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Unsettling Identities on Refugee Routes in Omar El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise*

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Refugee routes are often portrayed as physical paths; they are illegal, risky and highly significant because of their functionality as bridges from war zones to secure zones. The secure lands, in themselves, have remarkably become a destination for observers of migrants' mental and psychological oscillation between their homelands and new host societies; whereas, the refugee routes are seldom considered to be as dynamic as a (post-)arrival point, as a space, a process of displacement and emplacement, and of change and exchange in identities and perspectives. However, considering those who did not arrive it would be interesting to know what they might have endured. What if the dead are endowed with life and given voice to narrate their routes and their internal struggles in coping with the new societies hosting them temporarily before their last journey into survival? Against this backdrop, this essay analyses the novel of Omar El Akkad – *What Strange Paradise* (2021).

What Strange Paradise turns a deathscape into a death-escape, and thus, manifests the power of fiction in delivering new insights and new possibilities. The novel is a fictionalised rendition of the occurrence of the Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on the Greek seashore after a journey on one of the death boats in 2015. The ghastly spectacle of his small body laid out on the coast stunned the world; but, here, in this novel, he is given life in the character of Amir to proceed with his escape journey. The protagonists start their journey from Syria passing through Egypt before Amir mounts a feeble raft sailing with other strangers to a Greek island. In many ways, the Greek island per se, as a setting, is a frontier land and if considered in a more sophisticated reflection upon its geopolitical dynamics, it perhaps manifests the temporariness of stations, having in mind how Bhabha sees islands, "as being a sort of extra-territorial territories, . . . a space where a whole range of forms of illegality, forms of

untimeliness are being practiced" (49:15 – 49:36). In this 'space', the soul is agitated, the mind is captured between a troubled memory and restless anticipation.

To capture these intensities, I am going to spotlight where the author illuminates subtle complexities impeding his characters' coexistence within each hosting community en route. These complexities are entangled politically and socially – not the least of which is discriminatory due to class, colour, and nationality. As such, the characters in the novel are precarious, fickle, self-reflexive, and primarily uneasy about framing their identities. I will investigate how the author elucidates multi-layered contests within selves and others on the boat and in communities regarded as familiar and non-foreign, for the characters are burdened by unresolved questions about their unreconciled past and unrelieved present and future. Mobility studies, in this respect, namely Greenblatt's contribution in his manifesto on mobility studies affords the theoretical basis for seeing the road as a precarious fulcrum for socio-political and historical constraints that lay their burdens on refuge seekers:

> *mobility studies should account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraint.* . . . And it is important to note . . . that moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement. Mobility studies should be interested, among other things, in the way in which seemingly fixed migration paths are disrupted by the strategic acts of individual agents and by unexpected, unplanned, entirely contingent encounters between different cultures. (251-2, emphasis in original)

While Greenblatt showcases routes as "'contact zones' where cultural goods are exchanged" (251), Joris Schapendonk calls for a "mobilities turn" in migration studies. To Schapendonk, attention to the journey more than to the starting and arrival points

> complicates departures. . . At the same time, it challenges the finiteness of arrivals since a destination can be transformed into nothing more than another place of departure. . . . The focus on the supposedly "in-between phase" of migration introduces an ontological shift from settlement and permanency to mobility and process. This perspective suits better the turbulent character of contemporary migration. (12)

Arrival, as such and as the novel illustrates, is not a point in time and place, but rather a process that takes time and space until the protagonists reach the end, if it is ever reached.

The story of *What Strange Paradise* is told by the omniscient narrator switching events constantly between two different spatiotemporalities: before and after chapters. In 'After'-chapters, the author mediates the aftermath of the drowning boat on the island and displays the perspectives and intensities of a variety of inhabitants in the hosting land. The 'Before'-chapters trace Amir's refugee route with his family from Homs to Egypt, fleeing away from the barrel bombs falling over their neighbourhood to an unsettling accommodation in an unwelcoming atmosphere. By chance, Amir joins strange people on a boat without any idea of their destination. The intersection between what happened before and is happening thereafter cuts the narrative into two parallel worlds that are meticulously designed to present a compact story that eventually dispenses with prejudice and presumptions. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the dialogues, as well as the narrative, interlock answering some questions, but also raising others. Moreover, the narrative abundantly evidences incidents where these migrants and refugees are exploited en route and in the hosting communities where they are rejected.

Amir meets Vänna, a local teenager from the island, and both become friends in spite of the obstacle of their speaking different languages. In juxtaposition to their readiness to accept each other sits another scene recalled by Amir in one of the 'Before'-chapters, before he steps onto the boat. His mother regularly watches Egyptian soap operas to learn and master speaking like the locals with their own dialect so that she can socialise easily and blend into her new neighbourhood with less trouble. To sound like an Egyptian seems roughly possible for a Syrian, yet certainly, the complexities impeding her coexistence within the hosting community are much more entangled.

> [S]he ever hoped to avoid the immigrants' markup, every last trace of home in her voice had to be wiped clean. She needed to sound like the place in which she hoped to restart her life. Sometimes when Amir listened to his mother talk with the other women who lived nearby, women who had fled from the same place she

> had, he heard them say that what really mattered were other things: the colour of one's skin, the country of one's birth, the size of one's inheritance. But his mother always argued that what mattered most was to speak in a way that mimicked the majority tongue, to sound exactly like them. And even if those other things mattered more, this was all she could change. (El Akkad 33)

Amir continues recounting, a few lines later, how she acts differently and how she is called by different names in different places and on different occasions. "In moments such as these it was difficult to think of her as a single person, the same person he'd known all his life" (33). Her attitude of emulating the Egyptian accent and normalising her multiple identities reveal the trials and tribulations she undergoes in trying to fit in. In this regard, Greenblatt's thoughts on Mobility studies are worth mentioning, where

> [m]obility often is perceived as a threat – a force by which traditions, rituals, expressions, beliefs are decentered, thinned out, decontextualized, lost. In response to this perceived threat, many groups and individuals have attempted to wall themselves off from the world or, alternatively, they have resorted to violence. (252)

Significantly, the narrator – at the point of Amir's futile attempt to fathom the core of his mother's trouble with her identity – adeptly switches the reader's attention to another landscape, one of a myriad colonial histories. The narrator then shines a close light on the city of Alexandria where Amir's family ends up living. "It was a place sick with the ruins of colonial beauty" (El Akkad 34). Then the successive cultures that reigned over this land are introduced:

> British and French and Italian Villas, which stood on the graves of the Mamluk palaces, which stood on the graves of the Ottoman mosques, which stood on the graves of the Greek and Roman temples, which stood on the graves of myriad nameless and ancient villages long ago swallowed by the sea. (34)

In contemplation, the narrator muses: "Everywhere these identities warred and the warring produced *no victorious identity*, no identity at all, only the sense of manifold incompleteness, the universal aftertaste of

conquest" (34, emphasis added). This reflection overshadows his mother's dilemma; she also lives with 'no victorious identity' and overall it reminds us of the integrative struggle between what Greenblatt calls "structural constraint" and the "individual agency" (251). Agency in terms of holding power in leading their lives is not pursued saliently by Amir's family. Perhaps the visibility of their hardship and their dire need to pay for their lives in the eyes of the hosting societies propounds a less sophisticated form of agency and urgency which the narrative spotlights. We find that the recognition of their sheer human right to survive is set in opposition to the authoritative negligence of addressing this increasing flux of communities of displaced people. In effect, the visibility demanded by Amir's family vs the invisibility practised by the Egyptian government unfolds the dynamic intensity of this 'contact zone' and its impact on shaping and reshaping the characters' interactions with their surroundings. This is evident in the following scene. Before reflecting on the cacophony of his mother's words, Amir's attention had been caught by an interview on the television: "An old man with an ill-fitting military uniform stood at a podium, talking about a cure for all diseases. He praised the ingenuity of the Egyptian military for devising an end to illness, and added that it (the new invention) would soon mark another glorious chapter in the country's already glorious history" (El Akkad 30). And because it is "nonsense" (30), as his uncle affirms, Amir thinks about many unsettling things such as their unsettled situation in this country, their poor chance of recruitment and their being rejected because of who they are. All these factors may justify his mother's pressing need and desire to blend with the Egyptian people.

Parenthetically, El Akkad, in his interview with "The Sunday Magazine" of *CBC* Canada in June 2021, speaking about the insights of his novel, refers to the exploitation of Syrians in Egypt by manipulating prices: like raising the rentals and lowering the wages (4:10 – 4:58). What needs to be underlined here is the narrative manifestation of the fractured unsettled historical identities (colonial and postcolonial) cobbled, on one side, with social complexities (class and race discrimination) and with political dysfunction on the other side. All of that sheds light on the individuals' unsettled and restless identities. The fractured identity is not only of Amir's mother's linguistic dilemma but deeply rooted in other

identification taxonomies that are unnaturalised such as religion. This is clearly displayed in the following example, which also draws upon the intensity of regional politics. When the family crosses the Jordanian border to the Egyptian side, readers know that the Utus family are devastated because of the loss of their home, and divided because of being split in loyalty to the regime – into allies and opponents. In a climax to their misery, on the Egyptian border, they are suspected of being spies, even though they have their passports stamped with legal visas. The following conversation takes place at the checkpoint:

> "You Muslim?" the guard asked.
> "Yes, Sir."
> "But Shia."
> Quiet Uncle shrugged and looked down. The guard flipped through the pages of each passport, unconcerned with the visas, looking for something else, something he didn't find. He shook his head.
> "You're lying," he said. "You're Jews."
> Quiet Uncle looked around, hoping for some other senior officer to intervene. None did.
> "How can we be Jews?" Quiet Uncle asked. "Listen, listen – do we sound like Jews?"
> "You're spies," the guard said. "They train their spies to sound like your people."
> "We're not," Quiet Uncle pleaded, exasperated. "I swear to God we're not." (El Akkad 16-7)

Lacking evidence to hold them, they are moved on, passing by "the soldiers and through the checkpoint, under the eye of a massive billboard on which was painted a crude portrait of a different Leader and, below that, words of congratulations on his victory in the upcoming election" (17-8). While the ironic undertone here about the national politics tells of their uneven passing towards Egypt and foretells of their onerous life there, the capitalised 'Leader' overshadows the bitter reality that the family has changed their place of residence fleeing from a dictatorial regime to find itself tethered once again by challenging constraints of another authoritarian dysfunctional regime. In essence, as the narrative shows, the suspension of misery for these people en route is likely not possible. The accumulating poignant anxieties shape and reshape Amir's awareness of

what it means to be an outcast, an undesired refugee, not only later on the Greek island but also within the Arab countries and on the way to the unknown, to that better future that the passengers on the boat set sail for, the future that he cannot define.

The pervasive xenophobic sentiments on the island referred to intensely in the 'After'-chapters and represented mainly by Colonel Kethros, provide a background to understand Amir's choices in his continuous struggle to escape. When the war-injured colonel lost his leg, he was assigned to "lead(ing) the island's efforts at rounding up the illegals" (77). For him, runaway refugees need to be taken to the registration centre because they are not "[o]rdinary criminals (who) commit ordinary crimes" (114); they are "unregistered illegal(s)" (116). The deteriorating living situation in the camp, including the cramped space and the lack of water and hygiene are not considered by Colonel Kethros as significant reasons for the refugees' insistence on hitting the road. Arguably, these reasons for displaced people forcibly lodged into such temporary abodes function as reminders of their ingrained sense of unbelonging to a rejecting environment and, more significantly, as this paper argues, these reasons indicate the temporariness of stations and their contribution in (un)making the refugees' unsettled state of mind. When Kethros finally has a firm grip on Amir, he pours out his anger onto the child who does not understand his language. Kethros tells Amir that even those who demonstrate for the refugees' right to a better life are hypocrites:

> But you should know what you are . . . You are the temporary object of their fraudulent outrage, their fraudulent grief. They will march the streets on your behalf, they will write to politicians on your behalf, they will cry on your behalf, but you are to them in the end nothing but a hook on which to hang the best possible image of themselves. Today you are the only boy in the world and tomorrow it will be as though you never existed. (230-1)

When Kethros "drags Amir backward, grips him by the neck, pushes him against the back wall" to take him to the registration centre, "Amir screams. He kicks at the colonel, he thrashes and claws, but is easily subdued" (231). The case of facilitating refugees' passing through European borderlands is not an issue that is not targeted in the discussion of this

paper. Yet, as this case has been controversial politically, ethically, and publicly, the narrative negotiates such repercussions allowing fiction to weave different perspectives and multiple interactions into the whole story. For example, the crudeness of individuals like Colonel Kethros is juxtaposed by the sympathy of other characters, and as such, the author introduces a complex 'Other' who is non-homogeneous, opaque and less predictable. In the 'After'-chapters, by meeting other supportive characters we see the people on the island as multiple and diverse and in constant discord – which is also the case of the passengers on the decrepit raft in the 'Before'-chapters. However, by meeting these people of different attitudes in the worlds he knows through his escape journeys, Amir's sense of loss is intensified rather than attenuated. For example, sectarian and religious belonging is further illustrated as a problematic issue when Amir is to be taken ashore to the mainland by a kind local ferryman. The ferryman asserts that the boy will be embraced by

> "[h]is people, they take care of their own. Do you know his sect, his ancestry, his hometown?"
> "No," Vänna replies.
> "They'll help him anyway; they're not going to turn their backs on a little boy all alone. But it's better if . . . you know." (232, ellipses in original)

This detail alludes to the unending anxieties Amir, and the people like him, undergo not only throughout their journey but also subsequently. Between his homeland and the borderland (and what may come hereafter), Amir's journey on the raft was grievous and most strenuous; it deepened the layers of his mental and physical estrangement. In the following passage, evidence of internal conflict, racism, and villainy on deck, contrasted with naive futile ambitions to survive, is to be underscored. While the road from Syria to Egypt, where he temporarily stays, has been steeped in incessant anxieties, Amir's perilous journey in the raft together with other anonymous insecure people from all walks of life attests to the contestation and rejection experienced within a group that is expected to show sympathy for each other for the ostensibly simple reason that they are being lumped together under the same umbrella. The 'Before'-chapters are fraught with riots among passengers, mainly with Mohamed (the smuggler's apprentice); they can be labelled as the burden-chapters, the burden

of traumatised and unreconciled memory. The passengers' expectations of a smooth passing to the other side of the Mediterranean, safe and secure, fade away against the brutality of Mohamed. With his gun and sharp tongue, Mohamed significantly manages to seize control over the beguiled customers until the boat capsizes and they all lose their lives. However, the closer death approaches, the more his agency collapses. This occurs in what I would call a dispossession process whereby the passengers gradually dispense with their properties, beliefs and all that defines them until they reach a state of apathy and melt into nothingness. At the beginning, passengers are described as "a vast mixture of ethnicities and spoken languages and colors of skin" (50), holding onto their small luggage, clothes and views. They barely speak to each other, fully suspicious of each other's intentions. Soon, when Mohamed's lies are disclosed, they realise they are literally all in the same boat. "Something communal, a relief-born friendliness, now took hold among the passengers. They began to talk to one another" (70) telling of their hopes, thoughts, miseries, and escape routes. Maher, the Palestinian, and Teddy, the Eritrean, both introduced as educated persons exchange talks with Kamal and Walid, sometimes with Umm Ibrahim and always with Mohamed. Shortly before the boat crumbles, they become sullen and desperate; even Mohamed's threatening howls turn hollow. He eventually

> had lost their superficial obedience. . . . Because now the men and women, who, in undertaking this passage, had *shed* their belongings and their roots and their safety and their place of purpose and all claim to agency over their own being, had now finally *shed* their future. (191-2, emphasis added)

We see Umm Ibrahim appalled and deranged; she "pulled her niqab completely off" as a last gesture of her dispossession (215), keeping in mind that the most important dispossession such passengers frequently experience is the stripping away of their identities, their stories, and their names and being turned into figures (numbers) by the mainstream media. What the author here manages to do is to expose layer by layer contesting mental and emotional disruptions among a non-homogeneous mass of people of different biographies and aspirations. Accordingly, their convictions meet and part in their disputes to provide multiplicity in visions and perspectives.

As such, spaces of mobility are dynamic in as much as they do not interrogate the collective, but they do test the individual. Kudzai Matereke's article on African mobility criticised "[d]ominant discourses of globalisation" that "accord high currency to homogeneity while simultaneously playing down the multiplicity and heterogeneity of experiences in the distinct spatial and temporal zones of the globe" (114). By yielding to this multiplicity, we take for granted the protagonists' multiple transactions within themselves and with each other's questioning, as critics, their choices and become involved deeper in their escalating predicaments. The narrative allocates a wide space for showcasing the passengers' tense and erratic communications. For example, when a passenger is found dead from the cold temperatures, Walid dares, amid the denouncement of others, to try to check his pockets before throwing him into the water – which is both ethically and religiously controversial. He defends himself: "'Don't look at me like that. . . . Everyone here is thinking it. What, better the fish should keep it?'" (El Akkad 176). We see Walid grab Amir's lifejacket after the crushing of the boat and when the latter resists, he "pinned Amir by the throat . . . and slapped (him) across the face" (216-7). These passengers are driven by the sheer instinct for survival and to this end they will do anything, which may tell of their transient change of humour or their natural idle selves. For instance, Mohamed's brutality is displayed both in his physical threats to the passengers, and in his scourging words:

> You sad, stupid people. Look what you've done to yourselves. . . . Go ahead, change your country, change your name, change your accent, pull the skin right off your bones, but in their eyes they will always be engines and you will always, always be fuel. (179)

While this statement describes systemic discrimination in the Western capitalistic machinery referred to elsewhere in the narrative (109, 161, 178), it also draws attention to the fact that these passengers are victims of a chain of reasons, beliefs, and conjunctures: their countries and their people, on one side, and the host societies, on the other side. Above all, they are victims of themselves, which is the most poignant element in creating this tragedy. All this profoundly contributes to the passengers' volatile tempers and contradictory behaviours.

Mohamed's position amplified and exemplified in other situations drawn upon in on-boat chapters is counterposed by another image that manifests his fragility and frustration. Mohamed is soon to recognise the absurdity of his words and his unnecessary rage and accusations because he himself is earning a living from this job in order to "run his own migrant fleet one day" (179). He also shows a sense of morality on the occasion of the dead man on deck; he reprobates Walid's insistence to steal from the man and reproaches him saying: "You tiny, tiny man" (176). The broader image here portrays Mohamed as a victim as well as a victimiser in a predominant social, economic, and political system fraught with paradox and injustice. In the long run, stripped of their agency (possessions and dignity), the passengers and their tormentors become equal before death. Another episode that witnesses a change in the perspectives of the subjects on this road is the retrospection of Amir's uncle in the last moments before death. When hope of survival diminishes, Quiet Uncle approaches Amir and says in a moment of revelation, "I thought my brothers were selfish and stupid for speaking up (for standing against the Syrian regime). But the truth is we're all selfish and stupid" (195). Aside from the way the characters reflect upon their own troubles, sometimes even without completely denying their roles and responsibilities in creating these troubles and forging their misery, my point of emphasis here is to highlight the en route interplaying complexities which affect the identification of these characters and largely redefine their personae.

A further point that the novel effectively accomplishes is to give voice to the voiceless who in such tragic events will be designated as missing or be pronounced dead. Their incarnated voices have endowed them with a visibility that surmounts the invisibility of death. The novel here in imagining the ordeals of the dead, in giving them names and portraying their decrepit hopes and conflicting views and emotions, echoes what Homi Bhabha in one of his keynote speeches articulated, about survivors of death-boats, an "Eritrean man says, 'these people, the dead, have human rights' because any of us could be in that position" (Schulze-Engler 10). Bhabha continues:

> It is deeply tragic and poignant that the same argument about the change in life circumstances can be deployed by this man to talk about death. He said, "we could

> be dead at any point", rather than voicing the usual argument, "we could be different at any point", or "we could save ourselves". (10)

The issue here is not the "natality/fatality dialectic" (10), nor is it the issue in the novel, nor is it necropolitical in determining who deserves to die and who deserves to live. While it is of "ethical position[ing]" to Bhabha (10), it is of representation in the narrative of the road and of the visibility of the *dispossessed* subjects of their voices, names and, in consequence, their identities.[1] The narrated life of the dead, of what they could have experienced, not only narrates their unsettled identities but also generates the rhetorical question raised at the beginning of this essay and that the novel raises: what if the dead are given a voice, and thus, a chance to narrate their misery? In the novel, the drowning scene comes as a culmination of the passengers' hardship. In this scene, Amir is pulled down to the bottom of the sea by the troubled waters and the jostling of the passengers. The author here creates a fantasy for these people where their differences, whether ethnic, religious, or national, melt away. In the depth of the sea, the boy fancies seeing all the people he once knew

> in their old lives and their new lives waiting, and from each drew confession and each he felt into as though there were no barrier between them, no silo of self to keep a soul waiting. What beautiful rebellion, to feel into another, to feel anything at all. And then he surfaced. (El Akkad 223)

Nevertheless, Amir's survival and the chance he is given in the narrative to proceed on his journey and to tell about the tribulations of the road turn out to be adeptly contrived by the unreliable narrator. With the title 'Now', the last chapter narrates a normal day on the island of loud music, tourists bustling, and rescuing units walking around piles of luggage's and corpses including a dead body of a child made to appear like Amir. This twisting plot brings us back to the first line of the novel of a common reality: "The child lies on the shore," (1) that promises a life full of

[1] Although the narrator is given the agency of a witness that the writer does not have – which means the novel is not archival or autobiographical – the narrative registration can be seen as part of "cultural production" [Agnew 2020]. Agnew's argument draws on Hulme's and Arendt's thoughts on stories told by voices other than the implicated, that these stories are valid where "the telling of individuals' tales restores human dignity to them, and so constitutes an effective protest against the detention of refugees" (20).

possibilities when a few pages later the boy "opens his eyes" (5), driving us, readers, through the journey until reality prevails over fiction.

Between death and life, between reality and fiction lies a space of myriad potentials of compromising horrendous situations imposed by en route 'structural constraints', whether social, political, or historical. And although the assumption that "mobilities are often failed, unrealised, and unachievable" (Matereke 114) in comparison to the points of arrival, Matereke confirms that "[w]e need to go beyond generalisation to understand im/mobility experiences in their specificities" (115). The process of movement in time and place endows subjects on the move (in)transient transitions of their convictions, habits and all of what defines them in these discomfort zones that often impose on them undesirable interactions with others and with the transient places (structures) they pass by. Through the aesthetics and subtleties of the novel genre, literary representations, as in the novel *What Strange Paradise* (2021), allow untold stories to ripen and mature, to earn size and volume challenging as such "the finiteness of arrivals" (Schapendonk 12) in detailing the infiniteness and multiplicity of the self on the road.

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