Narrating the Shifting Sands: Hybridity, Kino politics, and the Poetics of Displacement in Contemporary Middle Eastern and African Fiction

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Abstract
This paper argues that contemporary Anglophone migration fiction does not merely represent displacement but formally enacts it, and that literary form therefore offers a distinct kind of evidence for debates on migration, identity, and political economy that are usually conducted through social-scientific method alone. Reading Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, Leila Aboulela's Minaret, NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names, Hisham Matar's In the Country of Men, and Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives, the study asks how fragmented narration, code-switching, unstable narrators, and non-linear temporality stage the psychic and material costs of forced and economic migration across the Middle East and Africa. The analysis is grounded in a dual theoretical framework combining Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the Third Space with Thomas Nail's kinopolitical theory of the migrant as a figure produced by, and resistant to, structures of territorial, political, juridical, and economic expulsion. Using comparative qualitative close reading as its method, the paper identifies four recurring formal strategies across the five texts: narrative fragmentation as mimetic of displacement, linguistic and religious hybridity as a site of identity negotiation, domestic and gendered space as a register of political-economic precarity, and historical memory as a mode of resistance to colonial and postcolonial dispossession. The study's significance lies in addressing an underexamined gap in migration scholarship: the tendency of political-economy-oriented migration research to treat literary texts as illustrative rather than analytically generative. By foregrounding form alongside theme, and by grounding its claims in sustained close reading of character, setting, and structure across all five novels, this paper contributes a literary-critical methodology to interdisciplinary conversations on migration, governance, and identity in the Middle East and Africa.

Keywords*: migration literature, hybridity, kinopolitics, diaspora, political economy of migration, postcolonial fiction, narrative form*

Introduction

Migration has become one of the defining forces reshaping political, economic, and social life across the Middle East and Africa, driven by armed conflict, environmental pressure, labour mobility, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Scholarship on this transformation has, however, remained disproportionately weighted toward political science, sociology, and economics,

disciplines well equipped to trace policy, flows, and demographic outcomes but less equipped to account for how displacement is lived, remembered, and narrated from within. Literature offers a complementary and, this paper argues, analytically necessary vantage point: the novel form itself can register the psychic fragmentation, linguistic hybridity, and economic precarity of migration in ways that resist reduction to data. This paper examines five novels published between 2005 and 2020 that dramatize migration across the Middle East and Africa and their diasporas: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*, and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*. Each approaches displacement from a different vector. Hamid narrates the migration of Saeed and Nadia from an unnamed city on the brink of civil war through mysterious black doors that instantaneously relocate refugees to Mykonos, then London, then Marin, California. Aboulela follows Najwa, a Sudanese woman raised in an elite Khartoum household, whose family is destroyed by a military coup and who is reduced, in London exile, to work as a maid for a family scarcely wealthier than the one she once commanded. Bulawayo narrates the childhood of Darling, who grows up in a shantytown ironically named Paradise before migrating to an American town she renames Destroyedmichygen, a satirical portmanteau of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Matar narrates the political terror of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya through nine-year-old Suleiman el-Dawani, whose father's opposition to the Revolutionary Committees and whose best friend Kareem's father, Ustath Rashid, is arrested and publicly executed on state television, terror that eventually forces Suleiman into exile in Cairo. Gurnah narrates the intergenerational aftershocks of German colonial violence in East Africa through Khalifa, Hamza, Ilyas, and Afiya, tracing Hamza's conscription into the German schutztruppe and the way that violence resurfaces two generations later when Hamza and Afiya's son travels to postwar Germany. Read together, these texts resist a single, homogenizing narrative of "the migrant" and instead reveal migration as differentiated by class, gender, religion, and historical period, while sharing a set of formal strategies for narrating dispossession. This introduction is followed by a statement of the problem the study addresses, its objectives, its significance, and its scope, before moving to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, a review of related literature, methodology, sustained analysis of each novel, a cross-textual discussion, and a conclusion.

Background of the Study: The Authors and Their Texts

A brief account of each author's background clarifies why these five novels are read together and situates each text within its author's broader literary and biographical relationship to migration.

Mohsin Hamid was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1971 and educated at Princeton University and Harvard Law School, dividing his adult life among Lahore, London, and New York. His earlier novels, *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the latter shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize, already engaged questions of transnational belonging before *Exit West* (2017), itself shortlisted for the Booker Prize and winner of the inaugural Aspen Words Literary Prize, extended this concern to speculative migration. Hamid has said in interviews that his central interest lay in what precedes and follows a migrant's move rather than in the physical journey itself, a stated authorial intention that corresponds directly to the novel's formal elision of travel through its magical doors. Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964 to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father and was raised in Khartoum, where she earned a degree in economics and statistics from the University of Khartoum before completing further graduate study in statistics at the London School of Economics. She settled in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1990 and began writing shortly afterward, becoming the first-ever winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000. *Minaret* (2005), longlisted for the Orange Prize, draws on Aboulela's own migration from an English-medium

Khartoum upbringing to Scottish exile, though the novel's specific plot of political coup and domestic service is not autobiographical. NoViolet Bulawayo is the pen name of Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, born in 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe, who adopted her pseudonym in tribute to her late mother, Violet, and her home city of Bulawayo. She moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan, at the age of eighteen, the same American town Darling renames "Destroyedmichygen" in the novel, and later earned an MFA at Cornell University. Her 2011 Caine Prize-winning short story "Hitting Budapest" became the opening chapter of *We Need New Names* (2013), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, making Bulawayo the first Black African woman to receive that distinction.

Hisham Matar was born in New York City in 1970 to Libyan parents and spent his childhood between Tripoli and Cairo before settling in London, where he studied architecture. In 1990, while Matar was a nineteen-year-old university student, his father, Jaballa Matar, a prominent Libyan dissident, was kidnapped in Cairo by Egyptian secret police and handed over to the Gaddafi regime, imprisoned in Tripoli's Abu Salim prison, and never definitively accounted for. *In the Country of Men* (2006), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is widely described as semi-autobiographical in its portrait of a Libyan family under surveillance, though Matar has resisted a fully autobiographical reading of his fiction; he later wrote directly about his father's disappearance in the memoir *The Return* (2016), which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Biography.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar and fled to England as an eighteen-year-old refugee in the late 1960s, following the 1964 Zanzibar revolution and the persecution of citizens of Arab descent that followed it. He went on to become Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent, retiring in 2017, and in 2021 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first Black writer to receive the honour since Toni Morrison in 1993, for what the Swedish Academy described as his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee. *Afterlives* (2020) extends the historical and colonial concerns of his earlier Booker-shortlisted *Paradise* (1994) into the era of German colonial rule and the First World War in East Africa. Read alongside one another, these five biographical trajectories, spanning Lahore, Khartoum, Tsholotsho, Tripoli, and Zanzibar, demonstrate that each author writes migration fiction from a position of direct or inherited displacement rather than as a purely imaginative subject. This shared positioning does not make the novels autobiographical in any simple sense, but it helps explain why formal strategies for narrating displacement recur across texts whose authors have never collaborated and whose novels are rarely read together.

Statement of the Problem

Literary scholarship on migration fiction from the Middle East and Africa has grown substantially over the past decade, but it remains fragmented in two specific ways that this paper addresses. First, criticism on *Exit West*, *Minaret*, *We Need New Names*, *In the Country of Men*, and *Afterlives* has developed largely in isolation, organized by national or religious literary tradition, Pakistani Anglophone fiction, Sudanese diasporic writing, Zimbabwean fiction, Libyan exile writing, Zanzibari postcolonial fiction, rather than through cross-regional comparison. This isolation obscures formal patterns that these texts share despite their disparate historical and geographic settings. Second, and more significant for a volume concerned with the political economy of migration, existing criticism has engaged questions of hybridity, trauma, and diasporic identity far more thoroughly than it has engaged the material and economic structures that produce displacement in the first place. The problem this paper addresses, then, is twofold: the absence of sustained comparative reading across this cluster of contemporary migration novels, and the

absence of a theoretical framework capable of holding cultural identity and political economy together within a single literary-critical analysis.

Objectives of the Study

This study pursues three specific objectives. The first is to identify and analyze the formal narrative strategies, fragmentation, code-switching, unstable narration, non-linear temporality, that the five selected novels use to represent migration, and to establish how these strategies function as more than decorative technique. The second is to read these formal strategies through a dual theoretical lens combining Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the Third Space with Thomas Nail's kinopolitical theory of the migrant, in order to demonstrate how identity negotiation and political-economic dispossession are formally inseparable in these texts. The third is to situate this comparative reading within, and against, existing single-author and single-national scholarship, identifying the specific gaps this study fills and proposing directions for further comparative research on migration literature from the Middle East and Africa.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three overlapping audiences. For literary scholars, it offers the first sustained comparative reading of these five novels together, demonstrating that texts ordinarily read within separate national or religious traditions share a coherent set of formal strategies for narrating displacement. For migration studies more broadly, a field historically dominated by political science, sociology, and economics, this study demonstrates that literary form is not merely illustrative of migration's human costs but can function as independent analytical evidence, capable of registering dimensions of displacement, psychic fragmentation, linguistic loss, the domestication of state violence, that quantitative and policy-oriented research is less equipped to capture. For the specific concerns of this volume, which invites theoretical, empirical, comparative, and policy-oriented contributions on migration, governance, identity, and the political economy of the Middle East and Africa, this study offers a literary-critical methodology that speaks directly to the volume's stated interest in the reciprocal relationship between mobility and the political economy of states, societies, and transnational communities.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to close reading of five published novels, *Exit West* (2017), *Minaret* (2005), *We Need New Names* (2013), *In the Country of Men* (2006), and *Afterlives* (2020), selected for their geographic range across the Middle East and Africa, their historical range from colonial East Africa to twenty-first-century speculative migration, and their formal variety. The study does not attempt an exhaustive survey of migration literature from these regions, nor does it engage in reader-response, publishing-industry, or translation-studies approaches to these texts; its method is textual and comparative, and its theoretical apparatus is restricted to the two frameworks, hybridity and kinopolitics, that most directly serve its stated objectives. Historical and biographical information about the authors is used only where it directly clarifies a novel's engagement with migration and is not treated as a substitute for textual analysis.

Conceptual Framework

The study proceeds from the premise that four concepts are mutually constitutive in migration fiction: displacement, hybridity, precarity, and narrative form. Displacement is understood not only as physical relocation but as a rupture in the subject's relationship to language, memory, and

domestic space. Hybridity names the resulting condition of cultural in-betweenness, in which migrant identity is neither fully assimilated to the host society nor continuous with the society of origin. Precarity refers to the economic and legal vulnerability that accompanies migration, particularly for refugees, undocumented migrants, and colonized or formerly colonized subjects, and connects the literary analysis to the political economy concerns central to this volume. Narrative form, finally, is treated as the site where these three conditions become perceptible to the reader: a fragmented chapter structure, a child narrator's limited comprehension, or a magical door that erases the physical journey of migration are not neutral techniques but formal enactments of displacement, hybridity, and precarity. These four concepts relate to one another in a specific way across the five novels. Displacement is the precipitating event; hybridity and precarity are its two simultaneous consequences, one operating primarily at the level of culture and selfhood, the other primarily at the level of material survival; and narrative form is the medium through which the interaction of hybridity and precarity becomes visible to the reader. The conceptual claim organizing this paper is that literary form and migratory content are not separable in these texts: the shape of the narrative is itself an argument about what migration does to selfhood and social belonging. A locked door, a mislaid ration book, a renamed town, or a child's misremembered chronology of a father's arrest are, in this framework, treated as equally legitimate objects of analysis alongside explicit thematic statements about exile or belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on two complementary theoretical traditions. The first is Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and the Third Space, developed in *The Location of Culture*, which argues that colonial and postcolonial identity is produced not through the assimilation of one culture into another but through an ongoing, unresolved negotiation that generates new, hybrid forms of subjectivity. For Bhabha, this Third Space is not a comfortable middle ground between two fixed cultures but a site of genuine ambivalence and productive instability, in which meaning and identity are never simply transferred from origin to destination but are continually translated and reconstructed. Bhabha's framework has already been productively applied to migration fiction: recent scholarship on *Exit West* draws on Bhabha's theory of hybridity to argue that Hamid's novel challenges fixed national boundaries and produces fluid, transnational identities through its protagonists' repeated border crossings, while readings of *Minaret* have located the novel's protagonist within a diasporic "third space" in which religious identity becomes a resource for negotiating exile rather than a symptom of it (Hasan 1-15; Rasheed). The second theoretical strand is Thomas Nail's kinopolitical theory of the migrant, developed in *The Figure of the Migrant*. Nail argues against treating migration as an exception to a normative condition of political fixity and citizenship, proposing instead that the migrant, produced through territorial, political, juridical, and economic forms of expulsion, is the central political figure of the contemporary period. Nail's four registers of expulsion are directly useful for literary analysis: territorial expulsion appears in these novels as the loss of a specific home or street (Suleiman's Mulberry Street, Najwa's Khartoum garden); political expulsion appears as the loss of protection by a state that has turned against its own citizens (the Revolutionary Committees in Matar, the schutztruppe's subjugation of Deutsch-Ostafrika in Gurnah); juridical expulsion appears as the loss of documented status and legal personhood (the undocumented migrants massing at the doors in Hamid's novel); and economic expulsion appears as the forced descent into precarious, often domestic or care labour (Najwa's work as a maid, Aunt Fostalina's labour in the American sections of Bulawayo's novel).

This framework brings a political-economy dimension to the analysis that Bhabha's theory alone does not supply: where Bhabha illuminates how migrant identity is culturally negotiated, Nail illuminates the structural, economic forces of dispossession that produce the migrant condition in the first place, including colonial labour extraction, war economies, and the bureaucratic apparatus of the border. Reading the five novels through both frameworks together allows this paper to hold identity and political economy in the same analytic frame, directly answering the volume's call for scholarship on the reciprocal relationship between mobility and the political economy of states, societies, and transnational communities. Neither framework is applied to displace the other: Bhabha without Nail risks treating migrant hybridity as a purely cultural achievement, disconnected from the economic coercion that so often produces it, while Nail without Bhabha risks treating the migrant as a purely structural category, disconnected from the culturally inflected forms of selfhood migrant subjects construct. The pairing is therefore corrective rather than additive, each framework supplying what the other omits.

Review of Related Literature

Existing scholarship on these five novels is substantial but fragmented by author and national tradition, with comparatively little work reading them together. On *Exit West*, Mushtaq Bilal situates the novel within debates on world literature, arguing that Hamid's use of delocalized setting and multi-strand narration allows the text to narrate migration as a global rather than a national phenomenon, characterized by what Bilal calls the narrative devices of delocalization of place and entrelacement (Bilal 410-27). Other scholars have applied Bhabha's hybridity theory directly to the novel's magical doors, arguing that they expose national borders as socially and politically constructed mechanisms of control that the narrative form works to dismantle, producing what this criticism describes as fluid, hybrid, and transnational identities rather than fixed forms of belonging. On *Minaret*, Md. Mahmudul Hasan reads the diasporic Muslim woman's experience through the concept of a religious "third space," arguing that faith functions for Aboulela's protagonist as a resource for self-actualization within, rather than an escape from, the pressures of assimilation and exile (Hasan 1-15). Chaudhry Hussnain Rasheed extends this reading through Miriam Cooke's transnational Muslim feminist framework, arguing that the convergence of religious origin and contemporary diaspora produces a new, globally legible form of Muslim women's identity (Rasheed). Both readings converge on the claim that Najwa's turn to the Regent's Park mosque community is not regressive nostalgia but an active reconstruction of selfhood under conditions of downward class mobility and cultural dislocation. On *We Need New Names*, Khalid Ahmed, Hassan Mahmood, Sardaraz Khan, and Aasia Nusrat demonstrate that Bulawayo's code-switching between English and Shona, her episodic structure, and her recurring guava-tree imagery perform rather than simply represent the intersecting pressures of race, class, gender, and displacement on the child narrator Darling (Ahmed et al.). Their reading identifies the novel's episodic, chapter-based structure, moving between named vignettes such as "Hitting Budapest" and later chapters set in the renamed American town, as a formal enactment of the discontinuity of migration rather than a stylistic ornament. Polo Belina Moji's earlier study of the novel's politics of naming similarly argues that the practice of renaming under migration, evident in Darling's own ironic renaming of her new home as Destroyedmichygen, encodes a larger politics of belonging in diasporic space (Moji 181-90). On *In the Country of Men*, criticism has concentrated on trauma and exile. James Kearney compares Suleiman with Nuri, the child narrator of Matar's second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, arguing that both boys develop desperate coping strategies in response to a father's loss, and that Suleiman's traumatized narration, filtered through the limited

comprehension of a nine-year-old, produces gaps and misunderstandings that the adult reader must actively interpret (Kearney 124-48). Nora Hashem offers a more specific textual reading, examining how the novel's engagement with Qur'anic narrative and the body inflects Suleiman's understanding of agency and guilt as he watches his father's world collapse around him (Hashem 39-61). Tim Parks situates the novel within Matar's broader preoccupation with authoritarianism, vulnerability, and the long aftermath of a father's disappearance under the Gaddafi regime, themes that anticipate the forced exile Suleiman eventually undergoes when he is sent to live with his uncle in Cairo (Parks). On *Afterlives*, Dirk Göttsche reads the novel alongside Gurnah's earlier *Paradise* as a sustained literary intervention into the memory of German colonialism in East Africa, arguing that Gurnah's fiction performs a transnational and multilingual critique of colonial amnesia that conventional historiography has been slow to undertake, tracing the German schutztruppe's suppression of revolt under Colonel Wissmann and its long aftermath in the lives of ordinary Swahili-speaking families (Göttsche 269-84). Two gaps in this literature justify the present study. First, criticism on each novel tends to proceed in isolation, organized by national or religious tradition, despite the fact that these texts share formal strategies for narrating displacement across otherwise disparate contexts: Bulawayo's ironic renaming of place, for instance, performs a similar defamiliarizing function to Hamid's unnamed "city" and unlabeled doors, yet no existing study reads these strategies together. Second, and more significant for this volume's concerns, existing literary criticism engages hybridity, trauma, and diaspora identity far more thoroughly than it engages political economy; Nail's kinopolitical framework, though influential in migration theory, has not yet been substantially applied to this cluster of novels. This paper addresses both gaps by reading the five texts comparatively and by pairing a hybridity-focused theoretical lens with an explicitly political-economic one.

Methodology

This study employs comparative qualitative close reading, a method appropriate to literary analysis that seeks to identify recurring formal and thematic patterns across a defined corpus of primary texts. The five novels were selected purposively to represent geographic breadth (Pakistan and the Gulf-facing Middle East, Sudan and the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe and the United States, Libya and Egypt, Zanzibar and Germany), historical range (from early-twentieth-century colonial East Africa to twenty-first-century speculative migration), and formal variety (magical realism, domestic realism, child narration, and multigenerational historical fiction).

Analysis proceeds in three stages: identifying formal features in each text, narrative structure, point of view, temporal organization, and linguistic choice, through close reading of the full novel; interpreting these features through the paired theoretical framework of Bhabha's hybridity theory and Nail's kinopolitics; and situating each novel's formal strategies in comparative relation to the other four to identify the recurring patterns that organize the paper's Analysis section. Secondary scholarship, gathered through the review above, is used throughout to verify and extend, rather than to substitute for, the primary close reading. Consistent with literary-critical convention and MLA style, textual references to the primary novels are cited by author name; because the study emphasizes thematic and formal argument grounded in verifiable plot, character, and structural detail over verbatim quotation, direct quotation from the primary texts is used sparingly and only where the precise wording is analytically significant.

Analysis

Exit West: The Elided Journey and the Kinopolitics of the Door

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* begins in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war," where Saeed and Nadia meet in an evening class before the city descends into militant control. The novel's defining formal device, the black doors that appear throughout the world and instantaneously relocate whoever passes through them, does not merely add a speculative flourish; it removes the physical journey of migration from the narrative altogether. Saeed and Nadia do not cross deserts or seas; they step through a closet doorway and emerge, disoriented, first on the Greek island of Mykonos, then in a mansion in London that is being informally repartitioned among squatting migrant families as houses, parks, and disused lots across the city are peopled by new arrivals, and finally in Marin, on the Pacific coast near San Francisco. This elision is the novel's central kinopolitical argument. By removing the journey, which is conventionally the site of migration narrative's greatest peril and pathos, Hamid redirects the reader's attention to what Nail calls the juridical and economic registers of expulsion: what happens to a person once they arrive undocumented in a country not built to receive them. The London sections dramatize this precisely. As "native-born" residents grow "vanishingly few" in certain neighbourhoods and nativist anxiety escalates toward organized violence, Saeed and Nadia experience displacement not as a single crossing but as a prolonged, structurally engineered precarity, an experience of being tolerated, surveilled, and periodically threatened rather than of simply having arrived. The couple's eventual relocation to Marin, where new arrivals are gradually incorporated into a visibly multiracial, labour-based community, marks not resolution but a different phase of the same kinopolitical process: expulsion followed by slow, uneven, labour-contingent re-emplacement. Hybridity, in Bhabha's sense, is legible above all in the novel's treatment of religious practice and gendered self-presentation. Nadia wears a conservative, all-concealing black robe from the novel's opening pages, not out of religious conviction, since she does not pray, but as a chosen form of self-protection and independence, riding her motorcycle through the city in a garment other characters assume signals piety. Saeed's relationship to prayer moves in the opposite direction: relatively secular at the novel's start, he prays with growing intensity and frequency as displacement accumulates, eventually praying not only for peace but specifically for Nadia and for his father, his religious practice becoming, in the absence of a stable home, a portable structure of meaning. This divergence between the two protagonists, one loosening her relationship to inherited signifiers of piety, the other tightening his, demonstrates that hybridity is not a single, shared trajectory even for a couple who migrate together; it is negotiated individually, unevenly, and often in tension with the very person one migrates alongside. The London migrant camp Saeed and Nadia encounter before reaching the repartitioned mansion also complicates any straightforward reading of hybridity as achievement. Hamid populates this liminal space with migrants of many nationalities living in close, improvised proximity, resisting the suggestion that displacement is a bilateral relationship between one couple and one host society; London becomes a space where multiple, simultaneous migrations converge, each carrying its own version of the hybridity Bhabha describes. Saeed and Nadia's eventual, quiet separation once they reach Marin, treated without melodrama as a natural consequence of two people whose paths through displacement diverged, further underscores the paper's claim that migration does not produce a single, generalizable subject: even two people who cross every threshold together do not necessarily arrive at the same hybrid selfhood.

Minaret: Domestic Descent and the Third Space of Faith

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* opens with its narrator, Najwa, looking up at the minaret of the Regent's Park mosque in London, a vantage point that frames the entire novel's retrospective structure. The narrative moves between Najwa's privileged childhood in 1980s Khartoum, where the family employs an Ethiopian maid, a houseboy, a guard, and a driver named Musa, and her diminished adult life in London, where she herself works as a maid, first uncertain how deferential the role requires her to be, later fired from one position after a household dispute. The precipitating rupture is explicitly political and economic: a military coup in Sudan, reported to Najwa's family in a single unadorned sentence, "There's been a coup," destroys her father's position and, with it, the family's entire class standing, precipitating Najwa's exile to London and her father's eventual execution. This trajectory, from an emancipated young woman driving her own car to Khartoum University to a domestic worker cleaning for a family little wealthier than her own once was, is the novel's clearest illustration of Nail's economic register of expulsion: displacement here operates not through violence enacted on Najwa's body but through the systematic downgrading of her labour and class position, a process scholarship on the novel has read as central to the diasporic experience of Muslim migrant women in Britain (Hasan 1-15). Yet Aboulela resists presenting this descent as pure loss. Najwa's growing involvement with the Regent's Park mosque community, praying alongside other women, feeding ducks in the park afterward, functions as the construction of what Hasan and Rasheed both identify as a genuine "third space," a hybrid identity that is neither the secular, Westernized, elite Sudanese self of her youth nor a simple return to an idealized origin, but a new form of belonging assembled from the specific resources available to her in exile (Hasan 1-15; Rasheed). Read kinopolitically, the mosque functions as a rare space in the novel where Najwa's political, juridical, and economic dispossession is momentarily suspended: within it, class distinctions that structure her working life become less determinative, and a Sri Lankan maid, an Ethiopian widow, and a formerly elite Sudanese woman can occupy the same devotional space on comparatively equal terms. The novel is careful, however, not to sentimentalize this space as a full escape from precarity; Najwa's material vulnerability, her dependence on domestic wages, her uncertain immigration status, her strained relationship with her brother Omar, persists alongside her religious reconstruction of self, demonstrating precisely the paper's conceptual claim that hybridity and precarity are simultaneous, not sequential, consequences of displacement.

Najwa's brother Omar offers the novel's starkest counter-example to her own hybrid reconstruction of self. Where Najwa turns to the mosque community, Omar turns to drugs in London, eventually selling a gift meant for his sister to fund his habit, and is ultimately imprisoned, a fate that leaves Najwa visiting him and trying, on occasions like Eid, to carry some fragment of home into the prison visiting room. Read alongside Najwa's trajectory, Omar's decline demonstrates that Nail's economic and juridical registers of expulsion do not guarantee any particular cultural response: the same rupture, the same coup, the same loss of elite status and paternal protection, produces in one sibling a hybrid religious reconstruction of belonging and in the other a spiral into criminalized addiction and incarceration. Aboulela's refusal to resolve this asymmetry, Omar remains imprisoned at the novel's end, his fate unredeemed, insists that hybridity in Bhabha's sense is a possibility displacement opens rather than a guarantee it delivers.

We Need New Names: Naming, Satire, and the Political Economy of Global Inequality

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is organized around a series of ironically named places that make the novel's political economy explicit at the level of nomenclature. Darling and her friends Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Sbho, and Stina live in a shantytown called Paradise, from

which they set out, in the opening chapter "Hitting Budapest," to steal guavas in Budapest, the nearby suburb of walled mansions belonging to Zimbabwe's wealthy. The children's chant, recalling international food aid, and their casual references to NGOs waiting to feed them, situate the novel's child's-eye narration within a precise political-economic context: national economic collapse, currency crisis, and the growing presence of international humanitarian actors in ordinary Zimbabwean life. When Darling eventually migrates to live with her Aunt Fostalina in the United States, Bulawayo extends this ironic nomenclature: Darling renames her new home, Kalamazoo, Michigan, as "Destroyedmichygen," a satirical Shona-inflected mishearing that simultaneously registers her limited grasp of American place names and her assessment, however oblique, of what economic decline looks like from the perspective of someone who has already lived through it once. Scholarship on the novel has demonstrated that Bulawayo's code-switching between English and Shona is not incidental linguistic colour but a structural device that performs, rather than merely represents, Darling's negotiation of a bicultural identity, with untranslated Shona interjections marking a zone of experience English cannot fully absorb (Ahmed et al.). Aunt Fostalina's labour in America, exhausted from standing and caretaking, exemplifies Nail's economic register of expulsion transposed onto the diaspora: her body, in the American sections of the novel, becomes a site where migratory labour's gendered and racialized costs are visibly inscribed. Polo Belina Moji's study of the novel's politics of renaming argues that this practice, evident equally in Darling's own name, in Bastard's and Godknows's names, and in Darling's renaming of Kalamazoo, encodes a larger politics of belonging under displacement, in which the migrant subject reasserts a measure of narrative control over a world that has otherwise stripped her of stable ground (Moji 181-90). Read through Bhabha's framework, Darling's bilingual, transnational voice constitutes precisely the kind of hybrid subjectivity his theory describes: neither simply Zimbabwean nor simply American, but a new subject position assembled from both. Read through Nail's kinopolitics, the same voice also encodes economic dispossession twice over, first the structural collapse that produces Paradise's poverty and the children's dependence on NGO aid, then the diasporic labour precarity that structures Aunt Fostalina's life in America, demonstrating that for Bulawayo's child migrant, cultural hybridity and economic expulsion are never separable experiences but two faces of the same displacement. Two further details ground the novel's political economy in the specific texture of Zimbabwean crisis rather than in generalized child's-eye whimsy. Chipo, one of Darling's friends, is pregnant by the novel's opening chapters, a pregnancy the children discuss with a bluntness that only gradually reveals its origin in her grandfather's abuse, folding gendered domestic violence into the same social collapse that has already emptied Paradise of stable adult authority. Bornfree, an older youth in the neighbourhood, is introduced through his involvement in opposition political organizing and later becomes a victim of political violence during a contested election, tying Darling's child's-eye narration directly to Zimbabwe's documented history of electoral violence and economic breakdown.

In the Country of Men: The Domestication of State Terror

Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* narrates the summer of 1979 in Tripoli through nine-year-old Suleiman el-Dawani, whose family lives on a street they call Mulberry, named for an orchard that has otherwise vanished. Suleiman's father, secretly active in opposition politics, is repeatedly away "on business," a euphemism the boy does not yet understand, while his mother, married against her will as a teenager, drinks in his father's absence and tells Suleiman fragmented, painful stories of her own foreclosed youth. The novel's central trauma arrives through the arrest of Ustath Rashid, an art history professor and the father of Suleiman's best friend Kareem, taken by

Revolutionary Committee men and later shown, bound and interrogated, on state television, an event the whole neighbourhood, including children, is compelled to witness. Bahloul, a beggar who appears intermittently throughout the novel, becomes entangled in Suleiman's own capacity for cruelty when the boy, disturbed and frightened by forces he cannot name, attempts to drown him, an episode critics have read as evidence of how state terror is metabolized and re-enacted, however inadequately, by a traumatized child (Kearney 124-48). The novel's narrative technique, an adult exile narrating his own childhood confusion from a distance of years, formally reproduces the withheld information and protective silences that structure childhood under authoritarianism: the reader, like young Suleiman, must piece together what has happened to his father and to Ustath Rashid from partial, adult-mediated fragments rather than direct exposition. Nora Hashem's reading of the novel's engagement with Qur'anic narrative and the body argues that this structure of partial knowledge and delayed comprehension is inseparable from questions of religious and moral agency that the novel poses through Suleiman's guilt over his own small cruelties (Hashem 39-61). Read kinopolitically, Matar's novel demonstrates Nail's political and juridical registers of expulsion operating within, rather than across, national borders: Suleiman's family is expelled from safety while remaining physically in place, watched by Revolutionary Committee cars that ordinary citizens know not to overtake, its home searched, its books burned by Suleiman's mother in a desperate act of self-protective destruction. The eventual, offstage exile that removes Suleiman to Cairo, where the adult narrator has lived ever since, is therefore not the novel's originating displacement but its culmination, the final stage of an expulsion that began years earlier within the supposedly secure space of the family home. This structure, terror domesticated before it is ever geographically exported, distinguishes Matar's novel from Hamid's and Bulawayo's, in which displacement is more immediately international, and demonstrates the paper's broader argument that political economy operates at the scale of the household as readily as at the scale of the border. Suleiman's relationship to his father after the elder man's eventual, temporary return from detention further illustrates the novel's insistence that state terror is absorbed at the domestic scale before it is ever named politically. The household's anxious repetition of the question of what the father will say or do upon returning, and the family's uncertain renegotiation of ordinary domestic routine around a man visibly altered by his imprisonment, register trauma not through explicit description of torture but through the small, displaced choreography of a family relearning how to occupy the same rooms together. This narrative choice is consistent with James Kearney's observation that Suleiman's traumatized coping strategies, including his cruelty toward the beggar Bahloul, function as displaced, inadequate responses to a violence the novel largely keeps offstage, disclosed to the reader only through its domestic aftershocks rather than through direct spectacle (Kearney 124-48).

Afterlives: Colonial Conscription and the Intergenerational Political Economy of Empire

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* begins by establishing the brutal suppression of East African revolt by Colonel Wissmann's newly formed schutztruppe, the colonial force of African mercenary soldiers known as askari commanded by German officers, a suppression that inflicted, the novel notes, unexpectedly heavy casualties on the schutztruppe itself before subduing all revolt in Deutsch-Ostafrika. Against this historical backdrop, Gurnah follows Khalifa, a commercial clerk, Ilyas, a young man who is conscripted into the German colonial army and effectively disappears from his family, and Hamza, who similarly enlists as an askari under German officers and returns from the First World War physically and psychologically altered. Afiya, Ilyas's younger sister, grows up believing her brother lost to the war, and it is only through Hamza, who eventually

marries Afiya, that the novel's second half unfolds, extending finally to the couple's son, who travels to postwar Germany seeking answers about Ilyas's fate. Gurnah's structure, spanning three generations and shifting among multiple protagonists rather than following a single migrant's journey, formally insists that colonial displacement cannot be told as one person's story. Dirk Göttsche's reading of the novel alongside Gurnah's earlier *Paradise* argues that this transnational, multilingual structure, moving between Swahili-speaking East Africa and German colonial and postwar spaces, reframes conventional accounts of German colonial memory as an ongoing, unfinished, and transnationally entangled process rather than a closed historical episode (Göttsche 269-84). The novel's title is literal in this sense: the schutztruppe's colonial violence does not end with the historical defeat of German East Africa but persists in its "afterlives", in Hamza's altered body, in Afiya's decades of not-knowing, in the son's journey to Germany two generations later.

Read through Nail's kinopolitics, Hamza's conscription exemplifies expulsion operating simultaneously at the political register, subjugation under colonial military command, and the economic register, forced labour extraction from colonized populations disguised as military service. Read through Bhabha's hybridity, the son's journey to Germany at the novel's close constitutes a Third Space encounter of a distinctive kind: not a migrant seeking asylum or economic opportunity in the conventional sense, but a descendant of the colonized returning to the colonizer's own territory to recover a family history that German archives and German cultural memory have themselves suppressed, precisely the reframing of colonial amnesia that Göttsche identifies as the novel's central intervention (Göttsche 269-84). Afterlives thus extends the paper's argument furthest back in time, insisting that the political economy of contemporary Middle Eastern and African migration cannot be understood without reference to the colonial extraction of labour and life that first produced the borders, economies, and disrupted genealogies within which today's migrants move. The novel's final movement, in which Hamza and Afiya's son travels to Germany and locates references to Ilyas in the records of a Berlin foreign affairs office, confirming that Ilyas survived long enough to be documented as a colonial veteran before disappearing again, makes the archive itself a site of political economy in Gurnah's novel. Colonial record-keeping, designed to track and manage conscripted colonial subjects as instruments of empire, becomes, generations later, the only mechanism through which a colonized family can recover its own history, a bitter irony the novel does not resolve into redemption. Afiya's decades of not-knowing her brother's fate, ended only partially by a bureaucratic trace in a foreign archive, demonstrates Nail's juridical register of expulsion operating across generations: the family's loss of Ilyas is never simply personal grief but a structural consequence of a colonial system that classified and discarded him as a record rather than a person.

Cross-Textual Synthesis: Four Recurring Formal Strategies

Read comparatively, the five novels converge on four recurring formal strategies for narrating displacement, each of which this paper has traced individually above. The first is narrative fragmentation as mimetic of displacement: Bulawayo's episodic, discontinuous chapters, Hamid's elision of the migratory journey itself, Matar's temporally displaced adult narration of childhood confusion, and Gurnah's multigenerational, multi-protagonist structure all resist linear, single-subject narration in favour of forms that formally reproduce the ruptures their content describes. The second is linguistic and religious hybridity as a site of identity negotiation: Bulawayo's Shona-English code-switching, Aboulela's turn to a transnational vocabulary of Islamic practice, Hamid's divergent trajectories of Nadia's secular self-protection and Saeed's intensifying prayer, and Gurnah's movement among Swahili, German, and English all locate migrant identity in language

and practice rather than in a single, fixed cultural inheritance. The third recurring strategy is domestic and gendered space as a register of political-economic precarity: Najwa's descent from an elite Khartoum household to domestic service in London, Aunt Fostalina's exhausted labour in the American sections of Bulawayo's novel, and Suleiman's mother's confinement and self-destructive drinking within the family home all demonstrate that the political economy of migration is legible at the scale of the household as much as at the scale of the border or the labour market. The fourth is historical memory as a mode of resistance to colonial and postcolonial dispossession: Gurnah's insistence on the multigenerational "afterlives" of German colonial violence and Matar's insistence that state terror precedes and produces the exile that follows both refuse to treat displacement as a discrete, presentist crisis, instead tracing today's migrant condition to specific, namable histories of extraction and authoritarian violence. Taken together, these four strategies substantiate the paper's central theoretical claim: that Bhabha's hybridity and Nail's kinopolitics are not competing but complementary lenses for reading migration fiction. In every novel examined here, the formal work of cultural negotiation, code-switching, religious practice, multilingual narration, occurs in the same textual space as the formal work of registering economic and political dispossession, domestic labour, conscription, currency collapse, state surveillance. No novel in this corpus offers hybridity as compensation for economic precarity, nor does any novel reduce migrant experience to economic determinism alone; each insists, through its specific formal choices, that identity and political economy are experienced together, by the same bodies, in the same households, in the same sentences.

Discussion

This comparative analysis carries three implications for the broader concerns of this volume. First, it suggests that literary scholarship on migration can move beyond single-author or single-national frameworks without losing the specificity that close reading requires; the four formal strategies identified here were only visible because the five novels were read against one another. Second, it suggests that pairing a culturally oriented theory such as Bhabha's hybridity with a materially oriented theory such as Nail's kinopolitics offers a template other scholars working on migration, governance, and political economy could adapt to different regional or historical corpora, including migration fiction from South Asia, Latin America, or the broader African continent not directly addressed here. Third, and most directly relevant to this volume's interdisciplinary ambitions, the analysis suggests that political economists, sociologists, and policy scholars working on migration governance in the Middle East and Africa might find in these novels genuine analytical propositions rather than merely illustrative case material: that displacement's economic costs are often most visible in domestic and gendered labour rather than in formal employment statistics; that colonial and authoritarian histories continue to structure contemporary migration patterns in ways presentist policy analysis can obscure; and that the psychic and linguistic dimensions of displacement, difficult to quantify, nonetheless shape migrants' capacity to rebuild economic and social life in ways policy frameworks concerned only with labour-market integration may fail to capture. Literature does not merely dramatize what migration studies already knows; in the specific, textured detail of Najwa's mosque community, Darling's ironic renaming of Kalamazoo, or Hamza's altered body after his conscription into the schutztruppe, it surfaces dimensions of displacement that more abstracted forms of inquiry are structurally less likely to notice.

Conclusion

Read together, *Exit West*, *Minaret*, *We Need New Names*, *In the Country of Men*, and *Afterlives* demonstrate that contemporary migration fiction from and about the Middle East and Africa does not simply depict displacement as content but formally enacts it through fragmentation, linguistic and religious hybridity, domestic focalization, and multigenerational historical structure. Pairing Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the Third Space with Nail's kinopolitical theory of the migrant allows this paper to hold identity and political economy together in a single analytic frame, showing that the cultural negotiation of migrant selfhood and the structural, economic dispossession that produces migration in the first place are formally inseparable in these texts, whether that dispossession takes the shape of Hamid's undocumented door-crossers, Aboulela's downwardly mobile domestic worker, Bulawayo's NGO-dependent shantytown children and their diasporic aunt, Matar's terrorized household under an authoritarian regime, or Gurnah's conscripted colonial soldiers and their grandchildren. This comparative approach addresses a genuine gap in existing scholarship, which has richly theorized hybridity and trauma in individual novels but has not yet substantially engaged migration fiction's formal strategies as evidence for, rather than illustration of, debates on the political economy of mobility. For a volume concerned with the reciprocal relationship between migration and the political economy of states, societies, and transnational communities, literary form offers not a decorative supplement to social-scientific analysis but an independent body of evidence: the shape a novel takes when it tries to narrate displacement is itself a claim about what displacement does to persons, households, and the possibility of belonging.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study suggests several directions for further comparative work. Future research might extend the kinopolitical and hybridity framework developed here to migration fiction from other regions, testing whether the four formal strategies identified in this corpus recur across other geographic and historical contexts or are specific to the Middle Eastern and African corpus examined here. Scholars working at the intersection of literary studies and political economy might also test whether the household-scale analysis modeled in this paper's reading of *Minaret* and *In the Country of Men* extends to other genres, including memoir, poetry, and testimonial writing by refugees and migrants, where the formal strategies for narrating displacement may differ from those available to the novel.

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