

UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration Episode 58: The Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives (04/10/2023)

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Dr Esa Aldegheri

هه آل ووس ههأل-أ، benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcase series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society and identity. with us.

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Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

Welcome, everyone. I'm so excited to gather some of our authors together for the Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives. My name is Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, I am an associate professor of Asian American Studies at UCLA and I co-edited this volume with Vinh Nguyen, who's at the University of Waterloo, the Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives, which just came out in February 2023. It's published open access, so really easy for folks to download the digital version and read the wonderful chapters. So we have four authors from the volume with us today. But before I introduce them, I'm just going to say a few words about the volume overall, and our process of putting it together.

Vinh and I started this project in January 2020. So this was right before the pandemic started to hit North America, at least. And this started when an editor actually approached Vinh and was interested in putting together an anthology under this rubric of refugee literature. And so one of our first kind of interventions or questions was to think about, can we move from refugee literature to refugee narratives? And what does that open up? And I'll talk a little bit more about that. And the second thing I think that we wanted to think through is how can we also open up the term refugee, right, to think beyond just the UN and UNHCR definitions and think broadly about what that term might mean, both in the contemporary moment as well as historically. So I think the handbook, you know, when we're thinking about this idea of the Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives radically expands these two terms of engagement, refugee and narratives.

So to elaborate, refugees, not just those recognized by the UNHCR, but the volume also considers asylum seekers, so called economic migrants, internally displaced folks who might not be recognized, black fugitives, indigenous subjects, and also climate refugees. And then when we think about narrative, of course we're thinking about literature and novels and poetry, but we also wanted to open it up and think about memoirs, comics, you know, film and photography, more the visual. Some chapters also consider music, social media, data, graffiti, more quotidian letters or reports. We also think about eco design and nature and the environment, video games, archival remnants, as well as ethnography.

So it was really exciting to think about how all of our authors, there are 30 in total, were expanding different geographical sites spatial sites, different time periods, but also spanning

across these different forms of narrative. And these different subjects of forced displacement who might be externally recognized as refugees or not. So I think we wanted to really open up and problematize this term.

So the last thing that I will say is that our 38 chapter contributions are organized across 10 different clusters that we put together. And when Vinh and I were writing this, we also wanted to think about how, of course, you know, these different chapters will cohere across different clusters. So this is just kind of one constellation and one way to read the book.

So first we have a cluster that really thought about storytelling. And one of our contributors who's here today will talk more about that too, because their chapters in this. So really, you know, emphasizing that refugees are storytellers and stories, of course, are also told about refugees. We also then had a cluster of chapters about genres and conventions. A couple of our authors here today will have chapters in that section that we thought about visibility and visibility as a next section. We had questions about mediation and positionality, both of the author or the artist of these narratives, as well as how the refugee is being mediated or not. Thinking about borders and border crossing, of course, as a key theme then of refugee narratives. Then a cluster around health and disability. Of course, we were writing this during the big part of the COVID-19 pandemic. So we had a couple authors who explicitly, you know, address that, even though that global condition was really informing the production of this volume overall. Related to that are, you know, theories and questions of care and kinship as another section. And then three more sections, one on land and water ecologies. One of our authors today has a chapter in that section. And then spatiality and cartographies, thinking about how refugee movement really changes our understanding of space. And finally, we end on a cluster of chapters thinking about temporality, but also about futurity. I'm really questioning what this idea of refugee futurity might mean.

So now I'm happy to introduce, or I will invite themselves to introduce four of our authors and then just looking ahead after that we will have a series or round of questions in which our authors will converse with one another based on their chapters that they wrote. So I will go ahead and invite our first author, Asha, to introduce herself.

Asha Varadharajan

Hello everyone, it's a pleasure to be here. My name is Asha Varadharajan. I'm an Associate Professor of English at Queen's University in Canada, and I've just begun writing a book which I call "Archaeologies of Non-Entity, Studies in Forced Migration and Displacement." So this chapter, in a way, was one of the avenues into writing the book because it opened up a whole series of questions for me and I'll say some more about that as we proceed but I'll turn the mic over to Himadri at the moment.

Himadri Chatterjee

Hello everyone, so thanks to the organizers for allowing us to share our work and thoughts about this book on this platform. I'm Himadri Chatterjee. I teach political science at the University of Calcutta, where I primarily teach about regional development, local politics, and modern political thought. The chapter that I have written for this book primarily discusses almost a decade's worth of ethnographic work that I have been doing. It draws from that ethnographic work at the borderlands of Bengal between India and Bangladesh,

certain suburban refugee settlements. And the literature that is coming out of the community settled there, which is primarily an oppressed caste, excluded caste community of Namashutra, formerly untouchables, and their experience of writing about and thinking through how they lived in the landscapes that they used to inhabit before communal tensions and forced migration. So in many ways, what the chapter really deals with is how landscapes, ecologies, memories about land and water and their descriptions become stagings of both departures and arrivals into new spaces. So I will talk a little more about that as we go on discussing our chapters and the book. Thank you.

Agnes Woolley

Hi, my name is Agnes Woolley, I'm a lecturer in transnational literature and migration culture at Birkbeck University of London. My research is very focused on the significance of refugee and migrant experience as very much a productive site of social, historical and creative critique. And I take up a range of forms, including literature, film and performance. My contribution to the book is an essay on film. This has been my most recent sort of set of interests, thinking about the relationship between the dramatic rise in forced migration in the 21st century and the concurrent revolution in digital moving image. And I also have a long-standing interest in the relationship between literature and the law. And my next project is looking at how legal, bureaucratic and legislative texts that kind of determine and shape contemporary migrant life constitute a social ontology that's been neglected. And I'm looking forward to discussing, bringing up some of these themes in the discussion.

Sydney Van To

Hi everyone. Thanks for organizing this Eryn and Asha. My name is Sydney Van To. I'm a grad student at UC Berkeley. My chapter in the volume has to deal with the influences of refugee histories in the development of film noir as well as noir as it expands beyond that historical film period.

Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

Thank you so much everyone for the wonderful introductions. I'm so excited to dive into our conversation. So my first question is, you know, I talked a lot in the intro about what we were thinking as editors when we're putting together this volume, Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives. So my first question is, what does this term refugee narratives mean to you? And how did you take up or sort of challenge this term in your chapter?

Asha Varadharajan

My main interest in this chapter was to think about the relationships between trauma and narrative, partly because trauma is something that resists narrative. And I wanted to understand the ways in which the refugee condition and its negotiation of trauma or its navigation of trauma would affect the form of the narrative itself. And I suppose the other question that was connected to the relationships between trauma and narrative is that I wanted to find a way to think about history as itself a form of traumatic repetition. And for this reason, I chose Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Adnan Mahmutovic's *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* because they depict the aftermath of the Holocaust and the experience in concentration camps and the manner in which the Bosnian War replicated many of the conditions that we have now come to see as paradigmatic where genocide is concerned. So I wanted to juxtapose these two texts in order to try to reflect upon this question.

I try not to take up too much more time, but I did want to mention one thing. One of the reasons that these two texts work so well together, I think, is that one of them is autobiographical, operates in the realm of memoir and autobiography, but it upsets the way in which we think about autobiography and memoir as somehow true and authentic because Wiesel himself suggested that he revise the work as much as 40 times and it was reduced from a 700 plus page manuscript to a very slim volume that we see in translation. So one of the questions was what is the relationship then between voice and focalization and the truth of narrative? What are the ways in which narrative cannot function in the realm of the authentic and at the same time, what are the ways in which trauma makes representation in and through narrative impossible? So that was one aspect of it.

And the reason that I looked at how to farewell and stay fair is that this is a work unabashedly of fiction. And it's a series of short stories that deliberately fragment and multiply the voices. So there's no single protagonist in this tale. And it allowed me then to put together the ways in which we often think of narrative as a Bildungsroman of sorts with the protagonist as a single figure. And that's what you get in Elie Wiesel's narrative.

But Mahmutovich deliberately makes this the story of a community. And that's why I wanted to look at the relationship between individual and community in these works of fiction and link that to the notion that I began with, which is history itself is a form of traumatic repetition.

Agnes Woolley

I was really fascinated by the way in your chapter, you really want to nuance that trauma paradigm, I guess, and think about the narrative structures in which it's conventionally perceived. And I think the films that I look at in my chapter are seeking similarly to confound our expectations of the quote unquote refugee narrative and the kinds of narrative frames we usually find it in. You know, one set of films I look at are films made by refugees themselves taking up that camera, giving that first person perspective. But another set of films are looking, and this perhaps links to your chapter as well, Sydney, take up a really genre heavy, you know, frame. So look at thinking about horror as this medium in which we get a very unexpected image of trauma and how that might be worked through. And an unexpected image of the refugee figure who becomes real agent in overcoming the ghost or the literal haunting within this genre. So I think one of the things I wanted to do was explore that narrative plenitude as Nguyen calls it. And I know that comes up for you as well, Sydney, in your stuff on refugee noir.

Sydney Van To

Yeah, it seems like we are all concerned with the ways in which refugee narratives have been framed, particularly as humanitarian narratives, narratives of rescue, or as narratives of a uni-linear journey from a dangerous place to a safe haven, or even as humanist narratives, narratives of uplift and overcoming. And one of the things that drove my chapter on refugee noir is the fact that resistance to these narratives is not so easy. There is a sense in which on the one hand, these conventions offer a ready template, which is legible to an audience. And on the other hand, being able to play with that template marks a refugee or a writer thinking about refugees' ability to upend our expectations about what these stories look like. And so

noir for me, film noir and literary noir is particularly interesting because it deals directly with popular culture media, as well as with legal institutions. And I see these as two dominant sites at which the refugee is being defined in public discourse.

Himadri Chatterjee

Let me actually jump into a portion of the original concept note really spoke to me one of the reasons why I really wanted to contribute to this particular volume and which also directed to an extent how I sort of restructured my material for this particular essay. Most of my material, most of my work has been primarily political ethnography which is largely political ethnography because of its very nature is sort of an outsider taking a look at internal narratives, narrations, which can be compared externalized to an extent and see how certain communities fare in competitive politics with each other, against each other, how their dialogues happen, how do mediations happen. But for this particular chapter, I wanted to go to how refugees themselves were narrating their own life worlds in ways where competitive politics was not necessarily making its presence felt.

And one of the ways in which I wanted to do that was to look at this question of how would refugees coming from communities who were already excluded in their homelands would think back about their homelands after their forced migration. So in some sense, what does one do with a home which was already abusive before it was left behind? And there I found interestingly is that what refused narratives often do is very interesting kinds of substitutions for how would you remember a home? How would you remember the place that you belong to? Where land and landscape, waterscapes in the case of my chapter becomes something which can be emptied of people. Emptied of people to the sense that one can then think of a landscape of memory from which one is not feeling always already excluded and can then write belonging into it in slightly different ways, in ecological ways, which can then be interrupted by other kinds of actors, zoological actors within that landscape. So for this work, I chose primarily autobiographical works coming from these oppressed caste communities.

And I wanted to see the ways in which they would remember home, while also simultaneously remembering the exclusions that go both before and after their movement, to condense what I was trying to do and what I felt-- what I took away as an experience from the writing of this chapter was that narratives have a very interesting way of refracting, and also at times, reducing to very useful points questions about justice. In terms that are not necessarily reducible to competitive politics or politics of rights claims, the two major methods through which political scholarship would want to look at politics coming from the refugee population, there are ways in which refugee narratives often frame their justice questions, which are not necessarily reducible to this particular too. So that was my interest in that particular phrase.

Sydney Van To

I was just thinking about a common thread across all of our chapters. You know, Himadri, you're talking about this impossibility of justice, but also the necessity of justice. It seems like in our attempt to get away from what we see as bad narratives or two conventional narratives about refugees, we want to move into a more contradictory zone. And I think that was most embodied in your chapter, Himadri, about these four different ways in which

writers can relate to nature or home, you know, disavowing home, claiming home, disavowing nature and identity and communal identity, and avowing it at the same time.

Agnes, in your chapter, you were looking at genres which were always double in their focus, you know, something which was a documentary as well as trying to be objective and subjective at the same time, or genre films, which were also trying to be a realist.

And Asha, you're writing on trauma, trauma as conventionally something that describes itself as unclaimable, but actually is quite narratable at the same time, forcing itself out quite frequently.

And so it seems like we don't like these typical, I guess, teleological ways of understanding refugee experiences, that trauma only works one way. Rather, we want to see it as working in at least two ways, at least in contradictory ways too.

Asha Varadharajan

I was thinking too that Agnes's question about breaking the boundaries between the symbolic and the actual, if you can put it that way, is I think something that all of us are addressing in the unique ways that our chapters address those questions.

Speaking for myself, I think what both these works do is that they challenge something that Himadri also pointed out which is a kind of humanist narrative which puts the protagonist at the center of their tale and ensures as Sydney just pointed out that they overcome in some way the obstacles that life throws in their way and I think that what fascinated me about Wiesel's Night for example is the way in which he's describing the betrayal of fathers by sons. He's describing the ways in which they lose their humanity rather than the ways in which that humanity survives everything that might destroy it. And similarly in How to Fare Well and Stay Fair, the contradiction that emerges there is, and this is connected to the point both Himadri and Agnes have been making about memory is that when the protagonists try to remember the horrors of the genocide in Bosnia, all they can remember are the faces of their families laughing.

And so memory betrays them in a kind of curious fashion, so that instead of re-vivifying the horror, it actually subjects them to memories of joy, you know, rather than suffering. So those contradictions, once again, Sydney, as you're suggesting, continually emerge. And one of the points I wanted to make is that fiction always aims in the direction of complexity, which is why fiction can simultaneously deal with the failure of narrative just as much as it can deal with the possibilities that narrative opens up.

Agnes Woolley

I think it's important to bring in the legal context here as a kind of really normative framing and a kind of pressure on narrative and I think this speaks to your question too Asha about the issue of you know how we address communal experiences because the convention the 1951 convention is so shaping of a particular type of refugee narrative and story that is about an individual who is experiencing a set of circumstances and then there is an imperative on that individual to kind of repeat that story, to repeat that trauma in all these

different kinds of spaces and places. You know, as you're saying, fiction opens out the possibility for memorial fracture and for kind of unconventional narratives.

What I have found is that documentary is a really rich space for these kinds of stories because I like the way it takes that problem, that issue around the historical reality and the representational issues and it kind of puts it front and centre and it says hey this can be a really generative thing, this problem around authenticity and is this credible, is this story provable and the tension between that and the kind of fictional narratives that a lot of us are working with.

What I love about particularly documentary and film but also in literature too is that it's absolutely foregrounding that as a kind of very productive problematic I think. One great example is the Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim wrote a story called *The Reality and the Record* which kind of places this juxtaposition between the refugee story as told in a kind of immigration detention centre versus the one that is the result of trauma or the one that is told in the press or the one that's told to the humanitarian organization, all of which have very different narrative contours. So I think that's worth bringing into the kind of the pressure from the legal side of things.

Sydney Van To

Agnes, I really like your approach of embracing this new scholarship on documentary because I think that is quite unpopular in refugee studies today because documentary might come across as too realist or possibly ethnographic. And so there's this reaction against it of just like, like let's swing in the opposite direction. Let's just jump into all these metafictional, postmodern inquiries about the problems of representation. When as you rightly point out, documentary is already concerned with this already.

Yeah, so your work on "*Razi's Fire at Sea*," it was really interesting for me to read because I was in this course on refugee studies this year. And we had also watched that film and everyone in the class disliked it as too self-congratulatory, as ethnographic, as filming without consent, all these reasons related to the critique of documentary.

But it's interesting that it could also be read in an opposite way. We could read it as self-critical, as more historicized than perhaps other works of fiction. So I guess this opens up the question that, if we want to embrace a multiplicity of narratives or some kind of contradictory form, if we're kind of hesitant to prescribe one idea of what a refugee narrative should be, and we'd rather embrace something that is more self-reflexive or embrace two at once, then it does open itself to the charge of how do we properly read it?

And perhaps that's the place we want to be in where we don't know how to properly read it. Perhaps that's our problem with humanist narratives and humanitarian narratives anyway, that they are read too easily.

Himadri Chatterjee

There is a way in which this critique of the ethnographic eye or the documentary eye has to an extent left behind the conversation, a conversation on refugee movements and refugee activism. Refugee activism, at least from mid 20th to late 20th century, has been significantly

self-documentary. There are ways in which at least in South Asia, one finds significant examples, numbers of examples across time, across at least half a century, where refugee populations have gone out of their way to maintain archives, maintain papers, even to an extent simulate how the state does documentation or how the refugee population imagines anthropological research might happen.

In fact, my chapter refers to one such figure who was trained in anthropology in the 1960s and was from a refugee population himself. And he tries to create sort of this group of refugees who would document themselves, not just in terms of numbers and policy specifics, but also in terms of sort of a racial identity which he wanted to construct for a very obviously South Asian population which is not racially distinct at all, but he wanted to create this sense of the ancient where the refugee population is something that has a belonging that goes back to antiquity.

So I fairly seriously think that this self-documentary approach is something that maybe Maliki was also to an extent pointing out when she was talking about how refugee studies as a discipline begins to evolve after a certain point of time, has probably percolated to the point, or maybe not even percolated, this is something that was found, was part of the poetics of refugee movements across the world that somewhere in mid 20th to late 20th century, these movements begin to find in themselves, this collective will to document themselves in great detail and produce significant amounts of archives out of that. Just that these are probably archives that historians did not necessarily access till, let's say the end of 20th century, till the time that historiography began to open up to other forms of evidence.

So in certain ways, this idea of narration, especially self-narration, is something that has also bled into conventional historiography over time as historians and their practice, their imperial practice, to put a name to it, began to open up to the diversity of popular and public archives that are present in the lives of refugees, built by themselves, in fact.

Agnes Woolley

That's such a fascinating point, Himadri, and thinking about how a kind of resistant act of documentation against the institutional, the humanitarian, the nationalistic insistence on the documentary, on the legislative, and the biometrics now that we see at the border, what kinds of subversive actions are refugees taking to self-narrate but also self-document? And a lot of the documentaries I look at, the refugee-led ones, are involved in that activity, you know, in a more contemporary moment. So I'm fascinated to get this historical view on it as well of those kind of resistant acts.

Sydney, to come back to your point, it is a controversial film and I absolutely take on board that criticism, but I'm interested in the ways that documentary does kind of exist at that threshold of the kind of the authentic and the real and the representational and the way it can open up those questions.

I know I have a lot of Sicilian colleagues who were very cross about the film and its representation of the Lampedusans in particular. For me it's a generative, it's a productive kind of controversy, but in all of these things it is a particularly contentious space, geopolitical space as well.

Asha Varadharajan

It seems to me that the discussion we've had thus far is raising the question of what form of witnessing does each of these narrative forms engage in? Because we're talking about the issue of representation, but in terms of the relationship between representation and action, if you will, perhaps the mediating moment is that of witnessing. And one of the questions that we can talk about is how one would define the act of witnessing in the documentary, in fiction, in noir, in the subversive historiography that Himadri is talking about.

And the reason I bring up this question of witnessing is I think it has or bears some relationship to Sydney's question about why we want the category of refugee literature at all, like why do we want to name the narratives that we're talking of as refugee narratives? So who is the subject, you know, of that? Is it the refugee? Is it the narrative and the form that it takes? Is it the event to which these narratives are bearing witness? Those are the kinds of questions and I think the conversation thus far has suggested itself to me.

I say this too in part because all of us seem to be addressing multiple histories and geographies, right? So, Sydney's question about world literature, so there's a kind of global reach to this handbook and it's deliberately crisscrossing borders, geographies, histories, temporalities, cultures were breaking all of the rules in a way. So it's worth kind of addressing that question. Is this the new form of world literature? Is this global? Is it post-colonial? What is it?

Sydney Van To

Yeah, thank you, Asha. This is a cool way to reframe the question about world literature as the problem of witness or the problem of how to relate to the pain of others as a Susan Sontag at it. You know, I know that at one point the critical norm was to really identify with the suffering of others, to try to re-witness a piece, to be re-traumatized by an image, to actually see that as doing productive, emotional, and political work. Whereas the critical mood has shifted today towards being more attentive to our own implicated status, our own self-indulgence in our own pathos, a possibly appropriative gesture by relating too easily to the suffering of others, even if we do that from a peripheral standpoint, even if we want to say that, even if we're trying to relate one refugee writer to another. Perhaps it's too quick, perhaps is too fast.

And so I wonder what is the proper way to relate to suffering? You know, this is a, it's a humanist question again, but I guess it comes back to the term refugee narrative. Why do we want this category? Is it a way of making legible suffering with under the analytic of forced displacement? Is that something we necessarily want?

As as Himadri's chapter raises, you know, there's already so much nuance between the delete and the refugee, the exile and the refugee. Do we actually want to kind of subordinate it under one analytic? Perhaps that sort of unification or umbrella term would be useful for political solidarity or drawing out historical connections, but it comes at a cost too, I guess.

Himadri Chatterjee

I would like to make a distinction between refugee literature and refugee narratives, because there is a way in which literature is constituted as a discipline, as a form, as something we do as an activity. And then we can sort of go into a journey of breaking that up into Imperial literature, colonial literature, literature from the third world, refugee literature, women's literature. And there are ways in which that breaking up that fragmentation is philosophically productive. I mean, there is of course minor literature, right? So that is a framework that we have used for a while now.

And there is a way in which I think that particular form, the minor literature is interesting, because the minor literature is not always out on crusade for correcting where world literature is going or what is representationally wrong with world literature. In a way, minor literature or minor literatures may exist in ways that wants to entirely roll back away from world literature. It may set itself tasks that do not belong to literature at all.

For instance, Dalit literature, what I find so interesting about it is that Dalits in India have a significant lack when it comes to a sort of a significant amount of exclusion from educational institutions. So to a large extent when an educated Dalit writer is writing about the Dalit condition, he or she writes with the understanding that large part of the population that he or she is talking about is never probably going to access that particular literature.

So the narrative contract is with an entirely absent person. And he or she also understands that the language and experience that he or she is writing about, and this is one of the founding principles of the literature since the 1970s and 80s, is that this is something that the middle class Hindu upper caste is never truly going to empathize with, read into, or find meaning from.

So it is essentially books after books and hundreds and thousands of books written for an audience that does not exist yet. There is a possibility it might exist, but there is also always already a feeling that that audience might never come to be. It is not a very hopeful or programmatic idea at all times, which is what I also find so interesting about this kind of literature that I'm talking about.

Now, when I am talking about these refugee narratives, the reason why I want to make this separation is because I wanted to heighten this non programmatic nature of what refugee narratives can be. For instance, one of the things that I really tried to focus on constantly is forgetting. And these are two extremely contradictory tasks. So the same community, which constantly wants to document itself, also wants to forget certain aspects of its being. And these two things are happening simultaneously.

So in some sense, there is this really interesting kind of friction or tension that is part of each narration, yet not continuous from one narration to the other. Even though the tension exists for both narrations, their presentation is not continuous from one to the other. In a way where refugee narratives might become a very interesting kind of parenthesis, where one has to articulate each time what is the limit of refugee narratives that one is studying. There is an individuation and alienation of one from the other that is built into the refugee narrative, where it keeps up this constant unsettling of what refugee literature can be, what

Refugee literature's relationship to larger world literature can be, and what the relationship of that one narration is to other Refusi narrations that are also ongoing.

Because this is to a great extent, a reaction I think, to the kind of massification of the refugee voice that was I think specific to the late 20th century, to the way that international organizations would formulate policy, would think of humanitarian work, and the way in which the refugee population received this massification, and then began to think of other avenues of talking about themselves.

These are poetics of that dialectic, but not necessarily answering back to that dialectic is what I found so very interesting about them. In some sense, what if one wants to tell a useless story about oneself is really what is at stake.

Sydney Van To

This reminds me of Asha's investigation of what is the use of trauma. Asha had written that she is uninterested in, or she wants to write against the conventional wisdom about trauma, that trauma can be, and has typically been read as a useless thing. And it's very uselessness by overcoming it, we have regained our humanity or something like that. Asha, could you say something about what you're writing against when you write against typical humanist pieties about trauma?

Asha Varadharajan

Yeah, thank you. I think you put it a lot better than I did. One of the things I was interested in in *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* is the manner in which on the one hand to go back to Agnes's question, event and representation coalesce in the depiction of trauma, because every time a subject experiences trauma, it's really the repetition of the event, rather than a representation of that event. So this is a kind of classic psychoanalytical explanation of trauma.

But what I found fascinating in *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* is that the story in which the trauma is depicted, what is repeated is actually the perspective of the rapist rather than the perspective of the victim. So what happens is that the victim in this moment of traumatic repetition assumes the voice and power of the rapist. So there's a really astonishing reversal of the notion of traumatic repetition.

So on the one hand, I was, you know, floored by this moment because it allowed the victim not only to assume the power of the rapist, but to retain the dignity of the victim at the same time. So that seemed to me to be one way in which the traditional traumatic narrative was reversed in this case. But the other kind of almost commonsensical way in which the traumatic narrative is reversed in this collection of short stories is it shows because it's depicting these individual stories within the context of the life of the community, there's a way in which the community shares this trauma and therefore mitigates its effects.

And there's also a way in which the trauma isn't something that continually rules the existence of the characters who experience it, so that what the narrative does is make it possible for these characters who have been assaulted in this fashion, nevertheless experience desire, nevertheless are capable of love.

And I think that suggests that life goes on after trauma, and yet at the same time, that trauma can never be recovered from. So it's a kind of doubled moment that I think is crucial in *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair*.

In Wiesel's *Night*, I think what was interesting was the way in which trauma produces precisely the alienation from God and community. And what he depicts is the success of the totalitarian move to destroy the essence of the human in these Jewish communities, so that what you get there is the way in which the moment of trauma also depicts the alienation from God and community and there is nothing that can be resolved or recovered from.

And this is the point I'm just about to make is connected to Hamadri's point which is that Vaisal doesn't see that the representation of this trauma, he sees it as something that he cannot escape. He must tell this story, but on the other hand he has little or no faith that it will ever be understood and even believed, you know, by the audience that may read it. So that the trauma there is the kind of failure of narrative to produce the kind of empathy and so on that humanitarian narrative continually demands. Right?

We believe that sympathy and empathy can overcome the barriers in the differences between these experiences, but Veezo actually denies that. So in his case, as Hamadri's suggesting, witnessing actually doesn't make it possible for the event to reach the other, you know, or for the trauma to explain itself. And I think that, you know, that's the tough lesson, I think, that that both these works offer.

And I also wanted to pick up that idea of forgetting, because I think that both these works are talking about the mercifulness of forgetting. So in kind of traditional psychoanalytic discourse where trauma is concerned, this emphasis on the talking cure, on overcoming trauma in some way, and that the journey of the protagonist is or the subject of trauma is towards healing in some way. And I think both these texts refuse those comforting options so that trauma remains resolutely inconsolable at the same time that forgetting is the only merciful thing that both the subjects of these narratives can look forward to, right?

Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

Yeah, thank you so much, Asha. I think that you're really pulling together a lot of the threads that have come up in our conversation, right? Thinking about this relationship between narrative and literature, maybe narrative something that really pushes against these divisions, right, between the fiction and the nonfiction.

We've also had a cluster of questions thinking about the relationship between witnessing and forgetting, but also witnessing this question of the traumatic repetition. And who is also the one who is the subject of that repetition? But I think this question of narrative is also calling into the question as a lot of us have thought about of the audience, right, or of the reader, who is the narrative directed at?

And I really appreciate Agnes and Hamadri really pushing us to think about the historical and legal context. Traditionally, we can think about the imperative for the refugee to narrate oneself to the state, to justify one's asylum claim, or to make legible one's asylum claim. But

what if we shift that audience away from the state to either, you know, refugee communities who have yet to come into being as a kind of readership or an audience or to other future generations or past generations, right? Of a kind of collective of folks who are attending to or connecting to this experience or understanding of displacement and forced displacement across space and across time.

I think it's really wonderful that all of our authors are situated, of course, in different spaces, different university contexts and across different continents, but also the different narratives that we are addressing and grappling with and engaging are crossing borders and crossing different time periods in interesting ways.

And so I love that we are kind of pushing against these different genre conventions to think about, you know, these different points of connection, but also contradiction was a term that came up a lot as well, and trying to work through those tensions as well as let them exist in their productivity.

So I just like to thank everyone for this wonderful conversation, and maybe just open it up to kind of last closing words before we end.

Asha Varadharajan

I just wanted to say that I'm in Berlin and I just walked past Hannah Arendt Strasse so it seemed to me to be a wonderful sign for our conversation today. It was lovely to chat with everyone, to see everyone and I hope everyone has a wonderful summer.

Agnes Woolley

Thanks Asha, thanks everyone too. It's been a real education reading this rich collection I have to say and I think your expansiveness in the contributors has really brought just a real real amazing collection of people together to have that conversation. So thanks Evyn.

Sydney Van To

Thanks everyone. This was such a great conversation. I'll be thinking about this for the rest of the day.

Himadri Chatterjee

Thank you everyone and thanks for this great conversation. Thanks for editing this volume. It's rich reading Evyn. So big thanks to Evyn and Vinh and thanks to Asha for making this conversation possible.

[JINGLE]

Dr Esa Aldegheri

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for شكراً, more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

[JINGLE]