother and see Shamil's sword: "She can tell you more, personal stuff too," Oz says (Aboulela 6). This insistence on the personal in Oz's invitation is significant. It follows Natasha's presentation at the History Society on "Jihad as Resistance – Russian Imperial Expansion and Insurrection in the Caucasus," which implies more than just an invitation for a visit. It carries a sense of protest against Natasha's cynical dismissal of the interconnectedness between the historical and the personal, as evidenced by her dismissive response during the presentation to a young girl in a hijab who asked, "Are you a Muslim?" (5). Within this opening context of the novel, Natasha's visit to Malak's home becomes an allegory for the interplay between the historical and the personal, reflecting the novel's exploration of how the past informs and shapes individual identity.

Malak's home is not merely a physical location but also a symbolic space representing the private sphere in the novel. It contrasts with the public realm of the university, where Natasha gives her scholarly presentation on Shamil, as it offers a more personal and intimate kind of knowledge about this historical figure. Natasha's description of the home highlights its deeply personal and private nature as Malak's own space, underscoring how it quickly becomes an intimate, interpersonal domain for her as well.

> I followed her to the kitchen. It felt unusual to walk in my socks through a stranger's house. Malak had asked me to take off my boots at the door and she herself was wearing light leather slip-ons. The house suited her with its rugs of burgundy and browns, cushions for what must be a seating area on the floor and more Islamic calligraphy on the walls. (Aboulela 3)

While Natasha's primary purpose for visiting is to view Shamil's sword, now housed in the home of his descendants, she finds herself drawn into a conversation with Malak

about her personal life. During this exchange, Natasha reveals what she has changed—her father's real name. Malak's influence further blurs the lines between the historical and the personal, drawing Natasha into Shamil's private life as a Sufi. This revelation later complicates the scholarly perspective of her research.

In the private sphere of Malak's home, which represents the conceptual double of the personal in history, Natasha's secular historicism is challenged by the religious perspectives of both Oz and Malak—directly by the former and indirectly by the latter. When Oz asks Natasha, "Why are you so interested in Shamil?", she replies, "From a purely secular perspective, he was one of the most successful rebels of the colonial age." Her emphasis on secularism irritates Oz, prompting him to wonder, "Why do you need to say 'from a purely secular perspective'?" Natasha describes her reaction to Oz's question by saying, "I paused, momentarily caught out. I put down my piece of toast." Her feeling of being caught epitomizes the personal undercurrents hiding beneath her identification with secularism. When Oz continues his line of questioning by asking, "Do you think I'm religious, and that's why you're trying to distance yourself from me?", he apparently misinterprets her emphasis on secularism as a personal stance against him, believing it to be a way for her to distance herself from him. As Natasha reflects to the reader, "I did not want to distance myself from him. I shook my head," it becomes clear that Oz is missing the sense that Natasha's secularism is not about distancing herself from religious people like him (Aboulela 13). Instead, as we will see, it is an attempt to distance herself from her past—a part of herself she desperately wants to leave behind.

Natasha's insistence on a strictly secular perspective on the history of Shamil's religious movement manifests her mode of translation in two interrelated ways. She

consciously avoids personal or emotional engagement with the historical material she studies, which results in methodological neglect of the role that Shamil's spiritual world plays in this history. If, as Walter Benjamin suggests, "[t]he basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue," Natasha's secular translation is premised on a refusal to let the spiritual aspect of Shamil's history influence her ("Task of Translator" 262). On the methodological front, her elimination of Shamil's spirituality contradicts the notion that "the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability," as Benjamin argues (254). By highlighting the complex interplay of these two aspects, Aboulela portrays Natasha's translation of Shamil as intertwined with her own self-translation as an immigrant preoccupied with the prospect of assimilation in British society.

In this respect, the supremacy of the secular perspective on history in Natasha's case becomes synonymous with the alienation of the past inherent in her translational process of assimilation. Oz points out to Natasha the implicit claim of epistemological superiority embedded in secular approaches to religious matters by describing his university lecturers: "A Muslim talks to them, and they put on that wide-eyed tolerant look, quick little nods, and inside they're congratulating themselves, thinking, 'Look at me, I'm truly broad-minded, listening to all this and not batting an eyelid'" (Aboulela 13). This is a recurring critique of secular epistemology in Aboulela's fiction, echoing Christina Phillips's observation that "[l]iterary texts may contain religious themes, characters and imagery but, if they wish to be taken seriously by critics, these must be secularized" (66). Nonetheless, Oz believes that Natasha is "different from the other

lecturers … You pretend that you're sarcastic but deep down you have respect. Am I right?" (Aboulela 13). Natasha avoids answering Oz's question, as she recognizes his desire for her to talk about herself. However, Oz's inquiry is not aimed at exploring Natasha's internal struggle with identity. Rather, it reflects his own struggle, driven by a need for respect. It embodies the paradigm of otherness through which he views his Islamic identity and, consequently, his relation to Natasha.

The emphasis on Natasha's secular detachment serves as a critique of leftist and postcolonial academics like her—academics who lack genuine insight into the religious feelings of the people about whom they write and whose struggles they claim to admire. Natasha's contribution to Malak and Oz's heated debate about Shamil was confined to how the British Empire viewed Imam Shamil:

> I told Malak, 'Did you know that Queen Victoria supported Imam Shamil? His image appeared on the front page of the London Times, with a call for the English to become,' I gestured with quotation marks, 'the generous defenders of liberty against the brutal forces of the Russian Empire.' (Aboulela 8).

This addition emphasizes that Natasha's interest in Shamil is rooted in his status as a subject of imperial translation—a position that, ironically, reflects her own experiences of assimilation. Her remark is soon eclipsed by the mother and son's argument over the relationship between Shamil's Sufi practice and jihad, compared to contemporary jihadist ideas. Natasha admits, "This [Shamil's Sufism] was not new to me. But this stress on Sufism was not an angle I had previously considered to be important. I needed to reconsider. Shamil's Sufism might well be what I needed to refine my research direction" (9). While this new conviction seems to represent a breakthrough in Natasha's detached historicism, it actually reaffirms the secular supremacy of her perspective. She believes that her secular practice of history can incorporate and translate Shamil's Sufism into her

framework, to evoke Dipesh Chakrabarty's characterization of secular historicism as a "problem of translation." As Chakrabarty argues, "Secular histories are usually produced by ignoring [the invocation of divine or superhuman presence]," so "the first system, the secular one, translates the second [the religious and supernatural system] into itself" (*Provincializing* 72). Natasha's practice thus exemplifies what Lawrence Venuti refers to as "domestication" in translation, applied to historical discourse.[63]

The course of events in the novel reverses this direction, illustrating not only that Shamil's Sufi spirituality cannot be translated through her secular historicism but also that Sufism itself ultimately translates the historian Natasha in spiritual terms. While this arc of Natasha's story signifies Aboulela's typical assertion of epistemological supremacy for an Islamic, Sufi perspective, *KOE* goes beyond merely depicting Natasha's mode of translation ideologically. It connects this translational practice to Natasha's personal immigrant experience, bringing her out of the translator's presumed status of invisibility. Beyond challenging the neutrality and objectivity of the secular perspective, this connection aims to draw a comparison between the secular translation of history and secular assimilation from the standpoint of faith-based Muslim subjectivity. Both processes involve detaching the translated work or assimilated subject from the original context.

From this standpoint, Natasha's secularism functions more as an identity than as simply a methodological lens. Her interest in history is deeply rooted in the complex process of her self-temporalization, reflecting the intricate layers of her present experience as an immigrant and her past as the child of a Sudanese father and a Georgian

[63] For Venuti, domestication refers to "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, thereby bringing the author back home" (*Invisibility* 20).

mother. She turned to history as an alternative time, seeking emancipation from the disorienting past shaped by the failure of her parents' biracial marriage. Natasha illuminates this anxious relationship to history by saying,

> When I was doing my Highers, the subject became my passion, a world that kept me awake at night; that claimed me, without conditions, as a citizen. I could lose myself in it and forget to visit my mother. I could memorise the dates of battles and the details of treaties so that I could blot out my father, so that I could be without a childhood self. The taunt 'swot' was the only one that never bothered me. (Aboulela 43, 44)

Natasha's citizenship of history is premised on the notion that, for her, it represents a non-personal temporality—"a foreign country" where she does not have to confront her childhood self. In this sense, to her, history functions as an alternative past, just as her name, Natasha Wilson, is an alternative to her birth name, Natasha Hussein.

The paradox lies in the fact that Natasha's personal background is what led her to conceptualize history as a detached, impersonal space. She comments on her identity formation by saying,

> I was seeing in these awkward composites my own liminal self. The two sides of me that were slammed together against their will, that refused to mix. I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight. I was the freak. (Aboulela 40)

Natasha experiences the failure of her hybrid identity as a form of temporal displacement, a subjectivity severed from what should be her heritage and relocated to a new present. Therefore, the change away from her father's name not only symbolizes her desire to assimilate into the British present but also underscores the perceived emptiness of the ancestral heritage that her father represents. Here, ancestry symbolizes a continuity with the past rather than a strict familial lineage. This is also evident in Malak and Oz's descendancy from Shamil. Despite their pride in belonging to him, their lineage to

Shamil is unclear, as reflected by Oz's remark about Shamil being their "great, great, great – not exactly sure how many greats I should say – grandfather!" (8). This deliberate focus on loose descent connections signals a personalized relationship to history. It establishes a sense of continuity with the past by framing history not as a conceptual, public temporality but as a realm of lived experiences embodied by individuals with whom one can form or imagine a personal relationship.

Natasha perceives her connection to Oz and Malak through a clear distinction between the past as a detached history and the past as a personal investment. Reflecting on their gathering at Malak's home, she remarks, "Here we were, the three of us, fascinated by a common past – faithful to it, even. I at least to the history, they to an ancestor they were proud of" (Aboulela 44). However, the novel complicates Natasha's claim of faithfulness to history by revealing her conscious selectivity of the historical material on which she focuses. She says, "I preferred the distant past, centuries that were over and done with, ghosts that posed no direct threat. History could be milked for this cause or that. We observed it always with hindsight, projecting onto it our modern convictions and anxieties" (41). These criteria explain her choice of Shamil as an object of historical study. However, the unfolding events challenge the notion that distant history can be neatly confined to the past or cease to impact personal experience in the present. Natasha studies Shamil only to find herself personally entangled with his legacy; she encounters his descendant, becomes professionally affected by the suspicious arrest of the young Oz, and ultimately ends up as a murid in a Sufi order that Shamil himself created.

Natasha's preference for distant histories is essentially another way to milk history for a particular cause—her personal one. Her instrumental use of history, aimed at safeguarding the fragility of her assimilative present, is mirrored in how she deals with her past. She transforms her interest in history into a mechanism for forgetting her past, using this act of forgetting to reinforce her sense of presentism. At Malak's home, Natasha continually reminds herself of her self-conscious restrainedness: "I was usually restrained, keeping back the shards and useless memories. I had worked too hard to fit in. To be here and now. That's how I wanted to appear – topical, relevant, and despite my research interest, inhabiting the present" (Aboulela 6). For Natasha, inhabiting the present becomes synonymous with dismissing the past as an isolated and irrelevant entity. In this sense, she represents a case of blurred boundaries between history as a public discourse and the personal past. Her secularism manifests itself as a means of keeping the past at a distance, preventing it from influencing her and allowing her to create a new sense of self. This notion of the possibility of temporal freedom—one's total ownership and invention of time—is precisely what the novel's Sufi concept of time opposes via Malak's perspective.

This image of the overlap between Natasha's secular translation of history and her personal struggle with the past illustrates Aboulela's approach to engaging with the religious-secular dialectic. Aboulela is less concerned with writing back to the discourse of secularism than with "attempting an epistemological break with it" (Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives* 182). She presents secularism through Natasha not as a transcendental, neutral ideological stance but as a sensibility rooted in a particular lived experience. In this way, *KOE* can be viewed as echoing Talal Asad's notion in *Secular*

Translations that secularism is "best approached indirectly" as "a range of sensibilities—ways of feeling, thinking, talking" (2). Natasha represents how secularism, as a temporal sensibility, functions within the individual interiority of a racially and culturally otherized Afro-Arab immigrant. While Western secular historicism produces the "backward" other externally, through what Johannes Fabian calls "denial of coevalness," Natasha's secular self-temporalization does so internally.[64] She otherizes her past self by silencing and distancing it from her present self. This idea pertains to how an immigrant from a Muslim background experiences secular assimilation as a temporal splitting of the self—a continuous effort to forget the past in order to protect a precarious present.

The failure of secular assimilation in Natasha's case is not limited to her experience in the UK, as evidenced by what happens in the wake of Oz's arrest. As the biracial child of a Sudanese communist father who studied in the Soviet Union and married her Georgian mother there, Natasha symbolizes an earlier form of failed secular assimilation. Her parents' marriage represents the newly formed Sudanese postcolonial nation as an "unalloyed" blend of a secular nation-state—with its leftist and communist leanings—and the Islamic culture of its people. Along the lines of this "national allegory," the stark failure of the marriage that produced the "failed hybrid" Natasha reflects a postcolonial nation that is also a failed hybrid.[65] Aboulela depicts this failure through the image of Natasha's father's house in Khartoum, "still incomplete, … without adequate flooring, without paint on the walls," echoing Sudan's status as a "dysfunctional postcolonial state" (Aboulela 250, 73). Beyond that, this symbolic image of the house

[64] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing* 72.
[65] Fredric Jameson in "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" famously argued that "Third-World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic — necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (69; italics in original).

establishes a discursive connection in the novel between failed assimilation and the archetype of a flawed home. The connection is reinforced by the juxtaposition between Natasha's failed assimilation and the damage to her flat caused by an unacknowledged raid by a counter-terrorism unit after Oz's arrest.

Natasha's temporary loss of home and university office following Oz's arrest signifies a breakdown of the public-private divide through which she has envisioned herself. Her situation is an allegory for Muslims in the UK in the climate of heightened suspicion following the 7/7 bombings. When juxtaposed with the failure of the postcolonial nation-state, the failure of Natasha's immigrant assimilation channels Aboulela's emphasis on the limitations of nationalism and liberal individualism as redemptive, secular ideologies of belonging. Aboulela presents Islam, through a Sufi articulation, as an alternative form of redemption rooted in a deeper sense of home as a spiritual entity. In an interview with Keija Parssinen, Aboulela states, "My fascination with the idea of home and my intense homesickness let me accept the Sufi concept of the home having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body" (29). In *KOE*, this Sufi sense of home is embodied by Malak, who reflects both directly and indirectly the concept of home as an internal, spiritual refuge.

Islamic Translations of Time

Malak represents a vision of home defined not spatially but temporally, wherein the continuity of the sense of self is envisioned through time rather than space. Her house embodies this sense of home; Aboulela depicts it less as a physical entity and more as a space representing a particular mode of religious translation of time. Despite its remote location as "an isolated farmhouse" in "the Scottish countryside," the interior of Malak's

house vividly reflects the cultural and religious specificity of her life as a Muslim immigrant (Aboulela 15). The house has identitarian details, such as the rule of walking in socks indoors and the presence of Islamic calligraphy on the walls and tapestries. The dissonance between the house's external location and its interior atmosphere mirrors how Aboulela "gives her characters—and, by extension, her readers—permission to ache for a place of familiarity and comfort, even if that place exists within a space that is otherwise undesirable" (Zanchettin 42). In *KOE*, at the heart of the politics of home is the valorization of the private realm as a space of comfort and agency. This space allows Malak to reconcile her past with her present, thereby enabling a continuous translation between the two. The novel's first pages portray Malak's home as a microcosm of reconciliation between modernity and tradition, housing Shamil's sword, Islamic calligraphy, and a prayer area alongside a treadmill, Pilates equipment, and a yoga space.

More importantly, Malak's relocation to the house mirrors the symbolic relocation of her past into this new space. Natasha tells us, "Malak Raja had turned her back on London, carried her furniture and family heirlooms north. 'I brought the scimitar by train,' she said, … 'I knew I wouldn't be able to get it past security at Heathrow" (Aboulela 4). Her movement to the north unmistakably invokes Mustafa Saeed's journey in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*.[66] Saeed's migration to the UK is marked by a break from his heritage; he leaves behind his cultural and religious values in Sudan only to return to them later. Malak's move to Scotland is different; she brings her heritage—her furniture, her family heirlooms, and Shamil's scimitar—with her. Unlike Saeed's, Malak's relocation involves a temporality of individual conscience that traverses

[66] Wail Hassan's Chapter 8, "Muslim Immigrant Fiction," from *Immigrant Narrative*, explores the depth of intertextuality between Aboulela's and Tayeb Salih's fictions.

geography, reflecting the transnational nature of Aboulela's articulation of Muslim diasporic identity. Through this framework, Aboulela delineates the private realm as the locus of identity, where agency manifests itself through the preservation and transmission of tradition rather than in the political realm.

Oz's radical thinking contrasts sharply with this Sufi concept of agency that Malak embodies. He exemplifies a similar form of captivity to the present as Natasha does, though through starkly different ideological lenses. Before his arrest, Oz was considering dropping out of university to concentrate on pursuing self-guided historical research into the types of weapons used in jihad. "My thesis is that they reflect the technology of their time and are often the same as those used by the enemy," Oz explains to Natasha (Aboulela 12). She implicitly debunks the ahistorical perspective of his thesis by telling him about a Russian film depicting Shamil's battles; "the camera was angled behind the cannons facing the charging highlanders." At that moment, Oz easily grasps the scene's unfair encounter by comparing it to "cowboys and Indians"—a comparison that Natasha confirms (12). What appears to be a naïve insensitivity to the historical imbalance in his thesis reflects a presentist mindset in which translations of complex historical realities become trapped in the confines of his present concerns.

Oz's captivity to the present is apparent during Natasha's presentation on Shamil at the History Society. He and several members of the university's Muslim Society attend the presentation, "drawn no doubt by the title, 'Jihad as Resistance – Russian Imperial Expansion and Insurrection in the Caucasus.'" However, as Natasha observes, "When they realized that my focus was Imam Shamil's leadership from 1830 to 1859 rather than the present, they seemed a little restless. Sensitive to their attention span, I finished ten

minutes earlier than planned" (Aboulela 5). The group's preoccupation with the present is affirmed by their personal question to Natasha about whether she is a Muslim; they turn her—and not the historical figure she is discussing—into the subject of their inquiry. Oz always does something similar with his mother, using, for example, their discussion about Shamil's Sufism as a means of "assessing [her], poking [her] with [his] own personal rubric," as Natasha observes (11). Thus, Oz's captivity to the present reveals itself by reducing history to a tool for demarcating otherness in the present rather than engaging with it in a way that enables comprehension of its complexity.

As a mode of translation, Oz's invocation of Shamil in life contexts represents another form of "domestication," in Venuti's terms. He neutralizes the historical difference in Shamil's life, adapting his figure to fit his own perception of the present. Natasha captures a revealing moment of Oz's monopolization of Shamil when she notes, "He looked straight into my eyes … 'Imam Shamil is my … is our,' a quick glance at his mother to include her, 'great, great, great … grandfather!'" (Aboulela 8). His domestication of Shamil reduces Shamil's experience of jihad to a material dimension, as illustrated by his research focus on the historical weapons used in the jihad. In contrast, for Malak, "Jihad is an internal and spiritual struggle" (8). Unlike his mother, who is an active follower of Shamil's Sufi order, Oz does not engage with the spiritual dimension of Shamil's legacy. By neglecting this aspect, he resembles Natasha, though their reasons differ. Their shared neglect of the spirituality of Shamil constitutes a case of not attending to what Gayatri Spivak terms "the rhetoricity of the original"— "the always possible menace of a space outside language." For Spivak, "the task of the translator is to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text" in the sense "of knowing

that the rhetoric of the text indicates the limits of language for you" (*Outside Machine* 182, 189). In this sense, Oz, like Natasha, does not surrender to Shamil. He fails to acknowledge the spiritual, interior dimension of Shamil's historical experience as a limit—an untranslatable time beyond the materiality of history.

Oz's mishandling of Shamil's sword, the family heirloom, is a remarkable expression of his disregard for Shamil's spiritual legacy. He associates himself with the sword in the virtual world by using "SwordOfShamil" as his online username, employing it as part of a performance of his online identity (Aboulela 100). This digital affiliation contrasts with his lack of genuine appreciation for the sword and its historical significance. Oz devalues the historic sword by using it to chop a snowman he builds in the backyard, all while making irresponsible jokes about setting up a jihadist camp. Natasha captures the scene with a sense of disappointment, noting Oz's disrespect for the sword: "There was no passion in his expression, only concentration as if he was practicing" (16). This image of disrespect for heritage mirrors Malak's remarks about "radical Islamist organizations," which, in her view, "were inspired by Hegel and Marx; their inner workings ticked along the lines of Trotskyist parties" and those Islamists "who turned their backs on tradition … [and] never took Shamil as a role model" (215). Within the context of such a critique, the act of taking the sword outside the house symbolizes the risk of politicizing religious tradition, indicative of the practice of political Islamism. As suggested by the pacifist Sufi perspective informing the novel, true appreciation of tradition lies in preserving it through spiritual practice rather than mobilizing it for political causes. Politicizing religious tradition risks losing it, as exemplified by the fate of Shamil's sword: The police seize it when they arrest Oz.

The untranslatability of the spiritual in Oz's militant translation of Shamil is symptomatic of his "hankering for an idealised past" (Aboulela 14). Oz reduces Shamil's life to fixed images devoid of internal complexities and intersections. He once tells Natasha, "What I like best about his days is the certainty. Everything was clear cut. Shamil and his people were the goodies; the Russians were the baddies" (7, 14). Idealizing the past is often often understood as a form of absence from the present. Public discourse about Muslim radicals, who present themselves as reviving or even reliving the authentic Islamic past in defiance of Western modernity, often labels them as "medieval" or living in the past (Bashir 137). Through the radically minded Oz, *KOE* reflects on the falsehood of both the radicals' claim to an Islamic past and the simplistic characterization that takes such a claim at face value. It demonstrates that Oz's idealization of the past is, in essence, a form of rejection involving both its monopolization and its distortion.

When viewed through a Sufi lens, centered around the teacher-disciple relationship, Oz's idealization of the past inverts the temporal logic of this Sufi connection. In Sufism, the transmission of spiritual power from teacher to disciple flows from the past to the present along the path of guidance, allowing the past to take on the role of teacher.[67] Contrary to this perception, Oz's exclusion of the spiritual dimension in his politically driven translation of Shamil highlights the centrality of the present as both the paradigm of politics and the locus of identity. This makes him no different from any other modern subject who thinks of politics and political identities as a contemporary affair. His idealization of the past thus mirrors Natasha's seemingly contradictory dismissal of the past as she pursues "the complete irrevocable dissolution" into an

[67] Gray, "From the Secular to the Sacred" 157.

assimilative present (Aboulela 6). Both reflect the way in which the precariousness of the lived present exerts epistemic violence on the past, whether this involves Natasha's attempt to assimilate into the present or Oz's outright rejection of it.

Parallel Temporalities as Translation

From this standpoint, one can decipher Aboulela's vision of incorporating the historical storyline of Shamil. The very existence of the historical storyline, as formally independent and narrated by a separate third-person narrator, suggests the untranslatability of Shamil's spiritual struggle. This untranslatability highlights not only that Shamil's spirituality does not fit into Natasha's secular paradigm of translation or Oz's Islamist paradigm but, more importantly, that it defies the very act of translation itself. In *Secular Translations*, Talal Asad addresses this idea of untranslatability in religious experience by using the example of the Qur'an, arguing that "certain messages cannot be separated from the medium because how the medium comes to inhabit the subject and engage her is crucial to what they mean" (67). In this regard, Malak plays a distinctive role, embodying *KOE*'s Sufi imagination of spiritual translation—what might be described as the act of translating the untranslatable. In other words, Malak's perspective mirrors the thematic semantics of the novel's structure of temporality.

To unpack this entanglement, one must recall Hassan's characterization of the translational politics in Aboulela's faith-based fiction. Hassan employs the concept of "divine translation" to describe Aboulela's depiction of faith as a unidirectional transformation by divine will, contrasting it with human translation (linguistic, cultural, or otherwise), which involves a limited, reciprocal exchange of knowledge. He notes, "Divine translation negates human agency, interrupts history, and supersedes all worldly

affiliation." Conversion, as Hassan points out, is the manifestation of divine translation in Aboulela's fiction; it "posits a clean break with the past, or with the original, and claims to transport the convert to a realm beyond history" (*Immigrant Narratives* 190). Malak's story exemplifies the workings of divine translation in *KOE* in two key ways: first, through her role as a Sufi practitioner of *zikr*, and second, by playing the role of a Sufi teacher for Natasha.

Unlike Oz and Natasha, Malak is not engaged in historical research about Shamil; her connection to him is rooted in the practice of *zikr* within the Sufi order (*tariqa*) that Shamil himself founded. In other words, she is connected to Shamil through "inward time"—"[the] time for prayer and seclusion," "the time to heal"—rather than through the outward time of transmitted historical knowledge, i.e., human translation (Aboulela 36). With the arrest of her son Oz, Malak finds herself in a situation mirroring Shamil's own experience when the Russians took his son, Jamaleldin. When he eventually restores Jamaleldin after years of struggle, only to see him die of tuberculosis, Shamil recognizes his sin and "the arrogance" of refusing to accept defeat. He surrenders to the Russians; "He understood that surrender meant humility. He accepted defeat graciously and saw it as Allah's will," as Malak interprets it. With this surrender, he also surrenders his sword intact; "He didn't fight with it and shatter it to pieces" (313). Later, a descendant of Shamil purchases the sword, which is passed down through the family until it reaches Malak. Thus, it represents the enduring nature of Shamil's spiritual tradition.

Malak translates Shamil by embodying his spirit of humility and acceptance of the divine will during Oz's arrest. She cultivates spiritual agency through circles of *zikr* while campaigning for Oz's release, drawing strength from her spiritual practice. When the

police release Oz with all his seized items except the sword, Malak accepts this outcome and does not ask for it; “in a strange way I don’t mind waiting,” she says (Aboulela 313). Here, she accepts the surrender of Shamil’s sword to the police under the same spiritual sentiment to which Shamil adhered when he surrendered the sword to the Russians a century and a half ago. This is the novel’s paradigmatic moment of Sufi translation—when the untranslatable spiritual becomes translatable only through the acceptance of divine translation.

Therefore, divine translation reveals how history should be understood first from its inner truth—a realm of spiritual struggle and activity—rather than by focusing solely on its external, changing manifestations. As the Sufi version of Natasha articulates: “No situation at any given time is entirely new; the constraints and conversations are different, the fears are different, but still today is a ripple of former times, a version of what has been passed down” (Aboulela 177). The very concept is narratively enacted through the multiple parallels and intersections in the novel, with situations in the present-day storyline clearly echoing those in the historical narrative. In addition to Malak and Shamil, notable parallels include Natasha and Jamaleldin as failed hybrids, and Oz and Princess Anna, whose nostalgia for a lost great past leads to carelessness and eventual abduction. This emphasis on the similitude of history suggests that internal struggles remain relevant, transcending the changing outer forms of historical events.

Redemptive Translation

Natasha’s reversion or conversion to Islam at the end of the novel exemplifies the transcendental redemption that *KOE* offers. Her reversion is a manifestation of divine translation. It is expressed not through an assertive action but, rather, through the fact that

she opens her soul to the possibility of spiritual activity, as stimulated by the implicit teacher-disciple relationship with Malak. By participating in the Sufi circle with Malak, Natasha transcends her detachment as a secular historian and immigrant, experiencing an "enlargement [that is] subtle and painless" (Aboulela 218). This feeling of enlargement is deeply temporal, transcending the sense of captivity into the present. Natasha reflects on her relationship with Malak, saying, "She had always given me a sense of communion with Shamil, oriented me towards the unexpected, and guided me to what could never be written down in history" (311). This is an emblematic reflection of Natasha's assimilation into Sufi time, where the blurring of boundaries between the historical/public and the spiritual/personal is grounded in the perception of time as a duality of the unexpected and the unwritten. It is a duality that echoes the concept of "dual eternity" in Sufi thought—"past eternity (azal) and future eternity (abad)"—in which "time is memory of an eternal past and the certainty of an eternal future, both converging in the present moment" (Thibon 97; Böwering, "Ideas" 82). This receptive nature of the present moment reflects its function as a temporality of the spirit—an open, unified time of divine translation—rather than a terminal of linear human translation, where the agency manifests itself by translating a limited past into an anticipated future.

This very concept of time allows us to understand the simultaneity of Natasha's return to faith and her return to her homeland. Her return to Sudan does not signify a return to the past or home. Rather, it is an experience of creating a new sense of both. She returns at her dying father's request but arrives too late, as he passes away while she is awaiting a visa. Having lost her Sudanese passport two decades ago and unable to renew it due to her name change, Natasha travels to Sudan using her British passport. This

incident conveys the sense of the impossibility of returning to the past—a reality that her father's death further confirms. In this way, her return conforms to Edward Said's note in *Reflections on Exile* that "no return to the past is without irony, or without a sense that a full return, or repatriation, is impossible" (489). Natasha accepts the irrevocable loss of the past by giving up her share of the inheritance to her half-brother. At the court in Sudan, she states, "I did not come here today to fight over money or for the share of a house. I came so that I would not be an outcast, so that I would, even in a small way, faintly, marginally, tentatively, belong" (Aboulela 290). This moment signifies Natasha's spiritual agency and freedom as she "let[s] go of the past and the future," representing liberation from the constraints of the progressive temporality of secular assimilation (115). It enables her to envision home as a spiritual homeland, a home in time: "I was confident that there was a home, there, ahead of me" (328). In Islamic terms, the home ahead of her symbolizes paradise, but it also represents the hope for a better future, where she can reconcile her two "unalloyed selves" through faith.

With this conclusion, Aboulela presents an alternative form of assimilation for her imagined immigrant subject—a faith-based assimilation that supersedes other modes of identification. Agency in this framework is conceptually shifted to emphasize the activity of the spirit rather than that of the mind or body. While fictionalizing the life of a complex figure like Shamil—a Sufi leader and military resistor—has the potential to bridge "the rift between politics and spirituality" in Aboulela's fiction, *KOE* ultimately reinforces that rift (Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives* 186). Its narrative intertwines the personal and the political only to highlight the private realm as the primary locus for processing what unfolds in the public sphere, responding through spiritual means. It

promotes a Sufi poetics of spiritual surrender, which encompasses not only surrender to the divine but also a withdrawal from the public realm in the name of accepting divine will. By foregrounding the spirituality of the private sphere, Aboulela challenges the secular/radical divide by articulating an apolitical Muslim immigrant identity in *KOE*.

While this articulation challenges both secular and political constructions of Muslim identity, it notably avoids engaging with the pitfalls of depicting Islam as a purely private faith. As Melani McAlister points out in "Kneeling for Hollywood," which discusses the representations of Muslim prayer in films,

> the terms of [the] respect [for Islam] are based on a prohibition: Islam is presented as 'good' by being linked to family life … a private, personal faith—the kind that narrows religion down to the line item of 'belief'—a religion that does not claim to be a force in public life. (287)

Additionally, Aboulela's focus on Muslim interiority falls short in her treatment of Oz's character, who is not explored as deeply from the inside as Natasha and Malak. The hesitancy to provide him, as a reluctant fundamentalist, with clear interiority risks aligning him with the terrorist figure. In *Epic Encounters*, McAlister underscores how the post-9/11 discourse frames the terrorist as blurring "boundaries between public and private" by failing "to separate the home from the world" (280). The anxiety surrounding the treatment of Oz's character echoes the novel's explicit, sometimes didactic, embrace of the Sufi perspective. One can interpret both aspects as efforts to establish a clear distance from Islamic fundamentalism. Some secular critics within Anglophone Arab and Muslim circles, such as Wail Hassan and Sadia Abbas, have associated Aboulela's Islamic fiction with fundamentalism or a passive version of it, as Hasan suggests.[68] When read in light of a response to such characterizations, I contend that *KOE* presents an

[68] Sadia Abbas, "Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel."

ambiguous construction of Muslim identity. It seeks to challenge both secularism and Islamism but remains caught between the two, unable to distinctly break with either. As a result, it becomes a combination of the two, being both epistemologically Islamic and practically secular.

4. Conclusion: History as Migration of Time

The use of parallel temporal narratives in *Homegoing* and *The Kindness of Enemies* as a means of memorializing distant pasts of encounters with modernity, while intervening in the present-day immigrant experience, reveals significant intersections between the two novels. Both novels offer a fictional mediation of history deeply grounded in immigrant poetics. They foreground a temporal-oriented concept of mobility, giving a migratory character to historical time through narratives that span and connect distant periods. Both novels structure and map the migration of history through the concept of descent, which acts as a conduit for the individual transmission of historical time. While *KOE* is not a genealogical novel like *Homegoing*, the concept of descent is a transnationalizing force in both works. This allows both novels to portray historical time in a manner that provincializes the temporality of the nation, mapping how a distant past of modernity that precedes the nation continues to influence and shape contemporary transnational experiences.

By linking early encounters with colonial modernity in West Africa and the Caucasus to contemporary immigrant experiences and by framing immigrant identity as a meditation on this temporal distance, *Homegoing* and *KOE* present modern subjectivities and narratives whose times transcend national boundaries. They challenge the assumption that the nation is the universal framework for modern temporality. In this sense, the two

novels enact Homi Bhabha's gesture of reclaiming marginalized, alternative temporalities within the modern as sites of resistance to nationhood. In *Homegoing*, this manifests itself as an expanded consciousness of the diaspora, which reestablishes Africa as a central locus of diasporic modernity. In *KOE*, it appears as a reclamation of Sufi history as a spiritual paradigm for navigating and reconciling the modern secular-religious divide within the Islamic context.

With this sense of divergence from the nation and the nation-state, *Homegoing* and *KOE* differ from the historicity of canonical postcolonial novels. As Ato Quayson points out, "It is the nation-state that provides the readiest template for understanding the post-colonial novel, even in its diasporic and transnational iterations. … [I]t provided the preferred horizon for elaborating social, political, and cultural history that the postcolonial novel then refracted" ("Changing Contexts" 7–8). *Homegoing* and *KOE* are not concerned with historicity as a means of telling the story of the formation of new postcolonial imagined communities. The dense realist poetics of historical representation in the two novels represent another aspect of this divergence, given the traditional postcolonial suspicion of historical realism.[69] However, their realism is not the realism of the classical historical novel that George Lukács outlines in his seminal book, *The Historical Novel*, which depicts human lives as representative types of public social transformation. Instead, they exhibit a peripheral realism that seeks to trace subaltern historical continuities rather than articulate capitalist transformations, channeling these continuities primarily through the individual, the domestic, and the private. It is thus a

[69] Dalley, 6.

realism that temporalizes history, portraying it as a multiplicity of lived experiences of time that allows the remnants of subaltern agency to be linked across historical time.

Despite their realist poetics, *Homegoing* and *KOE* are self-reflective texts. They display a self-consciousness about their narrative processes in representing history. On the structural organization level, both novels feature overlapping yet distinct chronologies through different narrative voices. This reflects a thematic framework of continuity without linearity, which underpins the sense of historicity in each text. More importantly, this structural self-reflexivity accommodates multiple characters—historians, translators, and researchers—who deliver the narrative content and whose collective voices actively shape and produce interpretations of it. Both novels position the present-day characters who engage in a systematic study of history—namely, Marcus in *Homegoing* and Natasha and Oz in *KOE*—as the "other" to the authorial surrogate characters: Marjorie, the literature graduate student, and Malak, the Sufi practitioner. This otherness is not antagonistic, like that of a hero and a villain. Rather, it invites mediation, intersection, and reconciliation. A similar logic of otherness governs both the relationship between the past and the present and the relationship between history and fiction, as envisioned by the two novels.

My interpretation of *Homegoing* and *KOE* as narratives that temporalize history—using individual experiences of time as a chronotope of history—is situated along these lines. The two novels transcend the conventional trope of contestation between history and fiction, positioning fiction as a repository for alternative temporalities that run parallel to, intersect with, and revise historical narratives and imaginaries. Central to this dynamic is a shift away from spatially oriented history—not merely from national to

transnational frameworks but also toward non-spatialized, transnational temporalities. This aspect distinguishes the politics of time in the two novels from the genre of the postcolonial historical novel identified by Forter, which "revises our maps of the colonial past by expanding and linking the geographical fields [of this past]" (*Critique and Utopia* 5). The immigrant historicity of *Homegoing* and *KOE* resonates more with a sense of de-spatialization than with the idea of geographical expansion and linkage.

Gyasi's *Homegoing* realizes the Afropolitan notion of "Africans of the world" through a repositioning of Africa within the time of the world, moving beyond the geographical paradigms of African identities, whether on the continent or across the Atlantic.[70] On the other hand, Aboulela's *KOE* disrupts the "imaginative geography" of Orientalism through a colonial history that positions the colonized highlanders of Dagestan as the "west" of the colonizing Russian empire while also offering a spiritual rubric of Islamic redemption as an alternative to national redemption.[71]

In conclusion, it is in these aspects that the "worlding" spirit of the two texts resides—in Pheng Cheah's sense of the word, which involves producing accounts of the world by focusing on its temporal dimension. The two novels place the immigrant subject at the center of their worlding processes. They do so by featuring immigrant characters that act as carriers and mobilizers of historical temporalities, signifying far beyond the immigrant experience itself and other constructed paradigms of space.

[70] Taiye Selasi introduces the concept of the "Africans of the world" in her famous essay, "Bye-Bye Babar."
[71] Said, *Orientalism*, 73.

Chapter Three: Citizens of Time: Representations of Refugee Temporality in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Viet Than Nguyen's *The Refugees*

1. Introduction: Refugees and the Time of Crisis

In the previous chapter, I argued that, by framing history as a migratory time, Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* offer reconciliatory articulations of diasporic identities. By invoking distant histories, they aim to provide their immigrant characters with a sense of temporal continuity despite their geographical displacement. This chapter extends the triad of fictional representations of migration, space, and time to a specific strand of contemporary migrant experience: that of the refugee.

Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West* starts with the line "In a city swollen by refugees"—a phrase immediately portraying refugees as a mass that overwhelms the urban landscape (3). The same imagery resurfaces throughout the book, achieving its most dramatic iteration by describing refugees in London as "black holes in the fabric of the nation" because they occupy the heart of the nation's geography. Across the city, no single unoccupied space can escape the refugee occupation: "the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters" (129). This cosmological imagery of refugee mass mobility recalls what Kavita Daiya describes as the dehumanizing construction of refugees as "natural calamities" in American and European journalistic discourse on the refugee crisis of the last decade (*Graphic Migrations* 23). According to the UN Refugee Agency, the 2010-2020 decade witnessed a record number of refugees since World War II. By the end of 2022, around 108.4 million people worldwide had been forced to flee

their home countries due to conflicts, violence, fear of persecution, or human rights violations.[72]

In addressing this disturbing global reality, *Exit West* engages with the Euro-American media's naturalistic, calamitous rhetoric about refugees sweeping across national geographies and invites us to think about refugees beyond what Paul Gilroy calls the "power of territory," which informs dominant conceptualizations of the refugee experience (*Against Race* 200). This chapter explores the representations of refugee subjectivities beyond the power of territory as represented in Hamid's *Exit West* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2017 short story collection, *The Refugees*. I argue that both works engage with the refugee experience by emphasizing its temporal dimensions rather than through a conventional focus on its territorial markers. *Exit West* portrays a magical realist world where migration is facilitated by mystical doors that collapse territorial borders, thereby allowing people to move between countries instantaneously. *The Refugees*, on the other hand, presents the stories of Vietnamese refugees through the lens of their present lives in the US, where they remain haunted by memories of their escape from the long-gone country of South Vietnam.

I argue that contemporary refugee literature, as exemplified by these two works of major writers, offers unique insights into the refugee experience by situating the refugee figure between nations not only spatially but also temporally, caught in the interstices between nation-states as well as between different states of temporality. While the physical crossing of national borders is always a temporary experience for refugees, *Exit West* and *The Refugees* emphasize the enduring nature of their temporal crossing, framing

[72] UNHCR, *Global Trends report 2022*.

the refugee experience as a persistent state of being (once a refugee, always a refugee). They portray refugeeness as an identity that is defined by its perpetual state of flux and uncertainty, rather than by stability and permanence.

The two works enact refugee temporality by employing magical realist elements: Hamid's magical doors and Nguyen's haunting ghosts. Thus, they highlight a refugee subjectivity that resists reductive assimilation into "citizen time"—"a vision of temporality molded to the citizen and the nation" (Bakara "Time, Sovereignty" 443). To that end, though they depict different social and historical contexts, both works present narratives in which the significance of refugee mobility lies in the idea of migration through time rather than through space. The dependence on magical realist eruptions as narratological strategies designed to represent the refugee subjectivity reflects, I argue, what one can describe as a refugee longing for form, to rephrase Timothy Brennan's famous title, "The National Longing for Form." In this way, contemporary refugee literature presents itself as a site of ethics and aesthetics, where specific formal elements consolidate thematic concerns such as displacement and trauma.

This chapter intervenes by arguing that the temporalized refugee narrative of *Exit West* and *The Refugees* exemplifies what Claire Gallien characterizes as the mode of "writing beyond" the national order of things in refugee literature (743). By emphasizing the enduring nature of refugeeness, the two works reject the trope of refugee victimhood, which reinforces the idea that the sovereign nation-state is the only protector and nurturer of humanity. Instead, they reveal how global precarity and injustice are also rooted in temporal inequalities, made visible through refugee mobility. Refugee time, therefore, acquires a universal quality, operating in line with what Pheng Cheah

describes as the "normative force of worlding." This force opens up an "ethicopolitical horizon ... for the existing world" by reframing the world as a temporal category rather than a spatial one, as produced through global capitalist and national processes (5, 8). In this context, the two works portray the refugee's persistence in time as immanent to these processes, not a break from them. It disrupts their calculations of spatialized time from within rather than representing a state of exception to ultimately be assimilated.

In "Time, Sovereignty, and Refugee Writing," Hadji Bakara points out that contemporary theorists of refugee experience give new meaning to the refugee's persistence in time. For these new refugee universalists, as Bakara calls them, "the future of humanity as a whole is sometimes figured through the refugee." Unlike mid-century refugee writers, such as Hannah Arendt and Anna Seghers, who "used their writing to disentangle human futures from national futures" and "deuniversalize the citizen," contemporary theorists "universalize the refugee." This refugee universalism, as Bakara views it, is a product of the contemporary period—"a period not of national sovereignty's consolidation across the globe but of its weakening control over global imaginaries of both space and time" (451, 452). Perhaps the most striking delineation of the historical position of today's refugees appears in Giorgio Agamben's proclamation that

> The refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today—at least until the process of dissolution of the nation-state and of its sovereignty has achieved full completion—the forms and limits of a coming political community. ("We Refugees" 114)

Agamben's depiction of the refugee as the protagonist in the drama of the contemporary political system is part of his theorization of the refugee as the paradigmatic site of

sovereign "biopolitical" violence and the exemplary figure of "bare life."[73] This image of the refugee as both the ultimate victim of the modern political system and the initiator of a new, radical ontology captures the inherent tension in universalist theories of the refugee. It reveals the discrepancy between the epistemological celebration of the refugee modality and the actual aspirations of refugees, who often have no desire to play this idealized role. Instead, they simply hope to gain citizenship in a country that does not persecute them.

Meanwhile, scholars in the field of Critical Refugee Studies have emphasized the refugee's persistence in time to challenge the reductive constructions of refugees as victims, threats, or mere objects of research. They call for viewing "refugees as ontological and epistemological subjects shaped by and shaping history" (Espiritu and Nguyen 5). This perspective values the persistence of refugeeness as a complex site of knowledge, both by and about refugees, irreducible to the mechanisms of control and incorporation that have long dominated legal and media discourse surrounding them. Fundamentally, this view addresses the construction of the refugee as existing "out of time." This is reflected in cultural narratives that portray refugees as "harbingers and proleptic denizens of a bleak future—a future to be feared, avoided, and intervened in at any cost" (Bakara "Refugee and Future" 483). Legal and practical systems similarly impose a temporal dimension in which the refugee experience is shaped by suspended time and perpetual waiting.[74] Consequently, the trope of the refugee persisting in time serves as a framework for both the uncertainty in the refugee's life and the disruption this uncertainty brings to the world.

[73] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
[74] See Griffiths, "Out of Time."

Drawing upon this line of theorization, the chapter interrogates the temporal dimensions of the refugee experience as represented in *Exit West* and *The Refugees* by addressing the following questions: How do these texts represent the refugee's persistence in time? In what ways do such representations inscribe memory, make sense of the present, and imagine the future from a refugee perspective? What kinds of refugee politics and subjectivities do they facilitate? And how does the concept of refugeeness as a persistent consciousness expose the hegemonic boundaries within a world politically and culturally organized around the nation-state?

2. Exit West: The Permanent Temporariness of Refugeeness

Exit West follows Nadia and Saeed, who reside in an unnamed city on the verge of civil war in the Greater Middle East. Saeed is the son of a caring family, a young man working in advertising, while Nadia is a young, independent woman who lives alone and is estranged from her family. Despite not being religious, she wears a full-length black veil, though she breaks the social norms associated with this dress by driving a motorcycle. The two meet in a business class and begin a romantic relationship with sexual intimacy that does not develop into full sex, which Saeed believes should not happen before marriage. However, despite her deep love for Saeed, Nadia rejects the idea of marriage. Their romance blossoms even as their city becomes increasingly dangerous and violent. As militant groups take over half the neighborhoods, prolonged electricity and cell phone service disruptions due to ongoing government-militant battles become distressingly common occurrences, as does the sight of explosions and corpses on the streets. Amid these circumstances, Saeed's mother falls victim to stray gunfire, prompting Nadia to move into the apartment that Saeed shares with his father.

Meanwhile, rumors begin circulating of mysterious doors in hidden places, offering passage to other countries. Nadia and Saeed arrange a meeting with an agent connected to one of these doors and decide to pursue migration. They will be leaving behind Saeed's father, who refuses to accompany the young couple. The door transports them to a refugee camp in Mykonos, Greece, where people from across the world are cramped together. Given their financial strain and growing sense of insecurity, the couple decides to find another door. A compassionate female medical volunteer, with whom Nadia briefly engages in a heterosexual romance, guides them to a new door. When they emerge, they find themselves in a palace in London, located in a block that refugees have taken over. The palace is full of Nigerian refugees. Nadia feels comfortable among them, but Saeed does not. He frequents a nearby house occupied by refugees from his country and suggests moving there. However, Nadia opposes the idea of surrendering their separate room in favor of communal living with their nationals. The two grow distant as Saeed becomes increasingly melancholy and religious, while Nadia remains open to whatever lies ahead.

To expel the refugees from their quarters in London, the government, supported by nativist mobs, puts the newfound community under a military siege. Initially, the government had threatened to evict them by force and even cut off electricity in the block, but it eventually abandoned the idea of violence. Instead, the refugees are relocated to new cities being built around London. In the so-called "London Halo," the refugees build new houses and receive shelter in return. At the camp, Nadia and Saeed take on different jobs, which causes their relationship to become increasingly distant. Therefore, they decide to seek another door, hoping that a different location will help

them become closer. They move to Marin, California, where they live in a shantytown where refugees, not natives, comprise the majority. In Marin, Nadia and Saeed drift apart until they separate, though both find their own paths. Nadia becomes romantically involved with a white female cook, while Saeed finds himself drawn to a Muslim Imam's daughter of mixed Middle Eastern and African American ancestry. The novel ends fifty years later with Nadia and Saeed briefly reuniting in their former city.

Hamid's *Exit West* has received significant critical acclaim, with a remarkable focus on its perplexing deployment of magical doors in place of actual borders between countries. The doors have been interpreted in various ways by critics: as naturalization or universalization of the migrant experience that omits its historical and material particularity (Yogita Goyal "We Are All Migrants"); as a symbol of post-apocalyptic futurism that challenges the late-capitalist futuristic sense of endless, conflictual repetition (Penny Vlagopoulos); or as a mechanism of compression that creates simultaneity, both normalizing and destabilizing the migrant experience (Steve Almquist). The question of time in the novel is intricately linked to the motif of the magical door. Scholarly analyses of the novel's representation of time have illuminated this connection, driven by Hamid's declaration, "We are all migrants through time" (Hamid 209). Greg Forter offers an insightful reading of temporality in *Exit West*, emphasizing Hamid's concern with "the imminence of a social calamity out of which some kind of newness will be born." Forter also emphasizes Hamid's attunement to "a sense of imminence and impending futurity as qualities inherent in the fabric of the present" ("Capitalism, Temporality" 66). Other studies, including those of Amanda Lagji and Beatriz Pérez Zapata, accentuate the novel's representations of waiting and

transience. Lagji highlights how the temporality of waiting not only "predominates [refugees'] sense of time" in the novel but also constitutes "the foundation of human life." Meanwhile, Zapata, along similar lines, stresses "how transience frames human experience, especially that of refugees" (Lagji, "Waiting in Motion" 225, 226; Zapata 765). Both studies highlight that the universalizing of the refugee experience in *Exit West* fosters human connections across diverse experiences, though without placing these experiences on an equal footing or erasing their particularities.

Departing from the debate over the merits and drawbacks of Hamid's universalization of refugees, I explore how *Exit West* temporalizes the narrative of the refugee experience. I argue that this narrative operates through a paradoxical articulation in which an acute awareness of temporariness underpins, both ontologically and epistemologically, the construction of refugeeness as an enduring quality. Hamid positions the refugee at the heart of a global temporal experience characterized by time-space compression, in which the constant flow of people, materials, and information leads to what is often described as "the end of geography"[75] or "the death of distance."[76] However, the refugee in *Exit West* embodies the precarious and disprivileged form of this global mobility. Hamid illuminates how the refugee figure offers a cognitive mapping of the current global structure, revealing the paradox of its being both dynamic and static. Within this framework, the novel's use of magical realism transforms the refugee narrative into a canvas for imagining the global uncertainty that defines a world in flux. This uncertainty is not generated but crystallized by the refugee's mobility, which, in Hamid's novel, embodies the contingent nature of time itself.

[75] See Das, "The End of Geography."
[76] See Kolko, "The Death of Cities? The Death of Distance?"

The novel embodies "permanent temporariness" through its central characters, Nadia and Saeed. Their perceptions of identity continuously change, and as their relationship becomes more distant, the refugee experience reveals their divided feelings toward the past and the present. The juxtaposition of the protagonists' temporal dividedness with their shared movement from place to place aligns with the symbolism that the novel's use of magical doors suggests. Both neutralize spatial movement to emphasize a movement that occurs within the experience of time. In doing so, Hamid's refugee narrative redefines refugee subjectivities beyond the trope of "stuckness" often associated with the refugee experience. Instead, it uses this notion to portray the opposite—the idea of the territorially bounded nation as a form of stuckness within a specific historical moment. In other words, the magical doors and the temporalized refugee narrative work in tandem, prompting us to think beyond the confines of the territorial paradigms of the nation. They illuminate the nature of contemporary human experience in a world characterized by spatial and temporal fluidity, where an intense sense of permanent temporariness emerges as a defining social reality.

Temporal Displacement in Place

Exit West's temporalized depiction of the refugee experience is notable in that it decouples refugeeness from the concept of spatial mobility. The novel intentionally leaves Nadia and Saeed's home city unnamed and geographically ambiguous, in contrast to the clear identification of other cities throughout the narrative. Molly Slavin notes that the novel "is heavily focused on cities," emphasizing that it "is not primarily concerned with nations, as many refugee narratives are; it is concerned with cities, and what happens in them in an age of refuge-seeking" (201). While this focus on cities reflects a

sentiment to imagine the current world without the nation-state as the rule, it accentuates the significance of leaving the protagonists' home city unnamed. Many reviewers have interpreted this choice as reflecting the fact that contemporary mass refugee movements originate from diverse and varied regions across the globe. I contend that while this interpretation is compelling and intuitive, it does not fully grasp the significance of leaving the city unnamed in a narratologically complex text like *Exit West*. This narrative choice depicts the city through its temporal reality rather than as a specific geographic location.

If naming is integral to the production of place ("one of the ways space can be given meaning and become place"), then the unnaming of the city in *Exit West* can be understood as representing a narrative act of de-spatialization (Cresswell 9). It infuses the novel's setting, from the very beginning, with a sense of destabilization and unfixedness, clearly diverging from the equilibrium that expositions in fiction typically establish. Unnaming renders the city as a manifestation of life itself, a temporal landscape reflecting the shifting nature of human experience. While describing the city, the narrator observes,

> It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class ... but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does. (Hamid 3, 4)

This portrayal of the city conveys an experience of time characterized by imminence, yet it does not foster a sense of urgency. In the city, the everyday is not the norm, and the emergency is not an exception; the boundaries between the two are blurred, collapsing the idea that "the everyday … name[s] that which an emergency interrupts" (Ben Anderson 182). The image of the city further normalizes this blurring by presenting the

city as a microcosm of natural life itself. In doing so, it defies the very concept of sovereignty as famously defined by Carl Schmitt—the power to decide on the exception. The people of the city live in a space that effectively exists outside the system of national sovereignty.

Transformed into a temporal space in this portrayal, the city can be viewed as the novel's chronotope—a spacetime construct in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense that facilitates "every entry into the sphere of meanings" that the narrative generates (258). This chronotopic status enables one to understand the refugee experience in *Exit West* as a mechanism for building a world in which the refugee's mobility is not a linear journey from one sovereign state to another but, rather, one that subverts sovereignty through both its emergence and its persistence. The novel associates the emergence of its refugee characters with the dissolution of the spatial texture of everyday life in the city. We are told that war in the city "revealed itself to be an intimate experience, combatants pressed close together, front lines defined at the level of the street one took to work, the school one's sister attended, the house of one's aunt's best friend, the shop where one bought cigarettes" (Hamid 68). This deadly spatial intimacy collapses the normal navigation of the city as a space: "Saeed's mother's mental map of the place where she has spent her entire life now resembled an old quilt, with patches of government land and patches of militant land" (69). War even alters the experience of the interiority of homes: "One's relationship to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come" (71). The novel's introduction of magical doors of migration within this context of highlighting spatial disintegration is particularly noteworthy. It is a narrative contextualization that frames forced migration as an

experience of the death of distance, though from a perspective of vulnerability and precarity rather than as a privilege enjoyed by global subjects with greater mobility.

In its naked nature, time encapsulates the lived experience of people in Nadia and Saeed's city. Time, as represented by arbitrary death, becomes unnavigable and incomprehensible through its ordinary relation to space. This fact is exemplified by two events: Saeed's mother being killed by a stray bullet and Nadia's cousin dying in a bus explosion. Along this line, the novel highlights a contrast between spatial stuckness and the accelerated pace of time brought on by war.

Saeed's parents' apartment is a prominent example of how spatiality takes on a temporal character. On the one hand, the novel describes the apartment by tracing its transformation over time. It "was in a once handsome building, with an ornate though now crumbling facade that dated back to the colonial era, in a once upscale, presently crowded and commercial, part of town. It had been partitioned from a much larger flat and comprised three rooms … etc." (Hamid 10). This historicization of the apartment alludes to the partition of India into three nation-states. While the reference might suggest that the unnamed city is Hamid's hometown of Lahore, Pakistan, it more significantly invokes the broader reality of the partition as one of the largest and most violent mass migrations in modern history—an event during which millions found themselves in the "wrong" country after the subcontinent was divided along ethnoreligious lines. Addressing the lessons of partition migrations, Dayia argues counterintuitively in *Graphic Migration* that "the refugee is constitutive of the nation" (8). *Exit West* echoes this perspective, suggesting that what is now seen as a territorially fixed nation was, in fact, built through the forced mobilization of people.

The nation-state is thus recontextualized within the broader historical framework of refuge and migration rather than the other way around. In an interview with Muddasir Ramzan, Hamid reflects on *Exit West* by reconsidering the term "refugee crisis": "When we say it is a 'refugee crisis,' I instead think there is a human crisis, which is that throughout history people have uprooted themselves or were forced to move by all kinds of developments" (117). *Exit West* echoes the same sentiment by challenging the perceived fixedness of the contemporary world as organized around the territorial boundaries of nation-states, suggesting that this fixedness is the exception rather than the norm. Consequently, the historical portrayal of the apartment as symbolizing the nation reveals its migratory nature over time. In *Exit West*, not only people but also places migrate through time.

In addition to the apartment's diachronic timeline, the narration focuses on how the synchronous dimensions of temporal experience also shape the meaning of the apartment as a living space. The apartment's balcony has

> a view down an alley and straight up a boulevard … It was the sort of view that might command a slight premium during gentler, more prosperous times, but would be most undesirable in times of conflict, when it would be squarely in the path of heavy machine-gun and rocket fire as fighters advanced into this part of town: a view like staring down the barrel of a rifle. Location, location, location, the realtors say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians. War would soon erode the facade of their building as though it had accelerated time itself, a day's toll outpacing that of a decade. (Hamid 11)

Here, Hamid highlights how wartime accelerates the disruption of the entanglement between two key markers of national identity, i.e., history and geography, with continuity being coupled with locality. The city, portrayed both diachronically and synchronically, emerges as a space of perpetual transformation. This suggests that, when viewed through the prism of time, no place possesses a stable or fixed identity. War amplifies this reality

by eroding the very notion of fixed spatiality, disrupting all forms of spatialized time—whether the synchronic perspective of realtors or the diachronic perspective of historians. In *Exit West*, geography and location are not destiny; the experience of time is.

The apartment once again conveys the universality of the human temporal experience and its transcendence of place. As a symbol of the country where Nadia, Saeed, and Saeed's father live, the apartment's three inhabitants experience it as a temporal realm of interaction. In his room, "Saeed's father encounter[s] each day objects that [belonged] to his wife," which "sweep his consciousness out of the current others referred to as the present." Meanwhile, Nadia, who is assigned Saeed's room after moving in, "encounter[s] each day objects that [take] her into Saeed's past." For his part, Saeed is "inhabiting a chamber that had been his only briefly, years ago, when relatives from afar or abroad used to come to visit, and being billeted here again conjured up for him echoes of a better era" (Hamid 81). Here, the novel portrays the three separate rooms as three distinct temporalities, each with a unique sense of time.

Despite being separated into different rooms, Nadia, Saeed, and the father are "intersected with each other across varied and multiple streams of time" (Hamid 81). It is striking that their intersection is exclusively rooted in their shared reflections on the past, a simultaneous contemplation of what was there. This simultaneity stands in stark contrast to the imagined simultaneity of fellow citizens in the "meanwhile" of the nation, as Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities* (24). In the case of Nadia, Saeed, and the father, the simultaneity of a failed nation leaves no present to imagine nor future to anticipate; all that remains is the act of reimagining past times. This reduction to the past drives Nadia and Saeed to migrate. The father's refusal to join them

reinforces this perspective, as his old age leads him to prefer "to abide, in a sense, in the past, for the past offered more to him" (Hamid 96). Here, the novel depicts migration as an act driven primarily by the dynamics of age. Individuals with more time ahead of them are more inclined to move, as they view migration as the pursuit of a new time.

By constructing the city as a space of temporal mobility, *Exit West* reimagines refugee mobility beyond the spatial metaphor that typically dominates conceptualizations of refugees. Nadia and Saeed's experience of crossing the magical door vividly highlights this fact. In the novel, the magical doors share a single appearance: "dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness" (Hamid 6). The overt reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has drawn attention from critics, though not all have explored its implications. Generally, it is interpreted in line with Lagji's observation of "rehears[ing] in reverse the journey of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" ("Waiting in Motion" 224).[77] In a different direction, Charlotte Spear argues that the allusion "reflects the worlding of the capitalist system, the beginnings of the forced interferences of the capitalist system on a world scale" (6). These interpretations focus on the door's appearance in its first scene in the novel, when an African refugee emerges into Australia, rather than on the scene involving Nadia and Saeed's crossing.

I argue that, while the magical door omits the spatial journey of border crossing, the emotional impact of its appearance during Nadia and Saeed's crossing symbolizes a temporalized construction of refugeeness. The allusion to *Heart of Darkness* is not an inversion of Conrad's route but, rather, an inversion of the geographical, cartographic character of Conrad's "heart of darkness" into a temporal one in the context of Hamid's

[77] See also Karam, "Reciprocal Self-Consciousness" 312; Al-Nakib, "Finding Common Cause" 236.

refugees. We are told that at the door, "[Nadia] was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end" (Hamid 103). Here, the door crossing not only signifies a non-spatial experience but also embodies a condensation of the accelerated sense of time experienced in the city. It features a form of temporal mobility that defies linear assumptions by foregrounding radical uncertainty about the future. Like the door, each moment represents both a beginning and an end—a transient temporariness that resists alignment with any teleological chronology, as this analysis will demonstrate.

From this standpoint, one can regard the magical door as maintaining a sense of continuity between pre-migration and post-migration. By freeing refugees from the constraints of spatiality and granting them hypermobility in a magical world, the magical door shows that refugee displacement is not exclusively or necessarily a spatial act. This idea aligns with emerging perspectives in mobilities studies, which advocate for rethinking the traditional link between displacement and migration. As Stephen C. Lubkemann argues through his concept of "involuntary immobility," the assumption that "migration is a requisite aspect of 'displacement'" is problematic because it "renders the involuntarily immobilized invisible" and "tends to obfuscate and ignore a priori certain aspects of the experience of wartime migrants" (455, 456). In an interview about *Exit West*, Hamid emphasizes the importance of understanding pre-migration experiences, stating, "I wanted to focus on what happens before you move. You know, what leads someone to leave where they live?" (qt in Almquist 139). Though migration is the plot's driving force, nearly half of *Exit West* depicts Nadia and Saeed's life in their

home city. By devoting this expansive part of the narrative to the pre-migration stage, the novel redefines the temporal boundaries of refugeeness, extending its scope beyond the limitations of spatial mobility.

While the refugee experience is often understood as beginning with the act of leaving one's home, *Exit West* underscores the existence of a refugee displacement that begins before the physical act of departure. Nadia and Saeed's displacement begins with their becoming "displaced in place," which, in the novel, takes the form of temporal displacement (Lubkemann 455). *Exit West*'s entire narrative is embedded within the temporality of displacement. The novel establishes this reality in its first sentence, which presents the city as "swollen by refugees" (Hamid 3). Although the phrase ostensibly refers to refugees from outside the city, it subtly implies that everyone in the city is, in some way, a refugee. The city's inhabitants, like the actual refugees, cannot "re-create the rhythms of a normal life," as they live in a state of displacement even within their own homes (26). The overwhelming presence of refugees in the city erases the boundary between urban life and a refugee camp. Refugees fill every available space, to the point that "Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg" (26, 27). In this portrayal, the city is a world with no space—ceasing to function as a city in any conventional sense.

A similar image arises in the description of the area in London overtaken by refugees: "It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters" (Hamid 129). This sentence depicts refugees as cannibalizers of urban space, transforming the urban reality in much the same way. Refugees redefine the landscape they inhabit in a way that disrupts conventional geographies and temporalities of

refugeeness. This resonates with Vinh Nguyen's concept of refugeeness as a phenomenon "not temporally constrained to singular events (displacement, asylum seeking, resettlement), spatially tied to specific locations (the boat, the border, the camp), or bound to the letter of the law" ("Refugeetude" 114). Such a notion helps explain Hamid's decision to situate his refugee story in an unspecified place and time, emphasizing the universality of the refugee experience beyond a singular or prototypical embodiment.

Migration as a Sensibility of Time

The way Nadia and Saeed experience migration highlights their contrasting temporal sensibilities and reveals how an individual's perception of time can significantly impact their acceptance of migratory reality. Nadia's willingness to lead the way and step first through the door—whose "darkness [and] opacity" symbolize the uncertainty of the future—demonstrates her mental compatibility with this uncertainty. Unlike Nadia, Saeed exhibits a high degree of reluctance; when he encounters the door, his face becomes "full of worry, and sorrow," and after emerging on the other side, he "pivot[s] back to the door, as though he wish[es] maybe to reverse course and return through it" (Hamid 103). While it might seem, in this scene, that Saeed is clinging to the past and Nadia is looking toward the future, their full story reveals a more complex dynamic. Saeed consistently gravitates toward permanence, while Nadia prefers the temporary.

This difference is foreshadowed long before the couple migrates. Their migration only intensifies this existing difference, highlighting a recurring theme in the novel: that refugeeness is not an experience of novelty but, rather, an intensification, an acceleration. Saeed's quest for permanence is reflected in his marriage proposal to Nadia and his refusal to engage in full sexual intimacy before marriage. On the other hand, Nadia's

rejection of the proposal, despite her genuine love for Saeed, can be seen as a rejection of the "chrononormativity," as Elizabeth Freeman calls it, associated with marriage. [78] It signals her unwillingness to commit the present to any futuristic projection. From this perspective, it is Saeed, not Nadia, who can be seen as thinking about the future in this instance, as seeking a permanent relationship inherently involves making assumptions about the time to come.

Nadia and Saeed's contrasting temporal sensibilities are central to the novel's exploration of refugeeness and its relevance to the nature of the contemporary global information age. In this context, the couple's relationship with their smartphones reflects more than their personal temperaments. As Lanser and Rimmon-Kenan have pointed out, the smartphone in *Exit West* represents "a new spatio-temporality, arguably a new chronotope…: a world in which all spaces, across their different 'time zones,' can be virtually present in a single moment" (449). I argue that smartphones function as a historicist device in the novel. The narrator underscores the historical evolution of communication within the city while describing Nadia and Saeed's relationship with their phones. The novel traces the evolution from the era when "copper wires" introduced rare and expensive telephone lines to the city "decades after independence" to the present, when "wands [wave] in the city's air, untethered and free," thus making phones accessible to millions for "a pittance" (Hamid 39). This historical context underscores a self-consciousness in situating today's mass refugee migration within the post-postcolonial moment, where the lingering legacy of colonization and the technological forces of globalization intersect as originating factors.

[78] Freeman, *Time Binds* 3.

The comparison between old copper wires and contemporary wands waving in the air serves as a metaphor to demarcate a historical moment in which conventional territorial frameworks give way to more open paradigms. Openness in this context is both spatial and temporal, as highlighted in the narrative's focus on high-tech communication that blurs the boundaries between the past, present, and future. For example, when Saeed shows Nadia images of major cities at night illuminated only by stars, she perceives them "as though from an epoch before electricity, but with the buildings of today. Whether they looked like the past, or the present, or the future, she [cannot] decide" (Hamid 57). Nadia herself embodies a global subjectivity shaped by the age of information technology, as is evident in her relationship with her smartphone. Unlike Saeed, who tries to resist "the pull of his phone" and limit his use of the internet to one hour daily (an hour that remains "tightly regulated" and whose end is signified by "a timer set[ting] off an alarm"), Nadia "[sees] no need to limit her phone." She also watches everything: "bombs falling, women exercising, men copulating, clouds gathering, waves tugging at the sand like the rasping licks of so many mortal, temporary, vanishing tongues, tongues of a planet that would one day too be no more" (Hamid 39, 40). This final scene metaphorically captures Natasha's temporal sensitivity, shaped by the vanishing and transient nature of the world as conveyed to her through the phone. By remarking that Nadia is not alone ("countless young people in the city" engage in similar behavior), the narrator positions her as a representative of her generation (41). In contrast, Saeed's regulatory measures position him as an exception, suggesting a sense of incompatibility with the way things are in this online world.

Beyond being emblematic of a youth lifestyle, Nadia's relationship with her smartphone plays a crucial role in establishing her understanding of her identity. On social media, Nadia leaves "little trace of her passing, not posting much herself, and employing opaque usernames and avatars, the online equivalents of her black robes" (Hamid 41). This implies a correspondence between her identity performance in both the virtual and actual worlds. Nadia's online username, like her black robe, does not reveal a fixed truth about her identity. Although the black robe is typically seen as a symbol of religiosity, Nadia, who is unapologetically non-religious, wears it in her hometown to navigate the city's gendered spaces and protect herself in situations in which she feels vulnerable as a woman. By riding a motorcycle, Nadia defies the traditional norms associated with the robe, thereby illustrating a performativity of identity that resonates with Judith Butler's notion of "the forced reiteration of norms" (94). The black robe remains a symbol of Nadia's performative conception of her identity as she continues to wear it even after she migrates to new communities. This signifies that she is "ready to resist the claims and expectations of the world" (48). In this way, the endurance of the robe as Nadia's dress evolves into a symbol of resistance against fixed perceptions, always serving to mark a change.

Nadia's type of subjectivity, as compared to Saeed's, is central to the narrative's portrayal of her as mentally more prepared to become a migrant. She is "feverishly keen to depart" and "more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than [is] Saeed," whose tendency to control his time reveals his lack of preparedness to become a migrant (Hamid 94). This difference is evident in their contrasting perspectives on what it means to create a home after their physical migration. When the couple sets up a

temporary home near the refugee camp in Mykonos, Nadia enjoys the process, feeling as though she is "playing house," much like she did as a child. In contrast, for Saeed, creating this temporary home elicits a bitter feeling of being "a bad son," thereby revealing his internal struggle with leaving home behind; to him, the act feels like a form of betrayal (107). This also highlights the strong association between the concept of permanence and home in Saeed's consciousness. In the London palace where they live with other refugees from around the world, Saeed attempts to create a sense of home in the room he shares with Nadia by placing a photo of his parents on the bookshelf. Unlike Saeed, however, Nadia takes from her backpack only what is required, as she knows that they need "to be ready to leave at any moment" (124). Therefore, the distinction between the two rests in the fact that one relinquishes the idea of home while the other clings to it. In this representation of the refugee experience, home is not a physical place; instead, it is a conceptual ideal, representing a desire for stability and permanence in the face of uncertainty.

The narrative juxtaposes Saeed's quest for permanence with a sense of national sentiment that emerges after his migration. The refugee experience leaves him temporally alienated, "more melancholic than he [has] been before" (Hamid 195). His melancholia is a "national melancholia," to use Eng and Han's concept, reflecting his inability to resolve his identification with the lost ideal of the nation by investing in new objects (38). It evolves as a sense of religiosity that is national at heart, as reflected in his frequent visits to a house of refugees from his country. Clearly, the house symbolizes the nation. When Saeed urges Nadia to move in with their countrymen, she firmly refuses, saying, "We've left that place" (Hamid 153). However, home, in Saeed's case, is not a place to be left; it

is a shared sense of communal time. This is vividly demonstrated when Saeed begins praying regularly with his fellow nationals. The narrator informs us that

> he felt praying was different here, somehow, in the garden of this house, with these men. It made him feel part of something—not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group, and for a wrenchingly painful second he thought of his father. (152)

When Saeed was a teenager, he and his father went to the Friday communal prayer—"a ritual that connected him to adulthood and to the notion of being a particular sort of man" (201). In this context, prayer becomes an expression of Saeed's longing for collective identity and a way to reconnect with a shared past. It serves as a form of protest against the harsh reality that "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (98). By praying, Saeed recreates home in time and preserves his nation in memory. However, the reality that the countrymen with whom he engages in the house turn out to be religious radicals highlights the dangers of mobilizing national melancholia from a refugee positionality.

Nadia and Saeed's temporal and emotional distancing from each other is not the only way the novel portrays the refugee experience as living in naked time. Time is also central to the texture of relationships among refugees themselves and with others. In the London palace, refugees barter among each other "with a promise of something to eat tomorrow or the next day in exchange for something to eat today, a bartering not so much of different goods, exactly, but of time" (Hamid 133). The bartering of time reproduces the palace as a space of waiting, thereby revealing its nature as what Marc Augé describes as a non-place.[79] This concept further illuminates the situation at the London

[79] For a discussion on the connection between spaces of waiting and Marc Augé's concept of non-places, see Singer et al. *Timescapes of Waiting*

Halo, where refugees are later relocated to tents and perform hard labor in exchange for a place on a waiting list for one of the apartments being constructed. In the Halo,

> A mutually agreed time tax had been enacted, such that a portion of the income and toil of those who had recently arrived on the island would go to those who had been there for decades, and this time tax was tapered in both directions, becoming a smaller and smaller sliver as one continued to reside, and then a larger and larger subsidy thereafter. (170)

The time tax vividly exemplifies how waiting is not a normal experience of time for refugees but, rather, an experience of subjection to power in the form of time. As Pierre Bourdieu noted, "Making people wait … delaying without destroying hope is part of the domination" (228). The exchange of refugee time for the promise of a place in the Halo figuratively illustrates how refugee time is dominated particularly through spatialization strategies. Waiting becomes an act of renouncing ownership of time in favor of a place where the refugee is presumed to put down roots and assimilate. In other words, through waiting, refugee time is regulated so as to be assimilated into the nation's territorial time.

Refugee Transience and the Death of a Past World

Nadia and Saeed's decision to leave the Halo, despite assurances that they will receive a private apartment in a year, might not reveal anything new about Nadia, but it does reveal something new about Saeed. Waiting is not a choice for Nadia, as her consciousness is always attuned to impermanence. In the Mykonos refugee camp, the narrator tells us, "Days passed like this, full of waiting and false hopes, days that might have been days of boredom, and were for many, but Nadia had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists" (Hamid 133). Lagji interprets Nadia's action as a reclamation of "this unproductive time for herself, as 'leisure,'" emphasizing that "[b]y refusing to emplot this time as productive, Naida lays bare the time of the camp as

such: it is a time of protracted and uncertain waiting" ("Waiting in Motion" 225). Beyond marking Nadia's agency, the transformation of refugee waiting time into tourist time blurs the conventional lines between the two experiences. Setting the refugee camp in the infamous tourist destination of Mykonos affirms this idea. However, this blurring is intended to highlight the stark contrast between the realities of these experiences in a world of instantaneous transportation. The magical doors, as depicted in the novel's abrupt vignettes, also show all types of people—including both tourists and refugees—moving across the world. The ultimate idea behind this narrative reality is to present a world where places cannot fully account for the existence and experiences of those who inhabit them.

For Saeed, the desire to leave the Halo is driven by a final attempt to resist the death that migration has inflicted on his world. His immersion in work reflects a realization of this sense of death rather than a commitment to a futuristic waiting. He feels that the loss of his mother, his father, and even "his ideal self … [are] like a single death that only hard work and prayer might allow him to withstand" (Hamid 188). This explains why, despite all the waiting, he immediately agrees to move to Marin with Nadia. Saeed wants to avoid the ghost of the potential death of what he once felt for Nadia as their relationship continues to weaken. At the heart of this feeling is the pursuit of the ghost of family, for Nadia represents "the entirety of his close family now, and he value[s] family above all" (188). While Saeed will ultimately learn to let go of Nadia in Marin, his struggle with the sense of death is central to the novel's portrayal of refugee subjectivity as characterized by the acceptance of the death of the world as the refugee has known it. Ultimately, this death creates space for a new world to emerge. This insight

defines Saeed's life in Marin, where he begins to pray "as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope" (203). Prayer thus evolves from a mode of resisting temporariness as embodied by death into an acceptance of its reality.

Despite Saeed's struggle to come to terms with the enduring reality of being a refugee, his story itself serves as proof of that endurance. Although Saeed's and Nadia's temporal perspectives differ, their stories follow a similar narrative arc. They both move from place to place without reaching the closure moment of settlement in a permanent location that can be claimed as home. In Marin, the couple's story ends in separation, but their mobility, as depicted in the narrative, continues. While the novel implicitly depicts Marin as a hopeful place for refugees, the isolated scene of Saeed and Nadia meeting in their home city half a century later imbues the narrative with a sense of perpetual mobility in both space and time. We do not know precisely from where Nadia is returning to the city or whether Saeed is a permanent resident there or merely a visitor. The implication is that Nadia and Saeed's refugee status has no resolution in spatial terms.

More importantly, Nadia and Saeed are similar in that both conjure new identities throughout their migration. Despite Saeed's quest for a fixed, collective identity, his identity changes throughout his journey. Initially a middle-class young professional working advertisement, Saeed evolves through migration into a religious nationalist and, later, into an individual with a pluralist form of religiosity after joining an African American congregation in Marin. This mutability reveals that Saeed's identity is as performative and situational as that of Nadia, who, by the novel's end, has embarked on a homosexual relationship. As Hamid writes, "Every time a couple moves they begin, if their attention is still drawn to one another, to see each other differently, for personalities

are not a single immutable color, like white or blue, but rather illuminated screens, and the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us" (Hamid 186). The difference between Saeed's and Nadia's refugee narratives reflects a concept similar to Simon Reynolds' observation: "In the digital present, everyday life consists of hyper-acceleration and near-instantaneity … but on the macro-cultural level, things feel static and stalled. We have this paradoxical combination of speed and standstill" (427). Similarly, Saeed, unlike Nadia, experiences the shifting reality of a world shaped by refugeeness and mobility without fully embracing the concept of continuous change.

Having such different sensibilities within one existential reality is the heart of *Exit West*'s representation of the contemporary refugee experience. On the one hand, it demonstrates that this experience is not uniform or monolithic and does not produce a prototypical subject, as Nadia and Saeed's story demonstrates. On the other hand, it reveals the ontological reality that change and mobility always shape the world—a reality suppressed by the myth of fixity underlying the territorial configuration of the nation-state. The universalizing force attributed to the figure of the refugee in the novel rests on its embodiment of this ontological aspect. Consequently, Nadia and Saeed are not the vanguards of the lifeworld of the narrative so much as they are among its multiple manifestations. This lifeworld is already open before the two embark on their refugee journey, as the magical doors transport all kinds of people, not only refugees.

The temporalized world that refugee mobility induces in *Exit West*, along with the process of universalization associated with it, requires a reimagination of the world as a single, unified realm. As Forter points out, the borderlessness that the novel's magical doors enact is premised upon the idea of the "redistribution of precarity across the surface

of the globe" as a fictive counteraction of the reality that "global capitalism distributes precarity unevenly" ("Capitalism, Temporality" 69, 70). While the capitalistic uneven redistribution of precarity envisions the world as a spatial whole through "uneven geographical development," *Exit West* rejects this reduction of the world to spatiality. Instead, it temporalizes the contemporary world, performing a "worlding," in Pheng Cheah's sense of the word, by constructing the world as a structure "held together and given unity by the force of time" (8). The refugee mobility presented in the novel maps the world temporally, creating a division not between refugees and non-refugees but between those who cling to the illusion of permanence and those who embrace temporariness as the world's defining characteristic. By proffering a world of global mobility whose residents, on both ends of the magical doors, inhabit time more than space, Hamid uses time as "the force of transcendence that opens a world" (Cheah 8, 9). This opening of the world remarkably demystifies the division that globalization produces between the wealthy first world of "the globally mobile" whose residents "live in time" and the unwealthy second world of "the locally tied" whose people "live in space" (Bauman, *Globalization* 45). In this way, Hamid uses the refugee crisis of the 2010-2020 decade as a catalyst for reimagining not a new world so much as our current world. The refugee magical realist narrative serves more as a marker of the present than as a vision of an impending future, thereby extending reality to its most dramatic limits.

3. *The Refugees:* Refugeeness as Haunting Temporality

While *Exit West* traces the routes of contemporary forced migration from the broader Middle East to the West, portraying the refugee experience as it unfolds in time, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* depicts a historical refugee experience. The story

collection focuses on Vietnamese refugees who fled their country following the end of the Vietnam War. They are portrayed not as refugees in action but as being visited or haunted by memories of their migration experience. In this sense, the collection presents the Vietnamese refugee experience from the perspective of how it is lived as a memory in the present time, whether by those who lived through it or by the post-memory generation that inherited its ravages. The central theme of these stories is the dual aspect of refugee memory—its suppression and its haunting presence.

Building on this observation, my analysis focuses on the representation of refugee memory in *The Refugees* as a site for temporal displacement. I argue that Nguyen's depiction of refugee memory as haunting emphasizes the persistence of Vietnamese refugees' "unsettlement"—a concept, as Mani articulates, that underscores a "mental/emotional displacement alongside physical geographical dislocation"—even decades after their spatial resettlement in the US (32). I will pursue this argument by focusing primarily on the opening story in the collection, "Black-Eyed Women," while occasionally referencing other stories as well. The story, which took Nguyen seventeen years to write, thematically frames the entire collection. Through a haunting narrative, the story reveals how the interplay of silence and remembrance profoundly shapes the negotiations and articulations of Vietnamese refugee subjectivity.[80]

"Black-Eyed Women" charts the life of an unnamed female narrator, a 38-year-old woman who escaped Vietnam with her family by boat to America as a young teenager following the war's end. She now works as a ghostwriter, helping people who were made famous by some tragic event to pen their life stories. The story begins with

[80] See Vongkiatkajorn.

the narrator being recruited to ghostwrite a memoir for Victor Devoto, the sole survivor of an airplane crash that killed his wife and children along with 173 other people, leaving him a ghost of his former life. Although the narrator speaks from the present moment, much of the story is narrated in the past tense, rendering the present indistinguishable. Only toward the story's conclusion does the reader realize that the narrator has been recounting the story in the present tense and that the past-tense narrative is her recollection of events that she experienced.

The narrator lives with her mother, who frequently tells her stories about ghosts of dead relatives. Given her disbelief regarding the matter, the narrator internally dismisses her mother's stories. One day, the mother wakes up the narrator at dawn to tell her that her dead brother is visiting them and wants to see her. The narrator believes that her mother is imagining things; however, the event prompts her to look back at the childhood she and her dead brother spent in the midst of war "in a haunted country" (*The Refugees* 18). The following evening, her spectral brother's knocking awakens her; he is a pale fifteen-year-old in wet clothes. After welcoming him inside and giving him fresh clothes, the narrator goes to tell her mother. However, when they return, the ghost is gone. Her mother tells the narrator that she should never turn her back on a ghost.

One day, the spectral brother knocks again. As she did before, the narrator welcomes him inside. Then, she takes him to the basement, where she spends most of her night writing. She asks him why he returned. He responds by stressing that he has not left the world. At this moment, the narrator reveals the story of her brother's death, which took place aboard a refugee boat. He had been killed defending his sister before she was raped by pirates who had captured the boat, looted all the valuables, and seized the

teenage girls and young women. After this reconciliation meeting, the narrator weeps over the long years of silence that the family endured after the son's death and resolves to write a book about her own ghost stories.

The collection's epigraph foreshadows the theme of the interplay between spectrality and time in "Black-Eyed Women." It features a quote from Roberto Bolaño: "I wrote this book for the ghosts, who, because they're outside of time, are the only ones with time" (*Refugees* 14). This ostensibly paradoxical articulation of spectral temporality provides a gateway into the articulation of refugee time that the story allows us to envision. Spectrality is central in this context because it shifts memory from being merely a reservoir of the past, as conventionally understood, to serving as a signifier for conceptualizing the present lived experience. As Fredric Jameson famously points out,

> Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (86)

In the case of refugee ghosts in "Black-Eyed Women," the scarcely self-sufficient present signals the persistence of refugeeness in time. The refugee ghostliness emerges from inhabiting a timeless present, one that is too paralyzed to let the past pass or allow the future to come, as imposed by the hegemonic frames of nation and citizenship.

The story's emphasis on refugee ghostliness is deeply tied to the historical background of the Vietnamese refugee experience it portrays. As Yen Le Espiritu points out in *Body Counts*, the US national narrative of memory during the post-Vietnam War era has constructed Vietnamese refugees as "the purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S.' gift of freedom" and "the featured evidence of the appropriateness of U.S. actions

in Vietnam." Refugees are "deployed" to reframe the war as just and successful and thus "to 'rescue' the Vietnam War for Americans," in Espiritu's words. In this sense, Vietnamese refugees are discursively transformed into "a solution, rather than a problem," effectively rendering their sufferings "unmentionable and unmourned in most U.S. public discussions of Vietnam" (2). These sufferings are similarly absent from the nationalistic memory of contemporary Vietnam, which remembers its own dead and forgets South Vietnamese refugees. Within this context, for Vietnamese refugees in America, the act of remembering one's own "takes place in relationship to, and often antagonism with, the national projects of remembering one's own in Vietnam and America," as Viet Thanh Nguyen himself asserts in *Nothing Ever Dies* (44). The result, it can be said, is a positionality in which refugee memory is made ghostly by the two nations' regimes of memory.

Nguyen's portrayal of Vietnamese refugee memory echoes this positionality through the trope of ghosts, as manifested not only in *The Refugees* but also in its predecessor, *The Sympathizer*. Studies of Nguyen's fiction have frequently highlighted his representation of spectrality, particularly as it relates to his theorization of "just memory." Regarding *The Refugees*, a text that has not yet received substantial critical attention, Kim L. Worthington argues that, through its ghostly figures, the book "invites us to consider how the ghost(s) of the Vietnam War, embodied in/as (former) refugees now 'at home' and 'belonging' in America, contribute to and unsettle narratives of (American) democracy" (207). Sean James Bosman highlights the use of ghosts in "Black-Eyed Women" as central to the story's exploration of "the importance of remembering, or at least recognizing, personal traumas in order to claim full ethical

subjectivity" (93). Bosman's observation aligns with Yogita Goyal's characterization of the collection as featuring "flawed characters who achieve no closure or triumph, but whose broken relationships (romantic, filial, and societal) reveal the damaging aftermath of a war that continues to be misunderstood and relitigated in memory" ("Un-American" 380). In this analysis, I address the ghostly figures in "Black-Eyed Women" as markers of refugee temporality, in which memory acquires a migratory character through the trope of haunting, embodying the enduring displacement of the refugee in time.

Spectrality and the Emplotment of Refugee Temporal Mobility

If refugees in *Exit West* are migrating through time, it is time, in the guise of the haunting ghost, that migrates through the refugees of "Black-Eyed Women." This contrast is largely rhetorical, for both narratives seek to imagine refugee mobility, first and foremost, in temporal terms. Both works accomplish this objective by neutralizing spatiality. While Hamid neutralizes spatiality through magical doors, Nguyen accentuates the excessive fixity in place of his Vietnamese refugee characters. In "Black-Eyed Women," the narrator and her mother not only have been resettled in the US for a long time but also notably lead austere lives at the spatial mobility level. Compared to the mother, whose everyday mobility is limited to the grocery store and her workplace at a nail salon, the narrator embodies a case of complete immobility. She lives in what looks like self-imposed home quarantine, leaving her mother deeply worried about her life. The mother underscores her daughter's detachment from the outside world by saying, "You can't even remember to take out the garbage or pay the bills. You won't even go outside to shop for groceries" (*Refugees* 24). The narrator's voluntary immobility presents another refugee narrative that diverges from the "mobility bias" in dominant

constructions of the refugee experience.[81] Similar to *Exit West*, "Black-Eyed Women" is a refugee narrative in which spatial mobility is not the central focus. Instead, mobility is primarily conceived of as a temporal quality.

In contrast to the narrator and her mother's fixity in place, the narrative depicts ghosts as having total freedom of mobility. The story associates the ghosts' mobility with the collapsing of both spatial and temporal boundaries. Spectral Aunt Six, for instance, lives "hundreds of miles away and you [see] her the same day." A similar sense of being unrestrained by the dictates of spatial distance recurs with the spectral brother, who "[swims] the entire distance" from the ocean every time he visits (*Refugees* 22). The collapse of distance that ghost mobility induces is also intertwined with the disruption of the conventional distinction between the dead and the living. Victor expresses this idea by saying, "The dead move on … But the living, we just stay here" (23). When the narrator asks the ghost brother, "Why have you come back?", he answers, "I haven't come back ... I've come here" (24). The answer implies a rejection of the presumption that he is returning from death or the foreign country of the past, thereby underscoring, instead, his belonging to the world of the here and now. The ghost brother further conflates the temporal realities of death and life in a subsequent response; when the narrator asks, "Why did I live and you die?", he says, "You died too … You just don't know it" (28). At the heart of this conflation is the suggestion that the narrator, as a refugee, is a ghost herself and that she and her brother inhabit the same ghost temporality. Thus, it sparks an imagination in which ghosts do not haunt refugees so much as they coexist alongside each other.

[81] For more insights on mobility bias within the context of migration studies, see Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies."

This conflation of the realities of living and death facilitates the erasure of temporal boundaries between the real characters and the spectral ones. The past and present in this spectral temporality of refugeeness are not separate categories arranged in a linear progression toward the future. Rather, they form one persisting reality. Employing spectrality as a metaphor for understanding the refugee experience expresses, in essence, linear progression's conceptual inadequacy to channel refugee consciousness, for ghost haunting is imaginatively associated with the collapsing of time linearity. In his concept of hauntology, Derrida emphasizes this non-linear ontology of spectrality, in which "the future comes back in advance: from the past, from the back" (*Specters of Marx* 10). The question that this context raises is how "Black-Eyed Women," as a refugee narrative, is underpinned by such a temporal ontology of spectrality.

Addressing this question requires turning to the story's narrative structure and how it emplots refugeeness. Patrick Hogan's attempt in *Understanding Nationalism* to decipher the emplotment of the nation in narratives can be a helpful gateway to deciphering Nguyen's emplotment of the nation's antithesis: refugeeness. Hogan argues that what enables our imagining of the nation in the first place is that it works itself out "through cognitive modeling or metaphor" repeated with great consistency among individuals and embedded in narratives (124). Therefore, "nationalism cannot be understood in separation from narrative, which itself cannot be understood in separation from our emotion systems" (168). From this standpoint, Hogan identifies the two most common nationalist metaphors—"family and land"—that scaffold emplotments of the nation (133). Hogan's exploration of these metaphors, specifically family, informs upcoming parts of my exploration of the nation in "Black-Eyed Women." However, for

the moment, my focus is on the idea of conceptual metaphor as a device for emplotment. Just as family and land symbolize the nation, the ghost in Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women," I argue, functions as a metaphor for the experience of being a refugee. From this perspective, the ghost can be understood not only as a character imbued with symbolic meaning but also as a narratological concept shaping the emplotment of a refugee narrative.

The story's spectral emplotment of refugeeness undermines linearity. The events are narrated in the past tense, but not until the end of the story do we realize that these events are not happening in a narrative past but, instead, are being remembered as flashbacks into the past from within a narrative present. This present is demarcated by the act of writing the story by the narrator, who, as the end of the story reveals to the reader, decides to stop being a ghostwriter and start writing her own memories. Within this ambiguous temporality of the narrative, time moves back and forth between multiple layers of the past: the close past of the ghost brother's visits, the distant past of the boat experience, and the more distant past of childhood during the war in Vietnam. None of the pasts within these layers is an autonomous past; the narrator's act of recollection encapsulates them all. The word "layered" properly describes this type of narrative configuration because it highlights the absence of progression between the events.

Devoid of clear chronological order, the narrative moves from one past to another by relying primarily on two temporal elements as modes of transition. The first is moments of remembrance, as in sections that start with phrases such as "I remembered," "I had not forgotten," and "Looking back ... I could see" (*Refugees* 17, 25). The second is moments of simultaneity, with phrases such as "By the time Victor Devoto chose me"

and "and this was my preoccupation on the day my dead brother returned to me" (15). Insofar as this narrative movement makes the multiple strands of the past difficult to distinguish from each other, it conjures a sense of single, free-floating temporality that encapsulates the narrative.

The delayed revelation of the narrative's present, identified as the moment of writing the story, further deepens the resonance of this temporal conception. It establishes the present as not just indistinguishable from the past but also devoid of presentness itself, serving only as a terminal or medium for bringing together multiple ghosts of the past. A figurative illustration of this type of present echoes in the scene in which the narrator opens the door for her ghost brother and says, "I reminded myself that he had given up his life for me. The least I could do was open the door" (*Refugees* 19). The connotation of this image, in which a static present opens the door for a mobile past to enter, neatly defines the meaning of writing for the narrator, who characterizes her perception of storytelling as "hunting for ghosts ... without ever leaving home" (31). In this view, to write is not only to open the door for the living past but also to accept the claims it places on the present of the living. Obviously, this resonates with Avery Gordon's idea that the presence of ghosts in narratives signifies a demand for justice.[82]

Writing here illustrates the reality shaping the refugee's relationship to the past, which the narrator conveys—again through the metaphor of ghosts—by saying, "As they haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs." However, the narrator is keenly aware of the uneven nature of this mutual haunting, describing the ghosts as "pallid creatures, more frightened of us than we are of them. That is why we see these shades so rarely, and why

[82] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* xvi.

we must seek them out" (*Refugees* 31). The frightened ghost symbolizes the precariousness of the refugee's past, manifesting as a haunted landscape of suppressed suffering. Its haunted character reflects the refugee's ongoing struggle to repress their past as a result of living in an insecure present. This mutual haunting paradoxically reveals that the past and present are not separate entities but, rather, a synthesis of lived time, intertwined and inseparable. The overarching effect of the overlap between the meaning of the present and the act of writing lies in conveying the sense that "the present is not yet finished" (*Nothing Dies* 288). From this standpoint, a refugee narrative, as "Black-Eyed Women" exemplifies, does not offer a straightforward reconciliation between the present and the past. Rather, it involves acknowledging the present as a figure of lack instead of treating it as a site of newness.

While this emplotment of refugeeness through the ghost metaphor collapses linear progression, it demonstrates refugee temporality as a form of a cohesive totality. Worthington points out that the structure of "Black-Eyed Women" features fragmentation and "fractured temporality" (216). However, I argue that the multiplicity of time in the story does not merely create a sense of fragmentation and interruption; rather, it blurs the boundaries between different temporal strands, making it difficult to discern where one strand ends and another begins or convenes. In doing so, the story features a non-linear yet overlapped temporality that nurtures a sense of one autonomous experience but without linearity being the conceptual foundation of its oneness. It embodies continuity without relying on linear progression, mirroring the refugee's enduring presence in time and complicating the process of situating refugee characters within any form of trajectorism. This construction of refugee temporality qualifies as the textual

incarnation of a particular mode of representation, which Viet Thanh Nguyen refers to as "the body-voice continuum, that act of speaking from (but not for) Vietnamese or refugee perspectives" ("Dislocation" 429). The disorienting nature of the narrative in "Black-Eyed Women" unsettles normative temporal sensibilities in readers through the act of reading itself. It transforms the reading experience into an experiment in engaging with the movement of refugee time itself.

The intertwining of the refugee's persistence in time and the haunting metaphor recurs throughout other stories in the collection. In a story titled, "I'd Love You to Want Me," haunting comes in the form of dementia, which turns Mr. Khahn, a professor and Vietnamese refugee in the US, into a ghostly presence. The professor grows more lost and confused because of his intermittent memory loss and begins calling his wife by another woman's name. The revelation of the couple's backstory is narratively woven into these moments of memory loss, which transform forgetting into a medium for channeling the past into the present. Like the narrator's mother in "Black-Eyed Women," who is "sixty-three, moderately forgetful" when she starts seeing the ghost of her son, the professor represents the mnemonic paradox reverberating throughout *The Refugees*, which depicts forgetting as productive of remembrance (*Refugees* 15). Through moments of natural memory lapses that expose the horrors of the past and the losses endured during war and exile, Nguyen crafts narratives that blur the boundaries between forgetfulness and remembrance, thereby illustrating that both acts can be strategic and shaped by power dynamics. What his refugee characters recall through dementia is not what was forgotten but what they suppressed and consciously sought to forget in their pursuit of a new present.

Refugee Time vs. Nation Time

The mechanisms of remembrance and forgetting lie at the heart of the portrayal of refugee time as antithetical to national imaginings in "Black-Eyed Women." In the story, nation appears in two forms: the hosting/new nation (the US) and the home/lost nation (Vietnam). In both cases, the relationship between refugee characters and the hegemony of the national imagination is channeled through the same metaphor of spectrality. In the context of the US, the narrator's role as a ghostwriter for Victor's traumatic memoir is central to this exploration. First and foremost, the story portrays Victor's memory not as a personal matter but as a symbol of how US capitalism can transform memory into a commodity: "What was left of him appeared on all the talk shows … His publisher said that it was urgent that he finish his story while audiences still remembered the tragedy" (*Refugees* 15). In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen underlines that capitalism enabled the US to emerge victorious in the war over the memory of the Vietnam War. He observes, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory," thus highlighting the paradoxical truth about the Vietnam War: "Even though Americans lost the war, capitalism has won in the end … The revolution has died. The dollar has triumphed" (4, 285). The name "Victor" alludes to American victory, yet Victor himself remains unredeemed by the transformation of his memory into a public spectacle. He appears "spectral" to his ghostwriter, the narrator, and is still haunted by the ghosts of his wife and children. His spectral existence symbolizes how the capitalist narrative of American triumph in the war serves as a form of unjust forgetting, obscuring the true trauma of what happened.

If Victor's story symbolizes how US capitalism turns traumatic memory into a commodity, the narrator's role as a ghostwriter reflects how it also commodifies amnesia. While suppressing her own traumatic past of rape and the loss of her brother during the refuge journey, the narrator makes a profession out of ghostwriting Victor's traumatic memory. As Nguyen points out, "Capitalism can turn anything into a commodity, including memories and amnesia" (*Nothing Dies* 13). The narrator's paradoxical positionality mirrors how, as Espiritu notes, Vietnamese refugees are deployed to reinforce a triumphant American national memory of the war, which can only signify as such by eclipsing their own narratives of suffering. The American capitalist ideal emerges as a form of redemption for Southern Vietnamese refugees, who are offered the American dream as "a rebuke against communism" (*Nothing Dies* 40). It mystifies the loss of home and other traumas inflicted on refugees, rendering them agents of another version of the unjust forgetting of the war. The timing of the ghost brother's visit to the narrator is significant in this context: "[Victor's] publisher said that it was urgent that he finish his story while audiences still remembered the tragedy, and this was my preoccupation on the day my dead brother returned to me" (*Refugees* 16). The narrator's encounter with her ghost brother as she embarks on Victor's memoir symbolizes the unjust forgetting that underlies the Vietnamese refugee subjectivity, as shaped by the American national narrative of the war. This unjust forgetting transforms both the past and the present into spectral temporalities for the Vietnamese refugee, as illustrated by the narrator's role as a ghostwriter in the present while being haunted by the ghosts of the past.

Although "Black-Eyed Women" does not portray its refugees in any active encounter with the apparatus of the nation-state, its ghostly depiction of refugee memory reveals the refugee's existence off the nation's temporal limits. The story signifies how the nation-state can legally accommodate the refugee—through citizenship—but without accommodating their memory. Refugees may be physically included within the territorial boundaries of a nation-state, yet their memory transgresses the limits of its sovereign temporality, which Bakara refers to as "citizen time." In this way, spectrality metaphorically represents the way refugee time is manipulated to conform to the nation's singular temporal framework.

Beyond linearity, spectrality in "Black-Eyed Women" provides a refugee perspective on simultaneity. As Derrida points out, spectrality involves the feeling of "ourselves being looked at by [the spectral other], outside of any synchrony" in a realm where "anachony makes the law" (*Specters of Marx* 6,7). However, in Nguyen's story, the spectral refugee is not otherized and also does not haunt in an anachronistic manner. The story intertwines its living and spectral refugee characters, placing them within a normalized, interactive temporality that can be described as "the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous." This refugee temporality affirms the coexistence of multiple presents, allowing for the possibility of inhabiting more than one at the same time. Upon meeting her ghost brother for the first time, the narrator emphasizes the gap in their ages, saying, "While he was still fifteen I was thirty-eight" (*Refugees* 21). She reinforces this difference by observing, "The last time I had seen him, he was taller by a head; now our situations were reversed" (20). The reversion of the situation might appear to suggest symmetry between the ghost version of the brother and the original version, but the

narrator marks some remarkable differences in the ghost version of her brother: "[H]is voice was hoarse and raspy, not at all like his adolescent alto … A purple bruise with undertones of black gleamed on his left temple, but the blood I remembered was gone, washed away, I suppose, by salt water and storms" (20). In one sense, these changes undermine the notion of temporal reversion; memory here is not a preservation of an original state to which one can return but, rather, an ongoing process of representation. In the second, the changes highlight the ghost brother's role as a manifestation of the narrator's consciousness rather than as a direct representation of historical reality. Consequently, one can regard the hoarse voice and bruised body as manifestations of the pain that the narrator's disrememberment inflicts upon her brother—who is the object of her memory.

To emphasize this image of victimized memory, Nguyen reverses the conventional roles of fear in ghostly encounters by depicting the ghost brother as the fearful one. The narrator underscores this reality by stating, "He refused to meet my gaze, seemingly more fearful of me than I was of him" (*Refugees* 21). The reversed dynamics of fear reveal that the narrator's present is not simply a theater of memories but, instead, an active, conscious state that exerts agency and reshapes the past. The narrator's past and present signify a synthesis, existing as intertwined dimensions of one another.[83] Unlike the simultaneity of the imagined community of the nation, where citizens are homogenized within "linear, homogeneous, empty time" and participate in a "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity," the spectral temporality of refugeeness in "Black-Eyed Women" is characterized by a non-homogenizing simultaneity (Anderson,

[83] For further exploration of the notion of time as synthesis, see James Williams' *Deleuze's Philosophy of Time*, especially the "Introduction."

Imagined 24, 25). This is echoed in the mother's description of the world of ghosts: "Ghosts don't live by our rules. Each ghost is different. Good ghosts, bad ghosts, happy ghosts, sad ghosts. Ghosts of people who die when they're old, when they're young, when they're small. You think baby ghosts behave the same as grandfather ghosts?" (*Refugee* 23). In this depiction, spectrality is intertwined with multiplicity to accentuate the heterogeneity of the refugee experience across time and place. It emphasizes the complexity of refugeeness, which resists reduction to a singular, archetypal narrative.

A vivid example of representing refugees outside the time of the nation in "Black-Eyed Women" is the story's portrayal of events and characters as untethered from any concrete historical references. Aside from indirectly and implicitly indicating that the narrator and her mother are Vietnamese refugees, the story deliberately excludes dates and details that would pinpoint the events' timeframe. For example, despite the narrator's profession as a ghostwriter, references to her use of modern electronic devices are notably absent. The story further emphasizes this temporal ambiguity by focusing on the domestic space of the home, leaving the external world largely invisible. This creates a narrative atmosphere of ghostly temporality in which the refugee characters are shaped more through the lens of temporal experience than through historical context. In this ghostly temporality, time, like ghosts, wanders freely, unbound by any chronological or historical scheme.

Spectrality of American Present and Vietnamese Past

Thus, the story emerges as a text that consciously deviates from the work of historical representation. This deviation serves a dual, interrelated purpose: It asserts that Vietnamese refugeeness has not yet become history and materializes the theme of

situating the Vietnamese refugee outside what Anderson refers to as the "calendrical time" of the nation-state (Anderson, *Imagined* 25). The ghostly timeframe of the story's events reflects this temporal positioning of the refugee figure in contradistinction to the nation. Nation, as Nguyen himself identifies in *Nothing Ever Dies*, is inclined "to remember wars like individuals, separate and distinct. Wars become discrete events, clearly demarcated in time and space by declarations of war and ceasefires, by the inscription of dates in history books, news articles, and memorial placards" (5). From this perspective, the representation of Vietnamese refugees in "Black-Eyed Women" as living in an ambiguous, undefined time challenges these mechanisms of national time. It reveals that while the nation seeks to demarcate the war in time to produce a conclusive narrative and move forward, the persistent time of the war refugees defies this process of reducing war time to the period of official military engagement. Such a reduction marginalizes those lived experiences of war, violence, and forced migration that do not fit within national calendric boundaries.

The anonymity of the refugee characters in the story signifies a similar idea. Unlike Victor, these characters remain nameless, and the story does not explicitly identify their country of origin or current place of residence. While the narrative explicitly indicates that they arrived in the US as refugees, it uses abstract terms such as "homeland" and "our country" instead of directly referencing Vietnam. The narrative's refusal to name anything about the refugee characters is a deliberate counterpoint to how national narratives remember the war that created those refugees through discrete names. As Nguyen states in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "Wars are as complex as individuals but are remembered by names that tell us as little as the names of individuals do" (5). In his

critical writings, he often emphasizes that the American designation of "The Vietnam War" confines the memory of the conflict to the geography of Vietnam, which ultimately erases the experiences of other affected Southeast Asian countries. Apparently, this conceptual context informs his choice to not name the refugee characters in "Black-Eyed Women." By avoiding naming as a device for national projects of remembrance, the story challenges the manner in which American national memory seeks to contain the Vietnamese experience of refuge by relegating them to a zone of spatialized time. In doing so, it portrays refugee time as something that essentially resists reduction to geographical frames.

The act of detaching the refugee characters from references to time and place resonates with the story's overarching trope of refugee spectrality. Such detachment not only enables readers to perceive the characters as ghostly figures but also complicates the notion of national belonging within the parameters of the refugee condition. As ghostly beings, refugees disrupt the claims of temporal and territorial boundedness that underlie the core of national imagination. The narrator underscores the unboundedness inherent in the refugee experience by highlighting how the violence within the Vietnamese refugee community—manifested primarily through home invasion robberies—constitutes a lasting impact of their lived experience during the Vietnam War. The narrator's parents live their lives in the US haunted by the specter of robbery, "afraid of our young countrymen, boys who had learned about violence from growing up in wartime," as the narrator remarks (*Refugees* 20). This suggests that what begins in Vietnam does not conclude within the spatiotemporal boundaries of national war narratives; rather, it perpetuates a cycle of trauma that transcends these imaginative boundaries.

In this context, robbery emblematizes the disintegration of the sense of home that refugees experience as a result of the war. This disintegration is not merely a material consequence of fleeing one's country; rather, it is a persistent feeling that accompanies the refugee experience even after arrival in the US. The narrator links the family's lifelong fear of robbery to the question of belonging by stating, "My American adolescence was filled with tales of woe like this, all of them proof of what my mother said, that we did not belong here. In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories" (*Refugees* 20). This alternative mode of belonging to one's story is vividly embodied by the dynamics of the narrative in "Black-Eyed Women" itself. It features refugee characters stripped of all usual markers of belonging—names, dates, and places—and rendered identifiable only within the confines of the storyworld. The story constructs them in such a way that their identities refer to nothing in the external, real world. They belong entirely to the story.

Beyond its connection to the host nation, i.e., the US, the spectral temporality of refugeeness in "Black-Eyed Women" channels the imagination of the relationship to the lost nation, i.e., Vietnam. If the US represents a ghostly future for the narrator and her mother, then Vietnam is the ghostly past. The loss of Vietnam is represented through the tragic loss of the son on the refugee boat—a tragedy that resonates with the theme of the connection between reproduction and nation. While the nationalist metaphor of family, as Hogan states, functions to "enhance the sense of durability," Nguyen employs the same metaphor to shift the sense of durability from the nation's existence to its absence (Hogan 155). The manner in which the narrator and her mother treat the ghost brother/son can be understood as two different responses to this absence.

The mother's treatment of the ghost son exemplifies what Nguyen refers to as "restorative nostalgia," a feeling that "the past can be recovered wholly and the lost homeland can be restored authentically" ("Refugee Memories" 912). Dissatisfied with the used clothes, identical to his old ones, that the narrator gave her ghost son during his first visit, the mother insists on buying him a completely new set. She explains, "He can't be wandering out in the cold with what you gave him, like a homeless person or some illegal immigrant" (*Refugees* 23). This gesture of restoring her son from the status of refugeeness symbolizes a deeper longing for a nation that offers redemption. This desire resonates with Nguyen's distinction between the refugee, who questions the viability of the nation, and the immigrant, who affirms it.[84] The logic of restorative nostalgia that the mother exemplifies is thus shown to be intertwined with the imagination of the nation as a protective shelter—the ideal of a nation that provides refuge and belonging.

Another dimension of the mother's restorative nostalgia resides in her concern with the idea of preserving public memory. She worries about her daughter's lack of preparedness to hold the wake and commemorate her death anniversary when she dies: "Your brother would have known what to do … That's what sons are for" (*Refugees* 23). The association between the son and the ability to perform public, socially organized commemorative practices reinforces the son/nation duality underpinning the mother's nostalgic imagination. It does so by echoing the traditional gendered construction of the nation, which confines women to the private domain while reserving the public realm for men. As a refugee cast out from the nation, the mother longs for the nation as an institution of public memory—one that forges a simultaneity between its living and

[84] Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique" 930.

deceased subjects through "calendrical" acts of remembrance. From this perspective, the nation bestows upon its dead an enduring place in its temporal imagination, preventing them from suffering a second death—a death in memory, in time. This threat of the second death fuels the mother's refugee restorative nostalgia for the lost son/nation.

Unlike the mother, the narrator embodies a consciousness aligned with "reflective nostalgia," which "regards the past with more ambivalence" and "deploys [a] set of optics in which the bright light of the nation's dominant memory is dimmed" (Nguyen, "Refugee Memories" 913). The narrator notices a change in how the ghost brother appears compared to her real brother: "The last time I had seen him, he was taller by a head; now our situations were reversed. When he said my name, his voice was hoarse and raspy, not at all like his adolescent alto." This contrasts with her mother's perception of the ghost son as "exactly the same"—a view that, when situated within the context of the mother's national nostalgia, symbolically reflects her belief in a coherent national identity rooted in a timeless origin (*Refugees* 20). Lacking such a belief, the narrator shows no desire to alter her ghost brother's appearance, which, as mentioned earlier, symbolizes the destabilizing nature of refugee status. She offers him her own clothes—shorts and a T-shirt—similar to the old, wet ones he has worn since his death on the boat. While the type of clothes conveys a sense of wandering, the act of giving the ghost a secondhand set of the same type establishes a sense of correspondence between the two. This gesture not only links the narrator to her ghost brother's state of refugeeness but also reflects her acceptance of their shared displacement and divergence from the desire for restoration or renewal.

The narrator's perspective on motherhood further underscores her divergence from her mother's national nostalgia. She reflects on her mother's critical view of her "unnatural nature, [being] childless and single," admitting, "Motherhood was too intimate for me as were relationships lasting more than one night" (*Refugees* 21). Here, motherhood symbolizes the same gendered imagination of nation echoed in the relationship between the mother and her dead son. The narrator's rejection of motherhood suggests a rejection of the gendered task of biologically reproducing the nation's durability. Her avoidance of long-term relationships affirms a stance opposite to durability, embracing instead a sense of transience. In doing so, the narrator reveals the persistence of her refugeeness as a temporal experience that contrasts with the claims of durability associated with nation. She can thus be likened to *Exit West*'s Nadia, who consistently understands her refugee identity through the lens of temporariness. In contrast, the mother shares with Saeed—*Exit West*'s other protagonist—an inclination to look to the past, which reflects their desire for a conclusive resolution to their state of refugeeness.

Despite their differing nostalgic attitudes, the narrator and her mother share a common passivity toward the past. This is evident in the years of silence about what happened to the family—the intertwining tragedies of the murder of the son and the rape of the daughter by the pirates. Only toward the story's end do we learn how this silence began, as the narrator reveals that she is a victim of a collective sexual assault by pirates following the killing of her brother in front of the family.

> When I turned my face away and saw my mother and father screaming, my eardrums seemed to have burst, for I could hear nothing. Even when I screamed I could not hear myself, even though I felt my mouth opening and closing. The

> world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on this matter. (*Refugees* 27)

The family's enduring silence about the dead brother reflects their collective attempt to suppress the traumatic memory of the living daughter's assault. However, this silence includes a contradiction: While it represents an ongoing attempt to confine the trauma to the past, its very existence underscores the inseparability of past and present. As such, it reveals the nature of the family's refugee memory, in which the failure to justly remember the brother who died for the daughter reflects how the precarious present encourages the disremembering of the traumatic past. This position reflects the broader theme of how Vietnamese refugees, in their effort to forget the suffering they endured, often avoid remembering their own people, whom they left behind in the homeland.

The disruption of the family's temporality of silence by the ghost brother illustrates the persistence of their refugeeness. This sense of persistence is narratively animated by the ghost's wetness every time he visits. Wetness here symbolizes the freshness of the Vietnamese temporality of the Pacific crossing. It emphasizes the ocean—an open space that, like refugees, exists between nation-states and challenges their territorial system of borders—as a discursive site for the Vietnamese refugee subjectivity. In a piece titled "salt | water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory, and Statelessness at Sea," Patricia Nguyen points out that "water is ... a fundamental metaphor for Vietnamese subjectivity." The Vietnamese word for water, "nước," also means "the homeland, country, and nation" (99). Within this context, wetness in "Black-Eyed Women" can be interpreted as conceptually foregrounding the experience of the oceanic journey as a home for Vietnamese refugees. It enables mobilization of the notion of home and, subsequently, nation from the fixity of space to the mobility of experience

in time. The ghost conveys this meaning by refusing to wear the new clothes that the mother provided; he explains his reason for keeping his old clothes: "We wear them for the living … Not for us" (*Refugees* 25). The ghost's response symbolizes a refusal to remodel the Vietnamese experience of refuge into any category other than that of refugees.

The end of the story validates what the presence of the ghost brother demands by presenting a reconciliation between the narrator and her refugee self. The reconciliation is manifested in her decision to stop ghostwriting others' traumas and instead write a book about the trauma of her own refugee experience. This shift occurs after the ghost brother "came [for the second time] and said all he wanted to say" to the narrator. She opens up to him this time, inviting him into her basement office, the place where she writes. They sit together on the same sofa, reminiscing about their past until the narrator is overcome with emotion and begins to cry. When she turns her back to reach for a tissue, he vanishes. This moment encapsulates her recognition of a traumatic past and marks a breaking of the silence. The mother, "the expert on ghosts," affirms this recognition by asserting that the "brother [is] not going to return" (*Refugees* 30). The fact that the ghost brother will not return suggests not that he will evaporate but, rather, that the narrator's writing of her memories will assimilate him. In this sense, the narrator's decision to write and remember signifies an embrace of her refugeeness as a positionality in the world. She reclaims subjectivity by abandoning the state where a victimized memory is entangled with the act of victimizing her own past—a condition born from the Vietnamese refugee memory existing at the intersection of national imaginations.

The narrator's transformation reflects the reclamation of public memory as an individual endeavor that sees beyond the temporal limitations of the national imagination, regardless of whether the nation is the host or one that has been lost. It emerges as a realization of the idea that Nguyen emphasizes in *Nothing Ever Dies* by quoting a line of poetry by Derek Walcott: "I had no nation now but the imagination" (283). By resolving to write her own memoir, the narrator reclaims ownership of her memory and asserts her belonging to her own story. She imaginatively liberates refugeeness from the nation by refusing the binary equation highlighted in another line by Derek Walcott and quoted by Ngyuen: "Either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (283). The narrator abandons the "nobody" status that silence and ghostwriting symbolize, not to reinforce the narrative of the nation but, rather, to affirm and embrace its other: the refugee. By embracing refugeeness through writing, the narrator rejects the notion that the only alternative to the nation is self-negation.

Thus, in "Black-Eyed Women," the nation is neither a point of origin that the refugee seeks to reclaim nor a final destination that they aspire to reach. These imaginations offer the refugee nothing but a ghostly present. The fact that the story's narrative present remains unidentifiable until the narrator reconciles with her refugee temporality reaffirms the overarching theme of the story: that the present, not the past, is what has been at issue for the narrator as a refugee. Refugeeness here resonates as a sense of being displaced from a narrowly defined present, one constructed by national narratives of memory. From this perspective, the story's spectral creations are not merely remnants of an unresolved past; they are essential elements of the refugee's lived reality, excluded from a present shaped by the norms of national citizenship.

4. Conclusion: Temporalized Refugeeness: Thematic and Formal Intersections

When looked at together, *Exit West* and *The Refugees*, particularly through the latter's framing story, "Black-Eyed Women," share notable parallels in how they intertwine refugeeness and temporality. Both works illustrate that the refugee figure is situated between nations not only spatially but also temporally. While the spatial crossing of borders is always a temporary experience for the refugee, *Exit West* and *The Refugees* emphasize the enduring character of the temporal crossing, which situates the refugee, as a form of subjectivity, outside the temporal boundaries of the nation-state. In this sense, they capture the temporal resonance of what Hannah Arendt calls "the impossibility of finding a new [home]" for the refugee "as long as peoples are organized within the old system of nation-states" (*Totalitarianism* 34; *Jewish Writings* 235). However, by temporalizing the refugee experience, the two works extend the negotiation of the interplay between the refugee and the world's current political organization beyond the spatial, territorial logic of the nation-state. The refugee is often constructed within this logic as an instrument for pondering the nature of the nation-state and, as a result, reduced to being perceived "only as a lack" (Soguk 8). Hamid and Nguyen can, therefore, be perceived as basing the discursive positionality of the refugee narrative on the rejection of bolstering the territorial imagining of the world, where the dominance of the nation-state, not only as a naturalized political unit but also as an exclusive epistemology, is established.

Emphasizing the refugee persistence in time, Hamid and Nguyen both represent refugeeness as a form of identity. They expand the category of the refugee beyond the lived experience and the epistemological critique it enables to demarcate an existential

reality, or a state of consciousness, that reimagines and reconceptualizes the self and the world. Contrary to what Peter Nyers identifies as the ideology of refugee identity, perpetuated by international organizations and mainstream discourses, in which refugees are defined as a universal character of "lack" and "emptiness," *Exit West* and "Black-Eyed Women" ground their counter, universal refugee identity in the notion that self-definition is always contingent on time (Nyers 16). No identity, including that of the citizen, is entirely static or fixed; it is always "mobile and processual" (Soguk 7). The unanimity of the refugee characters in both works, coupled with the deliberate obfuscation of the stories' historical and geographical determinants, represent, through narrative means, the idea of detaching identity from what is perceived as its fixed markers. With the refugee being the utmost materialization of such a detachment, the two authors see in the refugee bare humanity, not bare life as the nation-state does. The truth of this bare humanity can be captured not through any reductive form of affiliation or citizenship but, rather, through the citizenship of time itself, in which all humans stand as mortal beings, living transient, migratory lives.

At the heart of this construction of refugeeness lies the universality that both Hamid and Nguyen associate with the figure of the refugee. Hamid's assertion that "we are all migrants through time" directly evokes the idea that K. C. Cirtautas articulated half a century ago when he stated, "[E]very refugee regardless of nationality, race or creed points to the refugee within ourselves … [to the fact that] man is often not at home within himself, within his family, within his city, within his country or within his society" (13-14). In "Black-Eyed Women," this universality is at work in the commonality between the refugee narrator and Victor, whose traumatic loss of family has rendered him

forever spectral. Despite all the organizational publicity his case receives, Victor becomes a refugee at home, a refugee within himself. Nguyen uses the image of Victor to symbolize the idea that the nation-state is capable of neither acknowledging the refugeeness latent within human life, for it disrupts the nation's dreams of a fixed identity and progressive history, nor changing it. Thus, the nation-state works only by mystifying and making this intrinsic aspect of human experience invisible via its regimes of public memory and national history. Implicit in this interplay is the reality that the nation is constantly haunted by the ghosts of refugeeness and, consequently, by refugees who threaten its dreams of a secure national identity.

To say that Hamid and Nguyen's fictional discourse on refugees is situated within this universalizing tendency does not imply that it equates the actual experiences of refugees with those of non-refugees. Rather, both authors imbue the refugee perspective with a conceptual force that reveals the contemporary global human condition, in which the nation-state, often regarded as the sole guardian of humanity, ultimately represents a figure of lack in itself. Lack, typically associated with refugees in mainstream discourses, is thus mobilized to characterize the global condition at large. To that end, refugee universalism here speaks to what Bruno Latour calls "the new universality … a wicked universality, to be sure, but the only one available to us." Manifested in the trilogy of "migrations, explosions of inequality, and New Climatic Regime," this new, wicked universality, Latour maintains, "consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way" (Latour, *Down to Earth* 9). *Exit West*, in particular, embodies this idea by imagining the world we know as giving way beneath everyone's feet, yet remarkably without inducing a feeling of a catastrophic or apocalyptic future in which all humanity

will be without refuge. While refugees have become the harbingers of "harmed futurity" in mainstream representations, the futurity they signal in *Exit West* is harmful only to what is taken to be the natural order of things—the "clean future" of social order (Sheldon 35). To borrow Baraka's words, refugees in *Exit West* "are omens of a future radically severed from the imagined equipoise of an idealized present" ("Refugee Writing" 483). *Exit West*'s accomplishment lies in its ability to present a livable world in its final form while simultaneously establishing this sense of temporal severance.

The world in "Black-Eyed Women" seems stable compared to that in *Exit West*. However, this stability exists only at an external level. With the particularities of genre and scope in mind, the story focuses primarily on the internal, mental realities of refugeeness. The role that spectrality plays in shaping the mental topography of this refugee world is comparable to that of the magical doors in *Exit West*, as the figure of the refugee emerges in both works as a disruption of what is considered the natural spatiotemporal reality of the world. As "Black-Eyed Women" demonstrates, this disruptive temporality of refugees is not defined in terms of "crisis" or "emergency" (Nyers 11). All the stories in *The Refugees* follow one pattern of narrativization: While the story takes place in the present, it is narratively produced through a mnemonic attachment to the moment of the war. This pattern performs a double discursive movement. On the one hand, it departs from the straightforward historical representation of the Vietnamese refugee experience, which often risks depicting the refugee as a mere object of rescue. On the other hand, it does not break with the war as the formative temporality of Vietnamese subjectivity in the US. In doing so, Nguyen diverges from the tendency, shown by some other Vietnamese writers, to move beyond the war—a

tendency that risks assimilating the Vietnamese into the apolitical and ahistorical categories of the US multicultural landscape.[85]

The analogous narratological and thematic role of magical doors and ghosts highlights a formal similarity between the two works: their use of magical realist elements in an otherwise realist narrative. Just as the argument of *Moments of magical realism in U.S. ethnic literatures* goes, Hamid and Nguyen use these moments of magical realism as "a place of both opacity and illumination." They interrupt "taken-for-granted realities" and, at the same time, illuminate "the hegemonic constitution" lying behind a realism that hides "a forgotten or repressed history or discursive formation" (1). Whereas Hamid's magical doors seek to spotlight borderlessness as impending futurity hidden within the fabric of the present, Nguyen's spectrality underscores the absent present that the refugees occupy within the world's current structure. In both instances, the enduring temporality of refugeeness produces a narrative that exposes the "delimitation in time" at the heart of the national order of things (Brennan, "Longing" 51). It also endows the refugee's mobility with a discursive force to rechart the temporal maps of the world, just as it does with the territorial ones.

In conclusion, Hamid's *Exit West* and Nguyen's *The Refugees, with the latter* exemplified by "Black-Eyed Women," depict the refugee experience by focusing on its temporal dimensions. By showing refugeeness from the perspective of its persistence in time, they conceptualize the refugee in a way that challenges the problem-solving discourses in which a refugee is predominantly a passive object of rescue or a discursive site for the imaginations of reinstating normalcy. Instead, the refugee figure appears in

[85] Espiritu, *Body Counts* 15.

both works as a social and historical actor whose experience engenders alternative epistemologies that can question and disrupt what is established as the natural order of things. When considered in the historical context of the refugee crisis, these two works of refugee literature urge readers to think about refugees beyond the geopolitical frame that reduces the complex social phenomenon of displacement to a spatial spectacle.

Conclusion

Throughout the development of my dissertation, my driving question has been: How can migrant fiction be interpreted through its politics of time? In the past decade, migration studies have undergone a "temporal turn," with a growing amount of sociological research examining how states develop migration policies grounded in temporal rationalities in response to the unprecedented influx of global migrants. Literary studies have also embraced a temporal turn, moving beyond the dominant critical frameworks of spatiality to emphasize the importance of time in understanding literature. Despite the interdisciplinary nature of the temporal turn, critics have emphasized the distinct ways in which the concept of the literary emerges in relation to time, distinguishing it from adjacent approaches that focus on time in the context of culture or language.[86] I have often contemplated how literary representations of the migrant experience can create a unique intersection between these two lines of inquiry regarding time. The question in its simple form thus becomes: How does the migrant's time manifest in the literary imaginations of the migrant experience as a force for deriving narrative meaning and structure?

In drawing this dissertation to a close, I want to answer this question by revisiting Guha's remark from the opening paragraph, where he describes the migrant's consciousness of time as one characterized by "no distantiation in time" (4). The dissertation has shown that narrative fiction represents the migrant experience through a distantiation in time. This does not contradict Guha's assertion; rather, it aligns with its underlying logic. If, as Guha states, the migrant stands before the host community in an

[86] Thomas Allen, *Time and Literature* 4.

"immediate present cut off from a shared past," it is precisely the absence of that shared past—this time with the host community of readers—that necessitates the creation of temporal distance within the narrative (Guha 9). By temporal distance, I mean that the migrant's narrative time is expansive; it is not centered around a traumatic or melancholic moment of attachment to the past, nor is it centered around a generative moment of release into assimilation. Rather, it synthesizes multidirectional movements—backward, forward, or sideways—that create space for reconfiguring continuities from the past, intersections within the present, and possibilities of redemption in the future. This multidirectional topography of migrant temporalities is not the only challenge to the notion of linear, progressive time presented in the works that this dissertation examines; these works also incorporate elements of rupture, such as fragmentation, ellipsis, and ambiguity.

By highlighting these characteristics of temporal imagination in the examined narratives, the dissertation has demonstrated how migrant literature can elude the aporia of linear time or its negation. This is one of the key implications that the dissertation emphasizes through concepts such as "perpetual beginning" in the first chapter, "continuity without linearity" in the second chapter, and "persistence of refugeeness" in the third chapter. All these concepts channel negotiations of migrant subjectivity while avoiding reduction to the binary logic of "linear, homogenous time" or "reduction to the present." They illustrate that the consciousness of displacement not only disrupts the arrangement of past, present, and future within a teleological chronology but also resists the idea of relinquishing the need to organize these dimensions of temporal experience altogether. Instead, displacement catalyzes the continuous reconfiguration and

redefinition of these temporal relationships. Throughout the examined works, the past is revisited, modified, or multiplied via different narrative perspectives; the present is unstable and insufficient, projecting skepticism onto the future while simultaneously opening it to possibilities. The overall effect is a paradigm of displacement that is no longer framed by the before-and-after of migration or by the dichotomy of a past tied to the home country and a present rooted in the host country. Instead, it is an open-ended paradigm marked by an acute awareness that "our time is out of joint,"[87] in which resolution—or even redemption—is associated with the realization and acceptance of living with an enduring sense of displacement.

While the persistence of displacement evokes a range of politically and ideologically charged sentiments across the examined works, the central idea that the dissertation underscores is that this persistence defines migrant subjectivity as a temporalizing force. This link between the two constitutes a primary contribution of migrant literature to broader conceptualizations of the migrant experience of time. While sociological approaches to this experience often focus on the role of time—in its mechanical form—in governing mobile bodies and shaping specific subjective experiences, migrant literature offers a distinct perspective. It allows the migrant to be narrated and understood primarily within the complexity of their subjective time rather than through regulatory timetables and timings. This literary perspective traces the migrant as moving within their own sense of time, mobilizing personal and collective histories that have shaped their experiences while gesturing toward alternative futures. In this way, migrant literature endows the figure of the migrant with a temporal subjectivity.

[87] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* 2.

By marking the migrant's narrative time with distance, literary representations offer a counter-perspective to discourses that predominantly construct migrants through the globalized rhetoric of flow, acceleration, and rapid change. Literature infuses the migrant's time with a sense of slowness by representing it from a subjective perspective, rendering visible experiences of stagnation, unresolved pasts, and deferred futures. In this sense, migrant literature can also be read against the backdrop of the other temporal rhetoric about migrants—the discourse of the migration crisis that has emerged over the last decade. Crisis evokes emergency, a concept that is perceived as disruptive to everyday life and that "interrupts the smooth, continuous progression from past to present to future" (Anderson 178). As this concept contributes to the construction of the migrant other as a threat, migrant literature can counter this process of othering by familiarizing us with migrant temporalities, emphasizing their everydayness, and revealing a shared humanity.

The dissertation has also demonstrated how the temporalizing force of migrant subjectivity is intertwined with the despatialization of time. Across the examined works, it is the movement of the migrant's time in the narrative, more than the migrant's physical movement, that binds diverse geographies and traverses spatially imagined borders of national time. The de-spatializing force of the migrant's time also complicates the discourse of newness surrounding the migrant experience. It challenges the spatial logic that views migrant movement as a transition from one fixed point to another, defined by arrival in a new place and an encounter with indigeneity. This newness often obscures the continuity of temporal experience through the discontinuity of place. In contrast, de-spatialized migrant temporalities assert that a new location does not

necessarily signify the beginning of a new time for the migrant. Such a framework centers the migrant subject, allowing for an understanding of what they bring to the new place, rather than focusing solely on the destination place and what it bestows upon the migrant.

In conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated that the migrant subject's reclamation of time in fiction is deeply intertwined with an embrace of temporal displacement as a core aspect of identity. In doing so, it has presented displacement as "a vocabulary of the present," to borrow the title of the influential volume edited by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, which discusses "key terms" that "talk about time today in ways that, in part, reveal us to ourselves" (2). Displacement is an integral component of the universal human experience of time, given time's abstract character and the elusiveness of its phenomenological order as past, present, and future. However, this dissertation presents it as the intensified sensation that emerges when this universal state of being in time is mobilized from the ontology of existence to the historical realm of experience, taking the form of a question. St. Augustine famously reflected on the nature of time, saying, "What is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I don't know" (239). Similarly, the universal experience of displacement in time is taken for granted until it emerges as a question prompted by a historical experience whose disruptive structure comes to demand a work of narrativization. We can speak of migrant literature as a discourse of temporal displacement in this sense. The migrant's text, situated outside the national narrative that organizes collective imaginations of displacement from past to present and future, is always burdened by the task of representing the self in time.

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