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The Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman:
Coming of Age and Coming into Form through Fictions of Home and Exile
(Narrative Studies)

By

Alexandra Christian Budny

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2017

Abstract

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After a record-breaking swell in global displacement marking recent years up to 2016-2017, questions surrounding refugees and forced migration, displacement and exile, home and host, have reached new levels of popularity and timeliness. For all the high-stakes discussion, though, there remains a problem, in the tendency of the predominant discourse to eclipse and essentialize, staticize and passivize the Refugee and Forced Migration subject. It is a predilection reproduced in the dynamically growing corresponding surge of interest in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies as well, its own multi- and inter-disciplinary field: one which has been answered by a call from the literary-aesthetic domain. As championed by the Oxford Journal in the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), the advancement of a new sub-field with Literary Refugee and Forced Migration Studies offers an exciting opportunity to, as asked in its 2016 Special Issue, seek narratives reimagining those subjects of Refugee and Forced Migration experience “as active participants that use rhetorical and aesthetic means to inform, push against, and redefine the mechanisms that construct them as subjects.” In other words, in delineating Refugee and Forced Migration Literature as its own genre, replete with formal as well as thematic elements, as a critical intervention adding nuance, complexity and multi-directional agency; a chance to render visible what it called a “discrete field from which to develop new theoretical paradigms and methods of inquiry.”

My dissertation takes this project further still by advancing what I argue is an especially productive and revelatory sub-genre in the coining of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman. The utilization of the Bildungsroman as a literary coming-of-age form offers unique capacities for the narrating character-protagonist as Refugee and Forced Migration subject here, providing a non-traditional kind of lesson in the coming together of education (*bildung*) with the novel (*roman*). In a progressive critical reading of narratological techniques employed across three such literary works, I build the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman as a sub-genre which allows the release(1), expression(2), and connection(3) for the subject of those pieces rendered inside(1-i), outside(2-ii), and in-between(3-iii) by the experience. It is through the narrating character-protagonists building themselves into-being through these stages of discourse, that the broken and fragmentary become pieces of a mosaic,

material for the story being told and the subject being built. In so doing, this study determines what the text, as-text, does for both narrator and narratee, its openings and possibilities, insights and intricacies. In bringing the possibilities of the literary-fictional form to its utmost, this Bildungsroman allows for, indeed constructs and demands, an embrace of a different kind of engagement, in feeling, thinking and valuing what traditional forms and dominant systems would fail to include, cannot encompass, or would not recognize (as is critiqued within). The Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman as literary sub-genre, and its unique mosaic-experiential aesthetic therein, becomes one answer to the problem: reading narrative as a precondition to making possible more complex and inclusive modes of discourse.

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Knight, and her gorgeous children, my nephew and niece Koa and Ella, are inextricable parts of my heart, and have been indescribable sources of support in this journey. Being their aunt, as well as an honorary godmamma & “auntie” to so many other brilliant shining little beings, has been my greatest joy and honor, and gives me such hope for the evolution of our species...for that matter, my thanks to those beings not of our species, who have given me similar hope, connection, and inspiration—my resident feline of 20 years Aslan, aka “Azzy,” was for instance as knowing, loving, and evolved a creature as could ever grace this planet, and I am made better by each and every such relationship and encounter that enriches and completes my life.

For all, both those named here and those more circuitously mentioned: thank you, for being who and what you are, and for that, being part of me and what I am. To all the ways in which we will be part of each other’s paths in the future, and to all that is yet to come.

Dedication

To those whose stories have yet to be told, and to those who would listen...

Introduction:

Literary Intervention: MELUS Takes a Stand

Out of a currently burgeoning multi- and inter-disciplinary field of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies,¹ the Oxford Journal in the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) saw a problem: to wit, the journal argued, previous discourses around refugee narrative continually relegated the subjects of experience themselves into positions of passivity. As a corrective, it used its 2015 Special Issue to champion the cause for closer study into the definition of what it termed the “refugee aesthetic,” seeking interventions which would re-conceptualize and examine refugees “as active participants that use rhetorical and aesthetic means to inform, push against, and redefine the mechanisms that construct them as subjects.”² Whereas the thematic had previously been given disproportionate sway surrounding narratives of war and refugee experience,³ this approach demanded attention to formal as well as thematic elements for a freshly-advanced genre of Refugee Literature to be further put into relation and given specificity midst the ranks of existing generic categories. This pursuit delineated itself as a new sub-field, or, as they coined it, the notion of “Literary Refugee Studies as a discrete field from which to develop new theoretical paradigms and methods of inquiry.”⁴

As a special issue coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the Vietnam War’s end, the resulting essays trained on those subjects produced by displacement as that conflict’s legacy, and those bodies of work composed within the U.S. to suit the journal’s focus. Taking the call at its word though: how could the particular features of a “refugee and forced migration aesthetic” help to illuminate different dimensions of refugee subjectivity⁵? What does the advent of a “Literary Refugee and Forced Migration Studies” yield, as a contribution in those narratives which use literary form to explicitly heighten, complicate, and reveal elements of the refugee and forced migration experience within the text which may otherwise have remained foreclosed, ignored, or unappreciated?

Enter the *Bildungsroman*: Joseph Slaughter and the Building of a (Literary) Subject

¹ If displacement is nothing new to the globe, the academic genealogy of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies is somewhat more recent, with current developments seeing an increasingly exponential proliferation of interest among scholars, thinkers, policy-makers, citizen-individuals and artists—see Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nano Sigona, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* for a particularly in-depth catalogue and analysis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

² Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, MELUS Special Issue “Editor’s Introduction: Refugee Cultures: Forty Years after the Vietnam War,” *MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, Oxford University Press, Vol. 41 No. 3, Fall 2016, as well as the initial MELUS Special Issue Call for Papers, “Refugee Literature: 40 Years After the Vietnam War,” found at http://oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/melus/si_refugee_literature.html, last accessed February 21, 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, guest eds. MELUS 2015 Special Issue Call for Papers.

⁵ Ibid.

This dissertation answers by advancing a more specific project of definition still: for MELUS' special issue, in arguing for the insights of formal study within the literary-aesthetic domain, sought narratives which position the refugee as an active participant using aesthetic means to inform, push against, and re-define the mechanisms constructing him/her as a subject. What better way to perform such a study, than to examine more closely those literary works devoted to the building-of-a-subject as the abject focus of their narrative, with the subject in question given the narratorial locus of control: here enters the specific sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman* meeting these criteria par excellence, based around the tradition of a narrator whose charge is to tell the story of his/her own coming-of-age, re-presenting the process of his/her subject-formation as the dominant narrative theme. Taking a page from Joseph Slaughter's prioritization of the productive possibilities of the *Bildungsroman* in his book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*,⁶ this coming-of-age through form provides a particularly revealing example of how the literary can expose what MELUS describes as the "ideological and teleological underpinnings of existing narratives"⁷; it is in this that the *Bildungsroman*, when applied to the Refugee and Forced Migration Literary context, becomes such an illuminative site of interest. The Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman* becomes in this case the literary-aesthetic space where the narrating character-protagonist says, as his/her specific narrative imperative: "This is who, and what, I am. This is how I (it) came to be." The literary work is *meant* to be an active, deliberate communication of (narrating) subject, *on* the (topical)subject of their (character)subject-building. On a formal level, the constitution of the text here is rife with the very material needed.

In a telling rhetorical fusion, the synthesis of *bildung* (education/formation) with *roman* (novel) makes the *Bildungsroman*, in the literary aesthetic domain, the arena in which the individual narrating character-protagonist deliberately gets to schematize the process of growth and understanding for the narratee, usually framed as the building of an identity in relation to its corresponding belonging and participation in the greater world at large. What is more, this arc has traditionally conformed around expectations of a Western-genealogical model of subject formation and belonging, with participation bound to citizenship and its belonging within a nation-state and its corresponding structures. Slaughter describes the *Bildungsroman*'s unique facility with directly engaging and de-naturalizing this "common knowledge," and those processes that make the subjectively-experiencing human-being into a socio-politically and legally recognized human-subject⁸ those for whom experience exceeds or belies the traditional nation-state citizen/home-belonging model, as he defines in the case of the Postcolonial subject but which would hold true to the Refugee and Forced Migration subject as well, will find themselves rendered illegible, the dominant narrative deliberately excluding them and making in effect both their experiences and their identity illegitimate. If such subjects attempt to communicate their experiences, their narratives will be alienated, stripped and regulated so as to

⁶ Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁷ Nguyen and Fung, *MELUS 2015 Special Issue and MELUS 2015 Special Issue Call for Papers*.

⁸ Crucial too here to appreciate the multivalence of translation in "*bildung*," which in German entwines the meaning of "education" *with* "formation," as productively positioned by Slaughter in relation to a greater philosophical legacy in the German-idealist theory of *Bildung*— *Human Rights, Inc.*

fit into the dominant system's self-perpetuating mechanisms.⁹ As such, his argument ultimately situates the *Bildungsroman* as a revelatory re-production of the world's fictions, laid bare by the realities of consequence for those who fail to meet the traditional narrative arc—the story that such narrating character-protagonists would have to tell would be a tragedy.¹⁰

However, this dissertation seeks to recuperate a yet more constructive reading of the *Bildungsroman*, to explore where those literary-aesthetic possibilities of form lend capacities of agency to the narrating character-protagonist. While Slaughter resigns the individual to mere moments of rupture and rebellion, transient exceptions to a rule doomed to subsume and silence in such narratives,¹¹ I argue that fiction in such contexts contains a unique capacity to *make legible* those experiences through the literary aesthetic form.¹² This study focuses on reading those narratives as a positive act of construction, where the narrating character-protagonist is given the power to “teach” the narratee what such experience has built as a result—the story, in all its intricacies, and the details of its narration, with all the effects of technique therein,

⁹ Slaughter also engages here the particular element of expectation and constraint upon narratives which may be said to belong to the category of “testimony”—a special element to the conditions of discourse which very much apply to the Refugee and Forced Migration subject. For Slaughter, such expectations enter into and advance upon Arendt's delineation of the public sphere and the essential necessity of the individual to be realized (and constituted) through speech-and-action, where, as in the application of human rights abuse “Victims Become Citizens,” 140, the space becomes “not simply a clearinghouse for the publication of personal narrative truth but a kind of story factory,” in the “story forms that it disseminates, conventionalizes, and canonizes as ‘socially acceptable narrative’,” 144, connecting here to Edward W. Said's critique in “Permission to Narrate” which he says addresses “the Western-dominated international public sphere's foreclosure to the admission (even the formulation) of a Palestinian national narrative.” Footnote 12., Chapter 3, *Human Rights, Inc.* See also Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), and Edward Said's “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): 27-48.

¹⁰ In what might be seen, in the context of a literary-theoretical praxis, as a contemporary complement to Hannah Arendt's depictions of the plight of the refugee in “Decline of the Nation-State, End of Rights of Man”—*The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Press, 1951).

¹¹ What Elizabeth Anker typifies as Slaughter's depiction “that the *Bildungsroman* is fated to be no more than ‘reformist’,” in her *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 33.

¹² See too Meg Jensen, and her citations of Slaughter in her own explorations with “The Legible Face of Human Rights in Autobiographically Based Fiction,” *Routledge Literature Companion for Literature and Human Rights* eds. Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (Florence, US: Routledge, 2015) -- her argument focuses on such fiction's capacities to “make accessible, and therefore legible, an important frontier: the borderland between individual grief and cultural mourning, truth and fiction, past and present” 184; thus while her study focuses on the thematic, my own is interested in a more formally productive yield as in *MELUS*'s call, applied to the particular case of the fictionalized *bildungsroman* of displacement and the building of particular subjectivities within as effects of narrative technique.

allowing the Refugee and Forced Migration subject as-narrator to constitute and communicate through the discourse.

James Phelan and the Rhetorically Constitutive Act of (Character) Narration

To best perform this reading, in the definition of a Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman as revelatory contribution to the “refugee and forced migration aesthetic,” this dissertation brings a final theoretical insight and intervention to bear with James Phelan’s engagement of the specific rhetorical functions and effects of first-person character narration in *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*¹³. For Phelan, the presence of a character metafictionally performing the narrative act pinions literary-narratological concerns inextricably to its rhetorically constitutive effects; indeed, studying the specific aesthetic contours of such narratives necessitates special attention, he suggests, to the cognitive, emotional, and ethical effects of such discourse, where the reader is continually asked to consider what is being understood, what is being felt, and what is being valued at each stage.¹⁴ Phelan goes one step further by delineating the *Bildungsroman* as a particular “linchpin between design and identity.”¹⁵ Providing Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* as one such productive combination of memoir and Bildungsroman,¹⁶ narrative technique allows the text to fuse not just the story but the discourse itself to the narrating character’s subject-formation: not only *what* is being told but *how* it is reveals something about the narrating character whose being is the focus of the fiction itself, aesthetics here serving inherently constitutive effects.¹⁷ Phelan’s interests ultimately triangulate around the question of how this all affects the reader, that is, at the end of the day (and the text), what does the reader think, what does the reader feel, and what does the reader value throughout...but in the case of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman, I find equally and especially productive an attendant consideration to the ways in which the aesthetics of the form construct the narrating character-protagonist, as Refugee and Forced Migration subject. What is more, within this examination I will argue that the cognitive, emotional, and ethical facets of subjectivity become critically imbricated with discourse here: that the Refugee and Forced Migration subject, as narrating-character, turns to the narrating act as *the* way to think, feel, and value what might otherwise be, as Slaughter would warn, illegible and illegitimate. In other words, in the confluence between design and identity in the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman, I wish to parse out what functions discourse is serving not

¹³ James Phelan, *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Phelan, *Living to Tell About It*, Preface.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶ As per Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s definitions, Phelan decides, in their *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Giving a nod here of course to J.L. Austin and his canonical conceptualization of the performative speech act and its constitutive functions in *How To Do Things with Words*; those answers to the question “Can Saying Make It So?” 7. From the William James Lectures at Harvard University in 1955, (Oxford at the Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1962), as well as a more modern engagement through the context of fiction as in Jan Tlustý’s “Fictional and Factual Autobiography from the Perspective of Speech-Act Theory,” *Organon F19* (2012) journal compilation 2012 Institute of Philosophy SAS.

only for the reader, but also, especially and crucially out of the Refugee and Forced Migration experience, constitutively for the narrating-character.

Defining the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman: Subject Built Through Story-Discourse in the Aesthetics of Refugee and Forced Migration “Mosaic-Being”

I marshal three specific examples within the composition and definition of a Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman by using Ismet Prcic's *Shards*, Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, and Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*—where each central protagonist arrives at a realization of the rhetorical act making possible that which the Refugee and Forced Migration experience necessitates, literary form providing the space as formal re-course for the subjects of such experience to unleash, assemble, and communicate what would otherwise be rendered illegible, as in the case of Slaughter's subjects of exclusion. The experience these narratives provide reveal a world all to pieces, where it is the building of these fragments into the *Bildungsroman* that makes of them a mosaic. The aesthetic domain in these explicitly fictionalized works allow for the narrating subject to be composed by an assemblage of parts that would otherwise not fit into the traditional nation-state structure of experience, identity, and belonging. Here the subject can be contradictory and multiplicitous; subjective and collective; linked and polyvocal. In traditional strictures of identity, and systems of meaning as would belong to the canonical Western human-subject(as)-citizen¹⁸, this would have no place; it would be something to fix in the teleology of a becoming, in the failure of the broken, partial, and confusing. The aesthetic of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman thereby makes a positive construction out of what would otherwise be relegated to negative conception—the subject, experience, and story as a whole is not a *not*, in other words: it is *this*. It is the discourse which communicates as it constructs the components of a state-of-Refugee and Forced Migration Mosaic-being, which the works posit as definitive and constitutive to the narrating Refugee and Forced Migration subject within; and, in the deliberate ordering of the works that follow, a journey through the stages of this process of coming-into-being.¹⁹

¹⁸ See, for instance, Slaughter's citation of the literary work often credited as progenitive model for the genre which would come to be known as the “*Bildungsroman*,” with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*-- Chapter 2, “Becoming Plots: Human Rights, the *Bildungsroman*, and the Novelization of Citizenship” in *Human Rights, Inc.*; Franco Moretti shares this characterization, describing *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as the “archetype of the European *Bildungsroman*,” where man as-character and as-citizen comes into all of his corresponding privileges therein— in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New Edition), trans. Albert Sbragia (New York, Verso: 2000), first published in English by Verso, 1987.

¹⁹ Terry Tempest-Williams makes an affectively moving aesthetic case for this conception of Mosaic-Being in her examinations of *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008). Her work, itself a mosaic composed between accounts of her studying mosaic-building in Ravenna, embedding with prairie-dogs in Utah, then mosaic-building again this time in post-genocide Rwanda, advances and repeats a vision of mosaic: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” as she cites from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; “A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken”; the mosaic which is necessarily aesthetic and

As to what specifically is being built: all three authors, each of whom has undergone displacement during coming-of-age amidst war in his/her home-country (Bosnia, Iran, and Lebanon, respectively), choose to tell the story of a central-protagonist who is narrating his/her story of undergoing displacement during coming-of-age amidst war in his/her home-country (Bosnia/Iran/Lebanon), and who arrive at narrativization as the way to encompass what the experience would otherwise disallow. Reduced down, the generic plotline of each could seem a simple one, as all follow a specific forced-migration coming-of-age: in all three, the character-protagonist comes to know a way of life in the home-country in early years of childhood, until war breaks out and the world as they have known it breaks apart; in all three, the character-protagonist then leaves the home-country to escape the worst of the conflict, leaving family behind, and is schooled in a new host-country receiving further education in both literal and figurative ways; and in all three, the character-protagonist must negotiate the (im)possibility of return, with a visit back home to family. As each narrating-character makes clear in the telling, however, the experience of this story is anything but simple. Each stage is marked by confusion, tumult, and disorientation, and in each, the character-protagonist does not find relief in a linear trajectory passing from ignorance to knowledge as might be expected in a traditional *Bildungsroman*; instead, the growing understanding of each chapter is depicted as a painful coming-into-awareness of lack and loss, in breaks that fail to be fixed and chasms that fail to be filled. These experiences do not result in an easy unification, where the character-protagonist finds one-self in relation to a larger community/society/nation-state and world; instead, the experience creates a splitting, where the subject of displacement proliferates into a series of sub-selves and subjectivities.

Narrative devices and the judicious application of fictionalizing elements in each case make deliberate connections between the experiences of displacement and the experience of the text. Loosing the text from expectations of realism allows the aesthetic to be defined by a proliferation of effects— As the subject of displacement has been split, so too can the narration be split into a seeming proliferation of sub-selves. As the subject of displacement has been confused, so too can the narration dissemble into a jumble of twists and turns. And as the subject of displacements makes use of discourse’s capacity to encompass the holes, cracks and fissures left by all the disparate parts, so too will the narrative cement and bind, like a mosaic, those disparate elements into parts of a whole (novel-subject-being). The narrative provides space and belonging for these components here; what is more, it lends concrete form to what might otherwise remain intangible. Loss and longing are given shape and presence. The narrative renders construction to affective states of being, and allows for careful exploration along the contours of experience. All three works here, in *Shards*, *Persepolis*, and *Hakawati*, may be seen as consciously and deliberately confusing and unsettling in the cognitive realm, in order to create the emotional effects and affective understanding of refugee/forced migration experience, which may be said to assert within itself an ethical valence in the valuing of *this* kind of non-traditional coming-into knowledge of being. Here, the mosaic-form is a way of thinking, of feeling, of valuing, and of being, which the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman advances as

constitutive, which is a “conversation” with “form” and “time”; where, as a result, “Making mosaics is a way of thinking about the world,” she recalls her mosaic teacher Luciana reminding.

constitutive to the Refugee and Forced Migration subject, through the aesthetic construction of this form through the text.

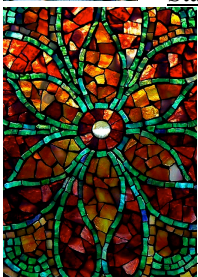
A deliberate order to the examination of these works both engages the stages of discourse and how these stages prove constitutive to the Refugee and Forced Migration subject—as each narrating character-protagonist makes clear, it is after all the narrative act that becomes the way to encompass and communicate all of the above, and what is more, to achieve what the particular Refugee and Forced Migration experience has built into a pressing demand by story’s end: for *Shards*, narration will be seen as fulfilling an essential need for release; for *Persepolis*, expression; and for *Hakawati*, connection. For each, this need connects to what the respective narrating character-protagonist advances as definitive to the subject of displacement, where: For *Shards*, multiple contradictory fragments of being must be unleashed; for *Persepolis*, myriad selves in all their expressive incarnations must be given room to co-exist; and for *Hakawati*, any individual must be understood only and as in constitutive relation to others. Bringing together these works in this way thus composes the mosaic of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman, in which these facets may be said to perform the stages of discourse as mosaic-making assemblage.

Stages in the Constitution of Refugee and Forced Migration Mosaic-Being: Building (the *Bildung*) of Inside, Outside, and In-Between

The order of engagement with these works is a purposeful one, as this analytic posits the progression from *Shards* to *Persepolis* then *Hakawati* as a cumulative advancement of discourse’s constitutive functions in the building of a Refugee and Forced Migration Subject as Mosaic-Being: the schematization that follows illuminates this arc from *Shards*’ Inside (Release), to *Persepolis*’ Outside (Expression), and *Hakawati*’s In-Between (Connection).



²⁰ Stage 1 – *Shards*’ focus on the release of the proliferation of fragments (the tesserae of the mosaic)



²¹ Stage 2 – *Persepolis*’ focus on expression through arrangement of those shards into the mosaic’s design

²⁰ Image from David Chidgey’s art-glass mosaics – detail; see

<http://artglassmosaics.com/artwork/2593503-Ebb-and-Flow-Detail.html>.

²¹ Ibid., image from David Chidgey’s art-glass mosaics, “Autumn Flower,” link from <http://artglassmosaics.com/>.



²² Stage 3- *Hakawati*'s focus on connection in-between those shards (the interstices) in the arrangement, which brings all together through the story-telling act of Discourse; Mosaic-Being as a state, through these progressive cumulative stages, which allows suspension and co-presence of those pieces connected and expressed through Discourse's Designs

This progression is a breakdown of the chapters that follow:

Step 1: Release – Ismet Prcic's (...shards...): A Novel

The narrative of the first work, *Shards*, suggests that this experience results in that which cannot be contained into a unitary static and complete-content being. The subject is composed of shards of being that must be released through the venue of discourse.

Step 2: Expression – Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis (1+2: The Story of a Childhood & The Story of a Return)*

The narrative of the second work, *Persepolis*, suggests that this experience results in that which cannot be understood within the strictures of reality. The subject must make-sense of these pieces by transforming them through the creative expression of discourse.

Step 3: Connection – Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati: A Story*

The narrative of the third work, *Hakawati*, suggests that this experience results in that which cannot exist in isolation. The subject must put everything into relation through the connective act of discourse.

The critical reading of each work thus adds another essential component to the definition of the Refugee and Forced Bildungsroman, in illuminating the constitutive steps resultant in the building of the Refugee and Forced Migration Mosaic-Being.

²² Ibid., images from David Chidgey's art-glass mosaics- "Breakthrough" on left, link from <http://artglassmosaics.com/>, on right, image from blogseries-posting by David Chidgey, "Mandala Series: Play and Self Discovery," whose accompanying text describes the result of that interstices-space between tiles, where, with dark grout " 'framing' the tesserae, each tessera's unique color, tone, and degree of transparency is accentuated"- http://artglassmosaics.blogspot.com/2013_04_01_archive.html.

The Corresponding Constitutive Subject(s): Building into Discourse

The subjects being composed within therefore do not meet the specifications of what Slaughter would see as the standard canonical Western subject, and the model to which others, as in the Postcolonial or the Refugee and Forced Migration subject, would be expected to compare and conform— if abstraction of that model-being is typically unified, rational, and individuated,²³ here there is a radical jumble and excess, a non-apologetic subjectivity and explosive creativity, as well as a fervent refusal to sunder one from other, fact from fiction. The act further de-naturalizes the notion that the subject is a pre-determined transcendental which simply comes into the knowledge of itself—as would be with the traditional *Bildungsroman*-narrator, Slaughter describes, who comes to know what everyone already knows, and becomes what he has always been meant-to-be, as teleological and tautological given. Instead, each work advances what the *process* of subject-making asks, and what the experience of attempting that process means, for the subjects of Refugee and Forced Migration experience.

Shards

Shards advances the act of narrativizing experience into a self as a kind of post-mortem operation. The novel suggests the unification (into a work, and a being) as the accumulating together of different selves, contradictory elements that exist alongside one another despite the seeming impossibility of such multiplicity. How can one be both one-self and an-other? The experience of the novel itself orients around a narrating force who seems to be the character-protagonist eponymous to the author himself—the story of “Ismet,” whom we shall keep as distinct from, although significantly not apart from, Ismet the flesh-and-blood authorial agent, diverges into several kinds of sub-egos. There is what narrating-Ismet himself calls a kind of “side A” and “side B,”²⁴ his American side “Izzy” and his Bosnian side “Ismet”; there is, too, what becomes another facet-of-self, and a particularly surreal and unsettling presence, with a manner of alter-ego in the burgeoning narration of a character named “Mustafa.” As “Ismet” manages to escape Bosnia before being successfully conscripted into the army, “Mustafa” begins as a seemingly straightforward other-character who remains, and fights. However, as the narration-experience of *Shards* further unfolds, such distinctions blur and the narrative threads interweave, voices mingling. Life events originally ascribed to “Ismet” are re-claimed and imagined by a narrating “Mustafa,” and when “Ismet” descends into a kind of tortured madness in the failure to assimilate successfully to an American “Izzy” self, it is “Mustafa” who haunts him and shadows him like a kind of ulterior self. This embodiment of guilt, of internal fracturing of self-identity, in the shape of “Mustafa” and his interruptive claiming into “Ismet”’s narrativizing space gives voice to a kind of sundering that is never healed, even in the narrative act. By the story’s conclusion, the narrative-pieces that the reader has consumed, and which have been divided into “Notebooks,” all seemingly penned by the narrativizing hand of “Ismet”/failed “Izzy”/(not)“Mustafa,” reveal a twist, in what seems to be the first-person recounting of the character’s suicide. This is then accompanied by the suggestion that the actual work of *Shards*

²³ See Anker on this as well, in the critique of “wholeness” and fictions of the human body and being in her *Fictions of Dignity*.

²⁴ Phrased, interestingly, as “two minds,” to be exact, in an ongoing process of dual-cognition: “I have two minds about everything. Side A(merican) and side B(osnian).” Ismet Prcic, *Shards* (New York: Black Cat, 2011), 43.

itself has been curated by his friend, “Eric,” after receiving the Notebooks and assembling them by corresponding instruction.

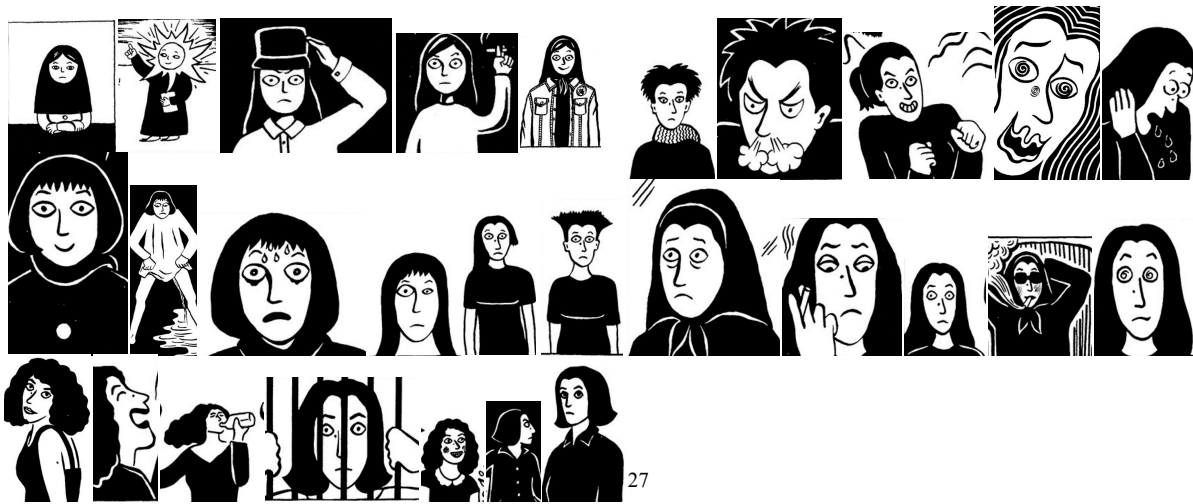
There is, within this, of course an existential as well logistical question. As reader, there is ambiguity as to whether the character seemingly narrating the novel at large has killed himself (and how the event could be self-narrated and included within the Notebooks), as well as the potential sleight-of-hand in suggesting that the narrative act has been secretly managed by another the whole time, in Eric who never has spoken or been suspected to be a narrativizing presence throughout. Such play emphasizes the heightened fictionalized elements of the story while illuminating a more poignant effect and function within: the attempt of making-whole is rendered impossible as a neat act to be performed by oneself. In fact, “Ismet”’s life in-narration only further fragments, culminating in the ultimate act of dispersal with the narrative auto-dissemination of his body across the pavement from a high jump. He is, narratively, figuratively, literarily, in pieces. The best that can be done is an assemblage of these pieces, and a putting together of understanding of them by an-other—the role of Eric becomes, in this way, a kind of proxy and parallel to the reader.

Persepolis

In the case of *Persepolis*, the graphic novel form taps into the wildly popular accessibility of its rendering,²⁵ and, as the word “graphic” suggests, makes concrete, vivid, figural and unequivocal the subjectivizing process of a coming-into-being and understanding of the world through oppression, war, exile and displacement.²⁶ This form of narrativization allows for an extremely significant capacity of co-presence and layered insight. The frames within depict a “Marjane” (eponymous to the author, and, again, significantly related) as situated in a certain epoch of life, while the curation of the story is being helmed by an older “Marjane” (for these purposes here, this latter agent will be called the “narrating Marjane”)—as in *Shards* and *Hakawati*, then, there is both a younger form-of-self being depicted in story-form and a larger orienting narrator-self who has lived through the scenes being described, and who is given credit for the narrativizing act— but what the process of graphic novelization makes particularly explicit is such discourse’s capacity to lend space and expression, shape and form to the past embodiments of self, so that the reader sees young Marjane’s imaginings, beliefs, and relativities in stark clarity, while always making constant for the reader the reminder that these individual subjectivities are only being understood in-relation, each to the other, as is relevant to the older narrating-self.

²⁵ As of its forebears and cousins, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, or Joe Sacco’s war correspondence&journalistic memoirizations including *Safe Area Goražde*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, and *Journalism*, also Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*, Zeinia Abirached’s *I Remember Beirut*, and an ever-growing list of successors as with Sarah Glidden’s *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* etc.

²⁶ As in Oxford English Thesaurus & Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/graphic>, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80829?rskey=ePg8iU&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>, etc.



This allows the reader to chart change, and to see what occurs over time, space, and distance with graspable indexes; it illuminates, too, the emergence of certain motifs, in that which recurs while highlighting difference. The openness of visual form allowed by graphic novels also permits a vast flexibility in the range of these interior “Marjanes” as given life and exteriorized form—an indulgence in hyperbolic efficacy (as with the visuals of “cosmic sun Marjane” instead of merely describing her former allusions of grandeur in childhood, or “snorting bull Marjane” beyond descriptions of her anger encountering prejudice abroad, post-displacement from Iran; depicting “Marjane behind bars” to encapsulate her feeling of trappedness after marriage upon her return, etc. See above). Each moment, image, and vignette, is carved to honor both the individual (moment, image, vignette, subjectivity of Marjane-self) and establish its place in the collective (story, history, personal narrative of life), as put into relief against the constant presence of the oldest-Marjane-who-must-make-sense and narrates for the reader at hand. Thus, again, while completely distinct in the formal features from *Shards*, or, as will be seen next, *Hakawati*, here too there is a multiplicity; and here too there are constant upheavals. What orients is the older inhabitation-of-being, the narrating self who makes sense by putting each subjectivity-of-self in relation to the other(s). This expression, this putting into form, results in the greater piece of art which is *Persepolis*, and, arguably, its own answer to the question of the closest one can come to understanding, or “knowing,” the “Marjane”(s) in total.

Hakawati

As the final work under investigation, *Hakawati* constructs a model of being in which storytelling is *the* definitive act for making sense from non-sense, truth from lies, and understanding in relation to self and others; while this is surely not a novel concept, what the work performs is the idea that storytelling reveals in a human condition an experience that makes linear or individualized thinking impossible, only an interconnectedness that loses something essential if attempted to isolate into its lone constituent parts. Composed of intermixed narrative

²⁷ Subject as-assemblage, in the fragmentary expressive range of *Persepolis*’ “Marjanes”; each necessarily understood as in relation to the other(s), constructed embodiments rendering external the internal experience of mobile subjectivities.

levels and layers, the terrain veers into the surreal and confusing, the intermingled and ambiguous at unexpected turns. The narration switches between epic myth, fantastic fable, and a main character-protagonist's firsthand accounts of his coming-of-age amidst war, the experience of displacement, and the effects of exile and return; yet while these would seem to be disparate tracks, their confluence becomes part and parcel of the overarching message, and lesson, of the story at large. For the only hold the reader can grasp as a constant throughout is the bonded link between story, teller(narrator), and audience. As the novel continues, the intimacy in the telling creates a sense of trust even in the lies, and through this, an emerging sense of connection between the disparate parts. The parables within become increasingly reflective of reality, and the relationships between characters wrought into an exquisite web. The central character-protagonist's arc, as it is revealed by the story's conclusion, has him assuming the mantle of overarching narrator as both the final coming-into his own, and the instantiation of his place in greater relationship to all: story-telling is what both defines and brings into relationship one-self to others, what relates past to present, what renders history living, and what brings understanding from confusion, pain, death and loss.

This central character-protagonist and, as the final reveal, overarching narrating force is, in this instantiation, significantly reminiscent as a proxy to its author, but explicitly named as other—and this is no accidental choice. Where *Shards* and *Persepolis* have character-protagonist/narrators eponymous to the authors themselves (see explorations of “Ismet” and “Marjane”(s) above), here the decision not to do so both honors and heightens the takeaway from *Hakawati*, for it insists that the entire enterprise demands a loosening from obsessions with what is reality. Were a reader to begin training focus on questions of (auto)-biographical overlap and fact with fiction, the *Hakawati* would have failed. Its project and its success lies in the acceptance of the act and experience of narrative-making as what makes meaning, and subjects, of all, in the incorporation and re-constitution of constituent parts. That it is the telling of stories which fabricates an identity, culminating a being out of disparate parts, the self made from a mosaic of others. Once a story is told, it then lives in others further still, for narrative not only breathes to life but also forges connections that will remain past story's end, and reveals what one-self would never know, as is encapsulated in the ultimate scene of the book where the character-protagonist comes full-circle to narrate to his dying father the story of his own life: “ ‘Your father told me that story—one of his best, if you ask me. He also told me how you were born. Do you want me to tell you? He told me all kinds of incredible things about you... Can you hear me?’ I closed my eyes briefly. ‘I know your stories.’ And his chest kept rising and falling mechanically, systematically. ‘And I can tell you my stories. If you want.’ I paused, waited. ‘Listen.’ ”²⁸ In this way, one being needs others to define any self, to bring any identity into being through the cumulative act of storytelling. As all along, endless layers of story have linked one to other, character to father, father to grandfather, to the ancients, the undeniably fantastical and beyond. This moment, (and) in the act of narration, all it means, is the iconographic symbol of *Hakawati*'s force majeure.

In Sum

The unique contribution of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman thus lies in the explicit process of self-building and elucidation made possible for the narrating-subject,

²⁸ Rabih Alameddine, *The Hakawati: A Story* (New York: Random House, 2008), 513.

whose experience, such works argue, demands forms of release, expression, and connection enabled powerfully within the literary-aesthetic space. It is narrativization which allows a mosaic-being to be assembled from the pieces of Refugee and Forced Migration experience. It advances that which Joseph Slaughter cautions is traditionally rendered illegible by what MELUS would call the “ideological and teleological underpinnings of existing narratives.” It gives form to different kinds of understanding (cognitive), feeling (emotional), and value (ethical), transforming what James Phelan terms the rhetorical effects of narration into a theoretical intervention and contribution to discourses surrounding the Refugee and Forced Migration subject in the literary and beyond.

Step 1: Release – Ismet Prcic's (...shards...): A Novel

Introduction: “Unnatural” Release

In delineating three cumulative stages of Discourse as Construction of the Refugee and Forced Migration Subject (as Mosaic-Being) through Bildungsroman, Ismet Prcic's (...shards...): A Novel engages the first, in focusing on the interior effects of experience and narrative's essential function of Release. To best schematize how the novel's narratological techniques serve this purpose, I turn to the field of “Unnatural Narratology,” in particular Brian Richardson's conception in his *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*,²⁹ to critically apply postmodern literary strategies enacted to de-naturalize, disorient, and poly-vocalize as an answer to the necessities demanded by the Refugee and Forced Migration experience. The use of onomatopoeic interruption, surrealist deconstruction in narrative sequencing, unreliable narration and contradictory narrative elements combine to use the “unnatural” as a deliberate strategy and purposeful argument in the case of Refugee and Forced Migration mosaic-being, where what Richardson calls the “alternate figuration that stresses the permeability, instability, and playful mutability of the voices of non-mimetic fiction”³⁰ are utilized to their utmost. What results is an alternate vision of subjectivity which defines the Refugee and Forced Migration experience and the construction of the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman.

Subject-Self Built through Refugee and Forced Migration Experience (& Bildungsroman)

Appropriate to the novel's title, the self is not a preordained given here, but rather a post-mortem operation in the collection of a proliferation of shards. Rather than coming into a whole, unitary being that belongs in a given place, the “lesson” that the character-protagonist, eponymous to the author here, learns through the Refugee and Forced Migration experience is that such an experience splinters, de-naturalizes, and alienates. The Refugee and Forced Migration subject advanced through this construction of narrative is a jumble of contradictory selves, voices, realities, and subjectivities which stymie all attempts at self-making. The external factors and components which exceed the individual and his control continually subvert, interrupt, and impose themselves as constitutively inextricable from the subject— not only is the subject non-unitary, but it is composed of both human and inhuman parts, organic and inorganic constituents. The pieces, in sum, “belong” nowhere – neither one nor the other, fitting neither home nor host country, but instead exploding out through the narrative. Where experience refuses linearity, distillation, or harmony, the subject must turn to narrative as the venue for release.

Rhetorical Functions & Effects: Emotional, Cognitive, and Ethical Capacities of Narrative

Out of this, the formal re-course of discourse emerges as the way to unleash a proliferation of component parts which otherwise do not fit and contradict. The narrating character-protagonist “Ismet” comes to the act of writing as a necessity, when the Refugee and Forced Migration experience has made him feel beyond what can be felt, has denied his understanding, and has made him fail to fit, to be what is expected, to live contently and within given frameworks of being. Where his experience has resulted in too much, narrative becomes

²⁹ Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Preface, xii.

the space for release. It is this which allows him to explode out the feelings that otherwise exceed acceptable thresholds, which transcend what he feels an abstract “human” should or can feel, charting him as subject into a terrain of impossibility (the “I” which feels so much that “ ‘I’ cannot exist” *like this, it cannot be*)—where he feels not only the emotional weight of war, displacement, and trauma, but also how such result in feelings he deems un-human, *inhuman*, only in the narrating-space does he feel he *can* explode those feelings out. It also permits him to forge into words what has previously refused understanding through traditional rational frameworks—“I” cannot understand this, but “I” can tap into this experience through language, vent it through the form of discourse. The resistance of experience and its effects to fit the “normal” world of experience, understanding, and value make him feel he is crazy, that it has made his processes of cognition faulty, that something has become irrevocably *wrong* with him—but the act of formation into-words becomes a method of alternate-cognition, a being that he can attempt to describe, reach towards, and transfer outwards through narrative means of words. And, in so doing, it is a shift in value, where the narrative becomes all the character-protagonist *can* do—where the subject cannot fit neatly in with others, either at home or in the host- countries, where the subject cannot align or reduce down into the expectations of a unitary whole being in the excruciating excess of too much and too many (pieces of selves, contradictory lacks-of understanding, memories that morph and invade, etc.), those shards *can* be released through the narrative realm.

Narrative Results: Structural Setup and its Conceptual Yield (on the Subject and Story Coming-into-Being)

Crucial to exploring the narratological methodologies which construct this process through the text is a preliminary investigation of its structure. The novel begins with an epigraph-page, then a non-contextualized jump-ahead excerpt from a first “Notebook.” Already the mosaic-pairing of quotes forged together in the epigraph-page launches a declarative salvo of the narrative’s designs: Starting with a turn from Shakespeare’s canonical coming-of-age text, *Hamlet* (or more specifically and significantly, the stage-notes Hamlet provides for the scene-within-the-scene of his theatrical players, to “*Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion/ be your tutor; suit the action to the word, the/ word to the action...whose end, both at the first and now; was and is, to hold, as ‘twere,/the mirror up to nature...’*”), the work is split and twinned by the pairing of this citation with another, from poet Saadi Youssef:

Who broke these mirrors

And tossed them

Shard

By shard

Among the branches

...

L’Akdhar (the poet) must gather these mirrors on his palm

And match the pieces together

Any way he likes

And preserve

*The memory of the branch.*³¹

³¹ Ismet Prcic, (*...shards...*): *A Novel* (New York: Black Cat, Grove/Atlantic, 2011).

These fragments re-contextualize the narrative imperative, and establish a very specific set of rules for the work that will follow. The command for “authenticity” here posits an explicit act of mosaic-making necessary to forge from reality’s splinters a “truthful” art, and indeed a breaking-apart of all which has come before, making the after an exercise in aesthetic, subjective and interpersonal means. Rather than so-called realistic composition, the poet’s relation to the world is in this case one of mosaic-maker, bouncing off the reflection of reality at angles, setting it into relief through a foundation of creative design. So too, even without explicitly expounding details of the second author Saadi Youssef, the poet to whom these elegiac words are ascribed, as an Iraqi artist of exile, memory and dislocation, does the novel set a tone: where the narratological functions of the epigraph serve to set a mood and conceptually preface the work that will follow,³² the setting of the metafictional narrative-imperative from a canonical Western text (and theatrical Bildungsroman) of Shakespeare alongside a fragment that the page explicitly contextualizes as “translated from Arabic by Khaled Mattawa” already performs an act of mosaic-making that transforms the “traditional” with an-other that demands something different, and more.

And it is a promise the text fulfills—the novel indeed resists a “traditional” reading from the very beginning. The next page that follows is a non-contextualized “excerpt,” bearing only the bolded title “(. . .an excerpt from *notebook one: the escape* by ismet prčić . . .),” and a selection of third-person narrative that recounts a character “Mustafa’s” training for war. Only later will the novel introduce Mustafa, first as a mysterious coming-of-age counterpart to the narrating character-protagonist “Ismet,” then as a kind of alter-ego birthed by Ismet’s traumas and experiences—and only after this un-contextualized 2pg excerpt does the novel seemingly “begin” and reveal the start of the first Notebook at large. On myriad levels, and across form and content, these initial pages thus inculcate an enigmatic sense of anticipation, where experience becomes paramount above initial understanding. The text demands experience of the narrative from within, even as it becomes increasingly alienated and schizophrenic, where a descent into madness is twinned with paradoxically increasing sense. The narrative is divided into Notebooks, each given its own title page, titled in all-caps, which would formally herald a clear division and enunciation between each Notebook, and signal its intent; however already in each notebook’s title-page is the qualification of an asterisked footnote, with increasingly provocative provenance. At the first notebook, it seems merely to indicate that the writing has been sent to an “Eric Carlson,” who, the narration will reveal, is one of “Ismet’s” American friends. A detail seemingly innocuous enough, and perhaps somewhat forgettable as the narration proceeds. . . . however, by the final notebook’s conclusion, these details accumulate, where what might seem initially a logistical footnote becomes a tumultuous narrative upending. By the final notebook, and that notebook’s asterisked footnote, it becomes suggested that the accumulation of Notebooks has been performed by Eric, upon “Ismet’s” death by-dispersion (suicide by splatter), and that Ismet’s final wish dictates his friend “*read all of this and try to piece me together.*” The footnote continues: “Bound as I am by this last will and testament, I’m including a portion of this notebook here.” After 374 pages, these footnoted words thus irrevocably change the narrative-

³² For more on the narratological functions of the epigraph as formal device, see, for instance, *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), including Tamar Yacobi’s “Authorial Rhetoric, Narratorial (Un)Reliability, Divergent Readings,” 113 and beyond.

exchange, where what may have been an increasing suspicion now is given jarring voice, in an “I” that could, for the first time clearly, be that of *Eric*, not Ismet. The “I” that could ultimately bring Ismet together not himself, but an-other.

Viewing the other structural details of the novel under these designs make every facet further significant-- every Notebook is divided into sub-sections, which are interspersed between titled chapters-within, also formatted with the elliptical and parenthetical brackets as in the novel’s title, and “diary excerpts” which are marked by bolded font and an italicized dated heading. At the outset, the non-bolded sub-sections seem to be a relatively straightforward first-person narration of coming-of-age Refugee and Forced Migration experience by “Ismet,” whereas the diary entries are more personal disclosures, addressed to his mother but not, significantly, necessarily intended for her reading. In one of the early diary entries, Ismet seems to refer to these non-bolded sub-sections as writings he is doing for a “memoir,” as instructed by a volunteer doctor on his American college campus who prescribes it as a help for his “post-traumatic stress disorder”: “He says that pills are only a short-term solution and that in order to really get better I need to put my experience in a larger framework to help me make sense out of the whole thing.”³³ Putting these sections of the narrative under this mandate unpacks myriad valences of meaning—for one, it illuminates the dynamic between the Western host-country “professional” who knows, and the subject-sufferer-“victim” who is labeled and prescribed, furthermore the prescription taking in this case the explicit form of a kind of “testimony”(memoir), as has been provocatively engaged within Refugee and Forced Migration discourse and by the likes of Joseph Slaughter in the literary realm, Didier Fassin in the sociological, etc.³⁴ However, already in its instantiation, the narrative further qualifies and complicates this, where Ismet reveals he is having trouble separating fact from fiction in his attempted memoir, but that the doctor has told him “that our brains our peculiar computers that constantly augment and even edit true events out of our memory when those events do not fit into the narrative of our own lives...*Don’t worry about what is true and what is not, you’ll drive yourself crazy. Just you write. Write everything.*”³⁵ Immediately following this disclosure, and the designs of the narrative mandate, the novel transitions from diary-entry into a non-bolded subsection which recounts (through third-person narration) the character Mustafa’s inner thoughts, truths, and feelings. Thus, in its very structure and design, the elucidation of content through its form, the unfolding of narration seems to constantly re-contextualize what the narration is performing as it resists understanding and reveals new rules. “Mustafa” can be part of “Ismet’s” narration of “his” life as facts can live alongside fiction, in the cathartic release of “everything.”

So too in the manner of address does the narrative complicate and question, challenge and confuse. In the beginning, the non-bolded subsections would seem addressed to a more traditional default narratee, whereas the diary-entries are more intimate and addressed to his mother—but again, already such distinctions are challenged and qualified from the outset. When Ismet writes in his diary entry “Mother, oh, *mati*, I’m sorry; everything I write to you is a lie. /

³³ Prcic, 22.

³⁴ As in Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, and Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman’s *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³⁵ Prcic, *ibid.*

I'm *not* okay,"³⁶ it gestures towards another, unseen, form of narration that Ismet has been performing for his mother, where he suggests he *is* okay, that he has enough money, that he has been visiting family, and so on, however that this form of narration is for him the space designated for truths. However, as the novel goes on, it becomes increasingly unclear and indistinct whether anything ever *addressed* to his mother is actually intended for her receipt—indeed, as it becomes revealed that his mother suffers from her own depression and isolation, and has attempted to take her own life, Ismet in his narration seems to recount a desire to protect her from his own realities, even as he is unable to help her in hers.³⁷ Under this increasing awareness revealed by the narrative unfolding, the significance of narrative-address³⁸ becomes heightened and re-contextualized: if Ismet's diary entries are indeed never intended to reach her, if the diary entries are yet another layer of Ismet's own isolation, then the address to his mother can be more a gesture of pain and guilt, the truths he will never be able to disclose. He addresses his mother, yet the catharsis of revealing a truth, and addressing those truths specifically to the mother and the family he has left behind in escaping the war, can never be fully reached in actually *being* addressed or landing, finding reciprocity or response. It is a performance of intimacy, but all the diary entry can do is release the agony of truths within. The non-bolded sub-sections of what initially is cast as "memoir," too, devolves, where it would initially seem addressed to a more traditional default narratee, but the question of address becomes further complicated and caught up in explosions of narration and defiance of narrative expectation. The Mustafa line of third-person narration, which could initially can be categorized and accepted as the fact-and-fiction blend of Ismet's memoir-writing, is transgressed and superseded by the increasing presence of this other-body until Mustafa intervenes in the first-person narration as well, events first ascribed to Ismet taken up and re-narrativized by another "him." The non-bolded sub-sections, which initially may have fallen under default assumption of memoiric-narrator addressing to a generic narratee, may be considered, upon further examination, later sent to Eric after the fact, or, when engaged later in the narration's unfolding, re-contextualized to be addressed to Eric as the intended narratee from the outset...however, the actual content of the non-bolded sub-sections, which devolve into increasing madness, a mired blending which reaches surrealistic postmodern frenzy, reach heights which eventually suggest the ultimate addressee may be, in a certain way, the benighted cursed fragmentary self, Ismet to his-impossible-exploded-self-in-shards. In the explorations of the specific narrative techniques that follow, the narrative functions must be considered always on a variety of levels—there is the narrating character-protagonist's relation to his family, to his friends, to his home and host- countries, but when it comes to what is written, there is always a proliferation of others...for all the others on the outside, who may be able to "piece" him together, there are all who live within, the proliferation of selves, voices, realities, and pieces inside Ismet who must ultimately be released by and through the narrative-act.

Lack of Control: Proliferation of Pieces

As to the unleashing of these shards, and engagement with the specific inability to control these elements as the subject of Refugee and Forced Migration being, onto specific narratological techniques in the construction of an "unnatural" narration. The special graphic-

³⁶ Prcic, 20.

³⁷ As in *Ibid.*, 120, etc.

³⁸ See further on this narratological significance with James Phelan in *Living to Tell About It*, etc.

interposition of “BOOM” in the novel’s narration here becomes analogue and index for the external factors and realities of experience which impel themselves into the Refugee and Forced Migration subject. What might initially be written off as a trick intended to gesture towards the auditory (sound) in the visual (literary) realm, instead becomes a larger poetic and conceptually evocative device, where the increasing presence of the “BOOM,” like the increasing presence of Mustafa, becomes synecdoche for the un-ignorable and uncontrollable proliferation of shards, lodging like so many pieces of shrapnel which will irrevocably mark the figurative body of being.

The Onomatopoeic:

“Boom!”, which would itself most likely fall within the category of “iterative onomatopoeia” along with the likes of “Smash” “Bang” “Crash” etc., on one level enters with increasing frequency into the text as a form of graphemic cue for sensate occurrence,³⁹ and one which at that significantly suggests resonance, as the un-ignorable reverberation through space (and in this case, the body), versus a “Poof,” “Swish,” or “Crinkle,” which are softer, subtler, and more controlled. The introduction of a “Boom!” thus performs a cue for attention, in the rupture of an inter-ruption that marks the stop to whatever has preceded to announce itself before anything can follow. While forms of the word appear earlier in traditional contexts of narratorial discourse, as when Ismet recounts the dominating swagger of an American cop at his airport arrival, “‘You speak English?’ he boomed toward me, overpronouncing,”⁴⁰ its execution here gestures to both literal loudness and the cop’s figurative grandstanding towards Ismet, who has arrived in a group of his fellow Bosnian refugees; however, this is relevantly distinct from the introduction of the word as onomatopoeic indicator, which first enters in the context of a wartime shelling.

This sequence also marks, significantly, the first shift into a second-person narrative mode, under one of the non-bolded subsections ascribed to Ismet’s maybe-memoir: it starts with an interruption from sleep, the jarring into narrative-beginning: “You wake up in the middle of the night.”⁴¹ Moved from the previous position of Ismet’s first-person depictions, which recount as-past those events which have already occurred, this narrative sequence simulates as-present the happening of the night’s events. This construction of a more direct experience is further cued by the nature of the mind-body narration: “You ransack your brain to discover nothing but leftovers of an already distant nightmare. You can’t recall your age. The baseless urgency you feel sitting on your chest borders on panic and you have no idea where it’s coming from...”⁴² The mind and body are in response to an as-yet unnamed stimulus – the only hint which has been given to the experience, as of yet, is the title of the sub-section itself, an elliptic reference to “(. . . the night you return to bosnia . . .)”⁴³, and the surroundings reveal, as yet, only the squeaking

³⁹ For delineations between categories of onomatopoeia as form, see Paul Simpson’s descriptions, positing the iterative in contrast to “lexical onomatopoeia” which “draws upon recognized words in the language system” and “whose pronunciation enacts symbolically their referents outside language”- under “Interpreting patterns of sound” in *Stylistics: A Resource Book* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66.

⁴⁰ Prcic, 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 78.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

of a hamster wheel and Donald Duck bed sheets. As the hamster wheel quiets, “you tense up even more. The silence is pressing. You wait for something, anything. *What the fuck is going on?* you think.

BOOM!⁴⁴ – Only as of this crucial sequence is the “Boom!” instantiated as a larger, more nuanced and essential component to the narrative, and Ismet’s (narratorial) being— while before, it exists in companionable equality to its fellow words, here and after, the “Boom!” is distinguished and raised in priority as a graphic index. It is given a life of its own, intervening and accented in its performance with the addition of a paired exclamation mark (!)⁴⁵, as well as what will now be a varied manifestation across a range of larger sizes, all-caps, in bolded font. On a simply visual register, before even engaging the representational power and meaning of the words themselves, “Boom!” now stands out, apart, littering and marking the pages in which it appears to attract attention above all else. The unfolding of this segment continues with implications on multiple levels. After the first **BOOM!**, notably, “You sit there, still waiting” for another sound as-answer to the situation at hand, but nothing comes. This “You” has no such control. Silence lies in full and fecund complicity. The home-setting becomes hostile in its familiarity, for it cloaks the as-yet-unknown intruder. Silence, darkness, unknowing are all the true setting, as the mind searches. It is after the mark has already been missed, the anxiety and confusion provoked by the refusal of life to respond in time to unknowing spiraling, that shelling-as-sound interrupts with another **BOOM!**

This might reside at the level of onomatopoetic referent alone if it were merely incorporated to highlight, say, the loudness of the sound itself. But the execution of this sound-cipher acts as more. The nature of this “boom” is an active agent in the text that intercedes in the narration: its presence is that which cannot be controlled by the you-being-there (in the live-time narration of the story). As “you” go down to the bomb shelter, the narration attempts to regain control, unsuccessfully, as “Your dad is making the rounds around the ‘neighborhood,’ shooting the shit with the ‘neighbors.’ Perhaps he’s

BOOM!⁴⁶

The level of interruption has increased, where the sentence itself in-process cannot continue when the shelling imposes itself into scene/mind/body/being. The frequency and degree of interruption increases still: the act of narration attempts to engage again at the level of description of a nearby family, where “The family doesn’t seem t

BOOM!⁴⁷

Here the interruption of the “boom” has amped up from its first appearance into striking between first sentences, then between words, then truncating individual letters of graphemic meaning itself; the pressure on the attempted narration rises exponentially as the bolded and exclamatory rebound of the **BOOM!** imposes itself seemingly whenever “it” wishes. Of course, a shell itself, in traditional understanding, holds no directed agency apart from the human being

⁴⁴ Prcic, 78.

⁴⁵ See Mieke Bal on the narratological functions and implications of the exclamation mark, as in “Levels of Narration,” *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 1999, 2009), 48 etc.

⁴⁶ Prcic, 81.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

operating it – if the scene were to be schematized according to more “realistic” means, the sound itself would only be an effect of human action, and its interruption would be in no way intended as a direct affront or engagement to an individual child in a bomb shelter. However, through the particular characterization and formalization of experience made possible through these narratological means, the sound becomes agency-itself, as that which transcends and supersedes individual control.

The valence of meaning surrounding this “boom” continues and amplifies as the placement of the “booms” personify its presence as a kind of unrelenting, unremitting, and unmerciful side-character (and antagonist): As “You lie down and try to sleep.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

You sit back up.”⁴⁸ Left without recourse, shaken and pushed into a form of altered state, “you” begin to feel a blurring between fiction and reality, the narration states. The text calibrates here the loss of agency with this invasion of the sur-real, while dictating a very specific picture of a visualization of a woman screaming “*TRAITOR!*”⁴⁹, where Ismet already feels the guilt of having escaped for part of the time to Croatia (“They all know you haven’t been there since the beginning”).⁵⁰ Another, more seemingly “rational” side of being you-as-narrated asserts itself to assess the situation:

It’s not possible, you think. You deduce that there’s no way that you just imagined her voice. It sounded way too real. It’s not possib

BOOM!

le . . . Le? . . . Not possible. . . What? . . . You forget what you were thinking about. You are not sure.⁵¹

This moment in the text marks a new level of interrupted being, as the narrated-you attempts to *regain* even a partial control over what has already been lost by completing the word amputated by the shelling – the abstraction of each grapheme, in itself, becomes analogic to the impossibility of marshaling sense together from the fragments of non-sense being experienced in the midst of war. The “you” who is a confused youth, in a bomb shelter in Bosnia, cannot marshal enough control of surroundings, experience, or context to piece a narration undisturbed by the interruption of an-other. The presence of the shelling exerts itself upon “you,” and the story itself. The “-le” in itself becomes nonsensical, and separated from a context of “rational-thought” in which units may be compiled into sense and meaning, the fragment becomes a symbol instead of the inefficacy of rationality in this kind of subjectified experience. Memory and thought itself becomes confused, disjointed, and existentially posited into doubt. The final moment of the scene completes into, essentially, the end of an attempted rationality and sense-making’s obliteration: the narration concludes as “You can’t remember anything. You push your body against the wall. . .

⁴⁸ Prcic, 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

BOOM!

. . .the wall is rough. . .

BOOM!

. . . nothing . . .

BOOMS!⁵²

As the directed intentionality of narration is made impossible, the body and an attempt to remain sensate is all that remains. The body feels the wall, and being feels the “boom.” Finally only “booms” remain, as the last indicator given directly by the narration, of “you” and “. . . nothing. . .” proves a cryptic remnant – are “you” thinking, now, of nothing? Is there only nothingness left in the proliferation of shards and booms? At the level of text and intentionality, it is interesting to note here that Ismet, presumably, of course, has both narrated “your” night and determined the size and placement of the booms; the onomatopoetic indicator of the “BOOM!” as a signifier is a direct object of intent in this way, allowing the narrating-character who writes these words a degree of control and cognition in the very act of their creation. And yet what it is meant to signal *is* the loss of control, and the limits of agency in the face of Refugee and Forced Migration experience. This narration, and the presence of the “BOOMS!” in this chapter, are structured so as to deconstruct and make-impossible the marshaling of sense in the midst of a childhood lived through war. The very intentionality and agency that is seemingly assigned to the shelling as-BOOMS! at an increasing degree over the scene then becomes, too, all the more poignant; though to this Ismet-of-childhood, re-animated through the sequencing of the narrative “You,” there seems to be an external force given voice by the BOOM! willingly intruding itself and destroying the possibility of agency, it is ultimately only an empty signifier, an agent-less object in the ultimate senselessness of war. The sequence resonates to impress both the powers and the limits of the narrative-act, probing at the contours of catharsis. The narrating-Ismet can write and re-create this coming-of-age, but in so doing, necessarily constitutes in its own performance the in-human non-agential presence that impels, compels, and unleashes itself within.

The purposefulness of this place, not only of sound, or onomatopoetic signifier, but on more far-reaching and multivalent levels the place of form in the novel as corralling of “unnatural” de-naturalizing narrative technique, hits home when it reappears later in the story’s unfolding. Already, throughout, the haunting of the BOOM! continues: it follows Ismet, in fact, around the world. . . when he goes on a trip to Edinburgh with his theatrical group, preparing to soon make a break for it and seek official refugee status out of Bosnia, a fireworks display catalyzes a **BOOM!** that throws Ismet and all of his young fellow troupe-members onto the ground; as the adults laugh, Ismet’s first-person narration reflects: “Asmir and the musicians were older. They remembered with fully-formed adult bodies and minds life before the war. Before chaos, they’d known order, before senselessness, sense. . . But if you were forged in the chaos, then there *was* no return. There *was* no escape. . .”⁵³ A “boom,” in itself, should, hypothetically be referent to a specific sound-making impetus: the boom. . . of a door, or a shell, a firework, or a human heart. But here the narration declares an impossibility to this kind of sense-making – “I” cannot *do* that when BOOM! unleashes not a sound that is to-be-known, but the proliferation of the unknowable, insensible and uncontrollable. The BOOM! is the world

⁵² Prcic, 84.

⁵³ Ibid., 240.

impressing in itself the x-factor of chaos, the suicide-pill of senselessness, that will render attempts at clarity impossible. It is that which splits the narrating-Ismet and his memories into shards. It is what moves his body – inhabits him beyond his control and knowing.

Further at this nexus between outside and inside, body and being, is an additional re-purposed manifestation of “BOOM!” which strikes at how the seed of radical chaos and unknowability in this sound-signifier and narrative-object is internalized into the body, from the processes inhabited above, and the sound-being of obliteration begins to come from within. As Ismet recounts in a diary entry addressed to his mother, he makes a return visit to Bosnia after his escape and finds he cannot control himself but to elicit the familiarity of onomatopoeic-response: “I punched a kid in the face today, *mati*...I punched him and he just sat down. I ran away. It was so good to feel my heart pound like that. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

I can’t wait to get out of here, *mati*...”⁵⁴ This time back in Bosnia, described later by his stateside therapist as a regression back from his attempts to heal from the experience of war, is paired with a seemingly nonsensical act of violence and the return of the BOOM!, though this time, it is spurred by his own hands. The moment is described as “so good,” to feel the BOOM! beating from within his own chest, and yet, in the next sentence, he communicates his desire to escape. To leave the here marked by inescapable pounding, and yet, as Ismet has said, there is “no escape”⁵⁵. As he divulges to his mother in another diary entry, “I *don’t* miss home, *mati*. I’m there all the time. In the past. In fiction”⁵⁶—the narrative act allows him to release, and yet so too there does he suffer the perpetual being that is never fully in control. He narrates his own condition of being as marked, limited, and conflicted, moved by outer forces which determine him as much as his own designs. In fact, his is very much the release of that which exceeds him, presenting a constant tension between his role as narrating-author, and the realizations he comes to as-character coming-of-age. The Ismet being recounted in his diary entry punches, but for no reason; it is this act of his which makes his heart beat, yet his heart beats on its own, what is more makes him dependent on its beat for survival. The release being performed results not in a clean slate, but rather makes possible a post-mortem examination, in suspension, of all the pieces.

Such a point is impressed, teased, and etched into particular relief as the novel nears completion: this entry, which comes after the revelation of Ismet’s directive as addressed to his friend Eric, and thus Eric’s potential narrative role, is annotated with the asterisk: “*This is the final entry and it appears here exactly as it does in the original without any of my meddling. Bear with it.”⁵⁷ Already, then, on one level the entire narrative thus far is re-contextualized and brought into question as to the final authorial powers of “Ismet”—if it is in fact a character-Eric who has been notating each Notebook, does this footnote’s insistence, that the entry appears exactly as in the original without meddling, come as a sort of apology for its heightened and extreme, “unnatural” state of narration? Or does such a note imply or beg doubt as to whether other entries may have been “meddled” with by another? The entry itself indeed seems to perform Ismet’s explosion into shards, his dissolution into pieces, incapable of keeping his-

⁵⁴ Prcic, 115.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 385.

selves together in one body of being: the words that follow parlay the usage of BOOM!, and the sense of embodied being, into a building frenzy, and an ecstatic nihilism into the effects of war. The entry begins as a recounting a kind of fairy tale story, where “Once upon a time” a human convict has been sentenced to solitary confinement. As he is led down the corridor to his punishment for transgressing “the ego of a BOOM! particular guard...”⁵⁸, the reader is signaled to what is coming – by the time he is locked inside, he “reaches for a for a **BOOM!** button”⁵⁹ ...again, as before, the interruption of story, but this time, from no obvious, external or explainable original-source. Not his heart, or a set of fireworks, no shells are to be found but instead the dissolution of the possibility of ultimate control or rationality of self is knocking. The room is his own madness, his own sentence which he is prepared to battle. He rips loose a button from his prison uniform, and like a Kafkaesque dervish, begins to spin, ten times, then throw the button over his shoulder. Each time is counted, “one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten times,”⁶⁰ and then, after he tosses the button, he “listens to it *plink, plink, plinky-plink, plink, plink, plink* on the concrete until there’s a silence **BOOM!** goes down his hands and knees and begins the search anew...”⁶¹ - The enumeration of each spin mandates that each one be counted, waited for (not until ten can the button be thrown), and then, with the onomatopoeic enunciation of the button’s scattering, each hit of button upon the floor is given a count, as the font-size and variation-on-the-theme (the “*plink,*” versus “*plink,*” versus “*plinky-plink,*” etc.) chart the button’s varying location and distance. As “he does this because he knows that if he is to stay himself he needs to keep his mind busy and on-task,”⁶² this inclusion, rather than rote detail intended to prosaically enhance the scene, serves instead to embody the very mind-state-and-being being depicted at the selfsame moment. The counting of the turns, and the nuance of the concrete differentiation of the button’s bounces upon the ground, are desperate sentinels of specificity, attempting to ward off that which begins, inexorably, to **BOOM!** This is the first occurrence of such size of font ascending, as the “booms” descend upon him, and as it all falls apart. Portions of this section are quoted at length so as to impress the contours of narrative designed to its greatest “unnatural” effects:

...he needs to pretend there’s something, this task of finding the button over and over, or telling himself a story over and over, to keep the mind busy so it doesn’t short-circuit itself but **BOOM!** I can’t do it. I can’t keep telling myself this story because the **BOOM!** shells are hitting closer and closer and the mint green hospital room is vibrating, the beams are creaking ,the ceiling is flaking and falling down on me like plum blossoms, and at the same time, somehow, I’m up here staring down, down, and the firmament is melting into a California rain and my heart is climbing up my esophagus and into my throat, into my eye sockets, into my thoughts, pounding there, **BOOM!** as

⁵⁸ Prcic, 385.

⁵⁹ Ibid.,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 386.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 387.

I wish I were in prison right now, in a *hole*, in the middle of it, on my hands and knees searching for a **BOOM!**utton instead of suffering this pounding, the pounding of shells on this fucking hospital, this pounding rain, this pounding in my head, the pounding of memory, of bullets and tree limbs, the pounding of Mother, the pounding of red hair, the pounding of volatile muscles turning rigid in the fleeting world far below, down there, where into my (pounding) ephemeral ear the sidewalk shall whisper the truth

BOOM!.⁶³

This crescendo links the “boom” formally once associated with shells now to memory, to the madness of memory that permeates and mixes and contradicts and hits him, and now, “me,” too, as the narrative shifts from third-to-first-person accounting...at the crux of story, and on the note of its impossibility, “he” shifts to “I” and the “I” which has been ascribed to Ismet as narrating-source is coming undone at the seams as the “BOOM!”s tear him apart. Narrative threads converge, components whir and blend, into one explosive confluence of being; this being which then, in the body, becomes its own condition of impossibility. The only pages which follow heighten the sense of mystery, for the final inscription seems to be coming from his mother’s pen (addressed to “Dear son”), and yet: there are no asterisks, relating and describing how such a letter, if discursively within the narrative world to be believed, would have been received, no mention of it being “found” as previous Notebook are described (some being sent to Eric, the final being found in Ismet’s car, etc.). The final act of narration relates: “Americans sent me pictures of a body to identify. Porridge of meat and guts, shards of bone. They said you jumped off a building, killed yourself...”⁶⁴ And yet, already and even in this too is the possibility, or impossibility, questioned: “But it wasn’t you, was it?...*Inconclusive*, they said...”⁶⁵ The body, too in shards, cannot be recognized. This *does* mark Ismet’s (figurative) body though, as the being-in-shards that the narrative both recounts and has constituted. Such an inclusion heightens the stakes while pinioning the confluence of literal with figurative body as a device which keys into the constitutive qualities of being in Refugee and Forced Migration experience. That which exceeds emotional thresholds, which belies rational knowledge or control, and which “fails” on the level of traditional values of identity, success and belonging, but which succeeds as an execution of conceptually resonant performative text.

Stories of Self, and Narrator Permeability + Unreliability:

Now, no one account of story, or re-counting of the facts told within an individual segment can be taken at face value, for as the novel reveals itself, it becomes clear that no one perspective is meant to be held as the irrevocably “authorized” version of truth. As a clarion call to those narratological schools interested in pursuing the possible effects of multiple narrators and narrative unreliability,⁶⁶ this novel is a study in such formal permutations par excellence.

⁶³ Prcic, 387.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 388.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Brian Richardson is especially wonderful to cite here, again, in his insightful cataloguing of the ways in which anti-mimetic elements and creative authorial designs provoke intrigues of both

In the building of evidence which would seem to suggest the above verdict of Ismet's narrative-fate, there is the teasing succession of intimation provided by the location of each of the three NOTEBOOKs, supposedly written, of course, by the character named "Ismet Prcić." The first notebook is described as being sent to his friend, Eric Carlson's address⁶⁷; the second is "left behind" at Ismet Prcić's last known "actual residence"⁶⁸; and the third is discovered by police in "Izzy's" car, with a note for his friend Eric (who has coined Ismet's here-forementioned American nickname)⁶⁹.

These notebooks, started under the directive of a kind of memoir surrounding Ismet's life, but qualified so as to be the writing of "everything" in the process, fact and fiction included, eventually spiral and conflate with increasing variability with accounts of a life of a man named Mustafa. It is right after Ismet reveals in one of his diary entries, addressed again to his mother, that "at first it worked...but as I kept at it, things—little fictions—started to sneak in. I agonized over them, tried to eradicate them from the manuscript, but it made the narrative somehow *less* true..."⁷⁰, Mustafa's first "narrative" is provided.⁷¹ This foreign presence, which begins as another but becomes increasingly entangled with Ismet himself, pushes itself into the narrative with greater frequency, just as does the BOOM!s – if the BOOM!s illuminate those external factors of war which become embedded and embodied into the Refugee and Forced Migration subject, the equally interruptive increasing presence of Mustafa strikes at an equally un-ignorable embodied guilt which arises out of Ismet's Refugee and Forced Migration experience. Just as the surreal build and explosion of BOOM!s reveal the impossibility of Ismet's holding together without a reckoning of this presence of war which will not leave him, the intensifyingly "unnatural" build of Mustafa's being twins alongside Ismet's increasing awareness of a sense of guilt, that in escaping he has left behind his family, that he has evaded the wartime conscription, death and destruction others just like him suffer. In this way, the narrative space becomes the release of this guilt into and through a building of this other as form of embodied avatar: Mustafa as projected narrativized reality of what could-have-been for Ismet, and what is for others; what, in Ismet's painstaking inescapability from his home, his family, and the realities of war, becomes a part of his story, the coming-of-age of his peers which haunt and remind him until they dominate his own.

story and discourse – see his wanderings into the realm of stories that seem to contradict or erase themselves in a proliferation of possibilities under "Unnatural Stories and Sequences" in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*: 20-23, and the narratorial locus of responsibility placed onto the reader to "decide" a story when a contradictory or varyingly incomprehensible set of events is put forward: 19-20 of the same.

⁶⁷ Prcic, 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 313.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 375.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁷¹ Interesting to consider here surrounding the subject of "kinds of narrative" and forms of text alongside choices of perspective is Franz Karl Stanzel's schematization in *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), in addition to H. Porter Abbott's work in text-types and the form-usage of the "diary" in "Time, Narrative, Life, Death, and Text-Type Distinctions: The Example of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*," *Narrative*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May 2011): 187-200.

Narrative Multiplicity: Contradiction and (Im)Possibility

As the novel proceeds, these events and identities which have seemingly been set forth with relative, if poetic, clarity begin to blur with dizzying frequency. In the beginning of the delineation between an “Ismet” and a “Mustafa,” Ismet’s stories are narrated in the first-person “I,” while Mustafa’s are recounted as through a third-person transcription of story being performed by Ismet. The two lives, as they are set out originally, are set apart: as the most crucially important difference, Ismet successfully escapes wartime Bosnia, while Mustafa remains behind and is conscripted into the army. Mustafa shares certain qualities, such as a childhood predilection for ninjas⁷², but seems to have a distinct identity built apart from Ismet’s, at least, to begin. But when Ismet reaches the part of his own story in which he witnesses a soldier shooting a mad dog, he ascribes to that soldier all of the qualities the reader already knows as fitting Mustafa,⁷³ and things begin to blur... After a shelling occurs soon afterwards, Ismet recounts, in a past tense narration, visiting a grave that bears the name of “Mustafa Nalić,” and in the wake of this moment, Ismet confides: “From then on I had trouble falling asleep... I dreamed of him... I imagined his life before death... I started to see him. I saw him everywhere...”⁷⁴ Already doubting the veracity of his memories, and challenging the possibility of his own sanity, Ismet’s narrative now explicitly raises into doubt whether Mustafa’s narrative and life entire is an imagining, and a projection of a kind of Ismet-twin who both is and is-not him. As Ismet later recounts to his mother in a “Diary Entry”: “**Mustafa is back, mati. I can’t get him out of my head. I spend hours daydreaming his life as I wait for mine to make sense.**”⁷⁵

But if Mustafa begins in Ismet’s narrative design and cognitivizing as meant to serve in an exercise in narrative clarity and sense-making, such attempts and differentiations soon fall apart further. Ismet tells of a case of mistaken identity, in which he runs into an old man who may or may not⁷⁶ have sheltered Mustafa and Mustafa’s brother as refugees – this man, insisting Mustafa’s brother was killed, while Mustafa lived,⁷⁷ only fuels Ismet’s narrativizing of Mustafa’s life entire. Whereas in its inception, Mustafa’s story seemed explicitly conjured and inserted into the necessary points of Ismet’s story-telling, as “Ismet” as narrator seems to begin to lose control, Mustafa’s narrative begins to *take over* Ismet’s own. Ismet questions his own capacity as the author of these stories, as he tells in a “Diary Entry”: “**I give up, mati. I gave up. This book about my life cannot be written. Not by me, anyway... Why do I write about Mustafa? Why does Mustafa have my memories?...**”⁷⁸ Interestingly relinquished not only in the present tense, but in the retrospective *past*, where by the writing of these words, Ismet has

⁷² Prcic, *Shards*, 54 for Ismet and 93 for Mustafa.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 164,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁶ The text is bound up in a series of ambiguities and contradictions, as something will come to pass which is later either brought into doubt or rejected entirely, feeding into an effect which Brian Richardson describes as “denarration” under “Three Extreme Forms of Narration and a Note on Postmodern Unreliability,” in *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, 87.

⁷⁷ Prcic, 179.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 337.

already “given up” his authorial intent to memoir-ize, or his ability to contain a self-that-is-his in written form, the uncertainty of Ismet-as-narrator then transitions to a scene in which Ismet further contemplates ending his own life, and imagines Mustafa materializing in his own backyard in San Diego. Ismet, who has become torturously aware of the ways in which he is *not* Mustafa, for he has delineated Mustafa as the one who stayed behind, and was forced to fight, to suffer, while for Ismet, “No. I ran away instead. That’s *my* story”⁷⁹, now narrates a surreal standoff in which Mustafa takes a pistol from Ismet’s hand and aims it at him. The narrating-Ismet who once “dictated” Mustafa’s life, perhaps created it whole-cloth, survives the encounter, standing to resolve to “Live his new life”⁸⁰...but on the next page, for the first time, Mustafa’s narrative is given an “I” at the helm – Mustafa, speaks, thinks, and assumes the narratorial reins for himself,⁸¹ asserting with ever-greater dominance his place in the narrative, seemingly outside of Ismet’s narratorial designs or authorial powers.

Yet, at the novel’s conclusion, the possible-letter written as though by Ismet’s mother provides a final twist: After conversationally recalling to Ismet, who may or may not have ended his life, that “Your friend Eric from America sent me a letter and a book by Faulkner,” the narrating-voice asks “Do you know someone named Mustafa Nalić? He writes that he knows you but I don’t remember...He seems to think that he owes me. He sent me this note and thanked me for visiting him in the hospital...”⁸² This inclusion explodes a range of questions, and a proliferation of shards from the narrative’s unfolding. Referring to Eric so casually, and in the context of a happy update, on one level would, if true, seem to contradict or challenge Ismet’s death—if Eric indeed *has* been assembling Ismet’s notebooks as a post-mortem act, would he also be sending happy communications to Ismet’s mother? Does this suggest Eric has reached out to her as a kind of salve after losing her son, but, if so, and if the case, then the inclusion of this letter from the mother would mean Eric has been the one to include it with the Notebooks in the first place, and, if so, why do so without the usual asterisk of explanation? No “this letter was found at Ismet’s last place of residence,” or “I include this here.” Also, crucially, this allusion to Mustafa pushes further to challenge, disorient, and complicate, for it recalls a particularly wild and surreal, ambiguous sequence before Ismet’s final spiral into possible death and narratorial relinquishment: one sub-section, switching between Ismet’s third-person narration and a Mustafa first-person perspective, recounts Mustafa’s injury during wartime battle, and the visit of a woman who seems to think herself his mother, while Mustafa himself is unsure.⁸³ A letter she brings Mustafa, in this sequence, may or may not have been addressed to him, one possible letter he attempts to make out “perhaps an *I*...it was impossible to be 100 percent certain.”⁸⁴ Swirling between all the layers of ambiguity, uncertainty, possibility and impossibility here are: from the outset, whether any “real” person as Mustafa has ever existed; if so, how or what Ismet could know, and what would be his narrative projections and creations; in this sequence, taking upon it and in the context of this final letter the combination of Mustafa and Ismet’s mother, and mere intimation or glimmer that a letter could be addressed not to him (Mustafa) but containing a letter

⁷⁹ Prcic, 349.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 390.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 374.

of Ismet's name, advances the de-naturalized and suspect surreal elements to a fevered pitch. Just as Mustafa becomes disoriented and unsure, as Ismet becomes the same, the narrative itself demands the same degree of disorientation and uncertainty. By this final point of the narrative when it seems at the very least that *this* Mustafa sequence has in some way been bound up in Ismet's memoir-izing, and the allusion to it in a letter questionably ascribed to his mother's hand, but without a contextualizing note from a potential Eric-or-not-Eric, makes possible too that it all *still* and always has been a metafictional construction written by Ismet's hand. The very ambiguity itself becomes part of the very function of the narrative-act, designed and intended, purposefully constitutive of the Refugee and Forced Migration experience and of Ismet's subject-hood.

This complex and ambiguous dance between narratorial figures and circles of control⁸⁵ complicates the traditional understanding of relationship between author and character, creator and text. The Ismet-who-writes was originally, at the outset, established as the would-be narrator, and one who demonstrated this seeming control with the use of the locus of a first-person "I" perspective and the capacity for third-person narration that saw, if not omnisciently, at least to a certain authorial degree the inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations of characters outside himself. However, with increasing frequency, the narrative manufactures the progressive decomposition of this eponymous "author-as-narrator," making the purpose and intent of the work something beyond indefatigable or unimpeachable narration. "Ismet" begins his work intending to yield something from the writing: at first, it is a belief that sense could somehow be made, from the graphic representation or expression of his life into story; then, seeing the impossibility of remaining "true" to the mere facts of a life when something else is demanded for the "truth" of a life-story, the project is expanded, and the levels of reality and creation blurred for more ambiguous reading; finally, after doubt has already been feeding on the contradictions and impossibilities inherent in the ongoing text, the named-author cedes control, and allows the life of his story and the characters within an agency beyond his own. Part of this release is the relinquishment of control, the acceptance of components beyond a self that, paradoxically, constitute it as well, in the proliferation shards. It is the accumulation of these shards, qualified, significantly, both elliptically and parenthetically—the narratological functions of this formatting choice, in both the accumulation of sub-sections and, as part of, the larger title-as-work itself, is appreciated in all its greater conceptual and constitutive implications here and now. The ellipses make explicit their very fragmentary nature, gesturing within to that which is not said, to something which remains unseen but which lives in the spaces, the interstices of the mosaic in the elliptical inclusions, The parenthetical⁸⁶ qualifies them as both disclosures and, in their intimacies, suggests something too that is being drawn in the margins, creating non-canonical relationships between the pieces. The shards are here, in this way, the execution of form which qualifies itself in its being, and cumulatively increases its impact and meaning in its own experience.

⁸⁵ Brian Richardson argues for the importance of the use of "multiperson" narration in "I, etcetera: Multiperson Narration and the Range of Contemporary Narrators," *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, 61.

⁸⁶ Narratologically in their function, see for instance Helene Carol Weldt-Basson's *Subversive Silences: Nonverbal Expression and Implicit Narrative Strategies* (Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2009), etc.

This narrative arc creates an experience of and as-text that moves the point and possibility of the story into increasingly experimental “unnatural” territory. The novel, by its conclusion, has resulted not in *a* narrator telling a story, or in several doing so, and not, for that matter, in *a* single story to be consumed—the discourse, contained within the body of the text, provides instead a precariously navigable terrain which yields not linear understanding, but rather something from the *experience* of the discourse as a roiling, contradictory, raw and multifold proliferation of story-in-situ. The experience of this form is crystallized into microcosmic clarity where Ismet’s narrativizing builds steam to a kind of denouement of his experiment at large, when he recounts in an address to his friend Eric in one of his final shards, that “EVERYTHING” came to him “in a dream”⁸⁷; the epiphany that follows is a kind of synecdoche of the text, in which Ismet declares:

In the beginning there was Light. In the beginning there was the Word. In the beginning there was the Voice. In the beginning there was the Voice using Words to bring the Light into existence by uttering the word Light into the void. Thus, out of the void came the light and from it everything else. But if something can be created out of nothing then something and nothing are made out of the same material, so to speak. If something can be created out of nothing by the sheer utterance of sound that gives meaning to it, then the only difference between something and nothing is in the naming...⁸⁸

Repetition has been a tool throughout the novel, in a kind of rhythmic fracking that creates a repetition-with-difference. The same words, repeated again, become like an incantation, or the recurrence of a dream, that gains significance with each coming iteration⁸⁹. Here, the content is further illuminated by the form, in which the repetition mimics the creative act itself, in which, as Ismet posits, the utterance of the sound itself, brings Light (and meaning) into the void. If previously “Ismet” the narrator has chastised and maligned himself for his inability to bring meaning through the content of his life, the narrative as a whole is being advanced as-meaning in itself. The point is run home by this section’s conclusion, given in the form of a quiz. Ismet summarizes:

...we sense, we hope, that there is someone, something out there, a *third presence* that follows us, watches over us, narrates us, dreams us into being, and we hope that this being means something, is something.

What is this something we hope is out there?

1. Fill in the blank:

The third presence is _____?

- a. God
- b. The narrator

⁸⁷ Prcic, 377.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See here Gérard Genette’s canonical explorations in *Narrative Discourse*, especially his descriptions of the “Singulative/Iterative” under *Frequency* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113, as well as Ursula Heise’s engagement with *Temporal Experience and Narrative Form* in “Chronoschisms,” in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, edited by Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 73.

- c. Ismet
- d. Mustafa
- e. What?
- f. Me
- g. You
- h. Who gives a shit?
- i. Something
- h. Nothing
- k. All of the above
- l. None of the above
- m. All/none of the above

[upside down, the “answer key” notes:] If you answered ‘m. All/none of the above,’ you are on your way to become nothing.⁹⁰

This final “test” teases at the entire enterprise of this novel’s undertaking. If every facet of form has complicated and confused the possibility of narration and meaning-making, here the novel admits and embraces it as an existential revelation into the matter of being. Just as text refuses final delineation of one clear unitary “narrator”-force, the deus-ex-machina which could agentially and authorially demand a unified meaning, the novel as a whole draws a parallel to the desire for the selfsame thing in life as a whole—the desire for a life to fit a clear arc, the expectations of traditional Bildungsroman, and subject, to conform to visions of simplified identity, being, and belonging. The novel here has grown and inhabited its own “coming-of-age” to accept its form and being as its own state.

Address to Narratee/Performance of Text (Answer—a la Theatre)

This answer of text as constitutive performance and release models what Ismet as central character-protagonist has realized. As Ismet, in his coming-of-age arc, delves into the world of theater and finds it is through this play, of words, of release, that he is “saved” (literally as that which allows him exit from wartime Bosnia through a theater festival in Edinburgh, figuratively as that which allows him release of his feelings and experiences),⁹¹ this text as narrative-release can now be appreciated as its own performance, of Refugee and Forced Migration experience and being. Crucially, immediately after Ismet’s “epiphany sequence” in his address to Eric, comes the sub-section titled “(...monologue...)”⁹² Just as in the essential shelling-sequence of “(. . . the night you return to bosnia . . .)”, this shard utilizes the second-person narrative form, but importantly, also includes the footnote: “*In the margins of these fragments the following note appeared: ‘PRESTO! STACCATO! Perform almost breathlessly!’”⁹³ Thus, in not only title, but explicit instruction, this keying upon the second-person “You” in experiential-narration is advanced as a *performance*, embodied and enlivened in its being. While the shelling-sequence makes use of the graphic onomatopoeic interruption-marker of **BOOM!**, “(...monologue...)” is marked by a proliferation of ellipses, each fragment of thought “You” have and action “You” take unfolded as a fragmentary dream... As if strapped into a ride more akin to the dystopic

⁹⁰ Prcic, 378-379.

⁹¹ As on Ibid. 157, 109-111 etc.

⁹² Ibid., 380.

⁹³ Ibid.

nightmares of Banksy's *Dismaland*⁹⁴ than the comforts of a *Small World*⁹⁵, the position the narratee is confined to is the pre-ordained acting out of the machinations of destruction, dissolution, and dismay. "You" encounter a seizing of control over "your" own story, as in effect pre-written, like the inexorable unfolding of a dream. And, as in a dream, the pieces come together in the connection only of a dream-sense, defying rational logic and transition, but compelling in its visceral 'realness': "You" reflect upon "the fact that... your chest most of the time feels inflated with . . . full of what? Wrongness?", "you" have no answers and yet are asked to question. "You" play a video game here and realize there is a glitch, an unavoidable limit to the system: the figures are stuck and playing out the same sequences over and over,⁹⁶ just as "you" do, living out the war, the pain, the trauma, the disconnection, alienation, multiplicity and loss. It is what Ismet recounts through his narration, and what is asked of "You" through-text. The frustration of that which remains unanswered, the vulnerability to being which cannot be controlled, and the impact of enacting that which cannot be known in the context of "sense" (rationality) but *sense* (of experience, embodied being), and cannot be avoided (the story which is "Your" story, which is told to "you" but which "you" must recite and play through) is itself here an essential part of the story. In the breathless lead-in to the final fairy tale, the story that is "(. . . boom-boom. . .)*," this is the embodiment of being.

Conclusion

This construction of Refugee and Forced Migration being through form as-Discourse presents and inculcates an embodiment of being that cannot be controlled by any one self – the heightened execution of Unnatural Narratology's greatest possibilities of form, where, as Brian Richardson describes: "the breakdown of the notion of a stable self has been effective in unleashing a polyphony of discourses within an individual and a compelling image of the fragmented nature of the self,"⁹⁷ all the more important to design when attempting to inhabit the Refugee and Forced Migration experience. Mustafa both

⁹⁴ In this tension between the simulation of what would at first seem to suggest agency (in the positioning of an interior unfolding "experience"), but that which soon becomes clearly the dawning realization of sensation in the pre-ordained and conscripted—the reference here gestures to the productive example of a recent 2015 art-project by Banksy, which included a staging area of figurines where, in the words of one article, you may "race with model boats on choppy waters bearing cargoes of dirty refugees (standing room only), their faces as listless as any waiting in line for slaughter"—"Anti-establishment art: Banksy's Dismaland, the Miserable Kingdom," August 25, 2015, *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2015/08/anti-establishment-art>, last accessed September 6, 2015.

⁹⁵ The ride of Disneyland fame: <https://disneyland.disney.go.com/attractions/disneyland/its-a-small-world/>. Last accessed September 7, 2015. The extremity of the juxtaposition here is as purposeful as Banksy's own project design's intent – instead of desperate refugees crowded into a boat awaiting dire straits and fatal fates, there is the terrifyingly idealized insistence upon the ride "across the world" as comfort, pleasure, and experience as passive-consumption of enjoyment.

⁹⁶ Prcic, 384.

⁹⁷ Brian Richardson in "Conclusion: Voicing the Unspeakable," *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, 136.

is and is not Ismet, and Ismet both is and is not Izzy, who both is and is not in any fixed or direct correspondence to the entirety of the author's being. The war in life embeds itself within the body of the narrative, and cannot be excised to clean a clear and linear arc of narrativity... ambiguity will seep in, a multiplicity of being that confuses and confounds every attempt to refine an answer, or assert authority; the text plays with both its "performative" aspects and its "ontological destabilization,"⁹⁸ as "the reader wonders whether the narrator is incompetent, disorientated, devious, or insane."⁹⁹ What is more, the experience renders insensible the very framework of "sensibility" in such a context. Every iteration will gain meaning not through the suitability of its content, but the power of its form—in its very being, it will be. And not be—for every contradiction seems to contain its own antithesis. No obvious solutions will be found. Instead, there is a proposal: to find something-in-the-nothingness. To find fullness in the silence, to inhabit both being and non-being.

If one were to wonder if this exposes the work to a vulnerability, in the criticism that it has devolved into philosophical rumination or aesthetic experimentation at the expense of socio-political meaning, what the work itself expresses and provides argues for exactly this, and nothing else. An experience that refuses easy answers or understanding, and provides both more and less than could be expected, is perhaps what the reader does not want but needs. To doubt the entire enterprise, and to re-consider what any of it means. And how we, as human beings, construct or conceptualize meaning in the first place. That this is what his work could give, as an insight *into* Refugee and Forced Migration being, as both revealing the constitutive ambiguities and limits of the traditional model of being and belonging and presenting the experiential alternative, as what experience indeed *demands*.

⁹⁸ Brian Richardson in "Three Extreme Forms of Narration and a Note on Postmodern Unreliability," in *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, 94.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

Step 2: Expression – Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis* (1+2: *The Story of a Childhood & The Story of a Return*)

Introduction: Graphic Expression

Advancing onto the next stage of Discourse as Construction of the Refugee and Forced Migration Subject (as Mosaic-Being) through Bildungsroman, Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*, in the compilation of *Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood & Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, allows focus on the essential function of Expression in sequential progression from release. This chapter draws upon the particular narratological techniques and effects of “Graphic Narrative,” especially as delineated and explored by Hillary Chute in her *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*,¹⁰⁰ to push further at how such capacities, in constituting multi-present, subjectively rendered iconographies, place, as Chute puts it, “the self in dialogue with a collectivity”¹⁰¹: what is more, to parlay how this dialogue, in providing layered perspectives and allowing the suspension of foregrounded juxtapositions in perpetuity, prove essential to the delineation of a Refugee and Forced Migration being.

Subject-Self Built through Graphic Means—Ontological Effects of Narratology

The “self” that is constructed within *Persepolis*’ narrative domain exists, crucially, as a multiplicity: structured as the unfolding of a series of Marjanes (the narrating-character protagonist and her various graphic representational avatars here are, again, eponymous to the author), the sequencing of titled vignettes builds a cumulative picture of Marjane as a proliferation of selves.¹⁰² These selves are importantly distinct and co-present not only as the logistical differentiations marking Marjane across time-and-space, i.e., Marjane at age X versus age Y, but also, and essentially, as unique and explicitly subjectivized *subjectivities*, incarnations of entire spheres of consciousness, personhoods, and agencies. As a character-protagonist, Marjane as a character-trait holds strong visions of who and what she is, and how she is positioned in relation to the rest of the world—but beyond her-self, through the experiences of war and displacement, repression and the witnessing of violence, forced migration and the bandying between oppression and foreignness, the significance of each of these visions becomes larger, weightier, more multi-valent and profound. Where she is, within her-selves, other-than what others see her as, or what others would allow; where she exceeds what the outside systems, cultures, or regimes would permit, or recognize. The forging of each of these subjectivities into-being then, in this way, as essential parts of *her* being becomes a critical act of self-expression and constitution. As a character-protagonist, it is out of an enduring and increasingly painful struggle for expression that Marjane discovers art as her means of self-assertion, and her drawing into-being her-selves in relation to the world— where otherwise she has been relegated or chastised, left out, or forbidden, where otherwise she has perceived her own difference, or the impossibility to incorporate, the graphic space she can make her own.

And so, it is through an analytic that can encompass the critical facets of form in the

¹⁰⁰ Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Chute, “Graphic Narrative as Witness: Marjane Satrapi and the Texture of Retracing,” *Graphic Women*,” 141.

¹⁰² In this narrative’s form capacity to allow “multiple selves” to exist graphically—Ibid., 140.

narrative's unfolding that can allow the capacity of the graphic novel to execute its greatest effects in the reading of *Persepolis*. Rather than essentializing individual frames as thematic indices to the work as whole, such a methodology argues for the relational and dynamic nature of the graphic narrative instead, seeing the staging within each frame as so many reference points which, while themselves both significant and signifying, will gain the most meaning when seen in connection with the greater braiding, sequencing, and repetition with difference that plays out by the reading across (and between) frames. It is from this context that a greater picture emerges: one that charts the story itself, as a parallel journey being played out in meaningful growth, cycles and (r)evolutions. The data points of each frame in relation to the other tell the story of Marjane's shifting and developing relationships with herself, her family, and the world; the charting becomes not an exercise in alignment and comparison but a framework that produces the discourse as an essential undergirding echo to the story. It reveals an arc in which the self is thrown from perceived knowing to unknowing, positing growth as a constant education and making the fool. It is the pain of disconnection and isolation, the continual shuttering between knowledge and escape, awareness and oblivion. And then perhaps one of the greatest lessons, in the need to always contextualize: the story's central tenant in the personal with the political, the self's place in larger history.

It is too this view that makes vivid the graphic novel's capacity to explicitly render this process for the reader as a necessarily subjective experience. For it is where expression fuses and transforms memory through the act of creation that the self can come into history as an empowered agent. This is possibly the most compelling argument of the story as a whole – that it is in coming into the self as a creative-locus, an admittedly subjective fallible but process-making being, that one leaves behind the visions of martyrdom, or the limits of victimization, and that life can no longer be seen as simply happening to oneself. Thematically this is Marjane's journey as a character, and formally this is what *Persepolis* enacts: a process that embraces awareness in layers, realizations as a continual process, and a constant positioning and re-positioning of the self whose essential awareness-and-realization is that it will never be the end-all-be-all, and all can never be truly known or written into definitive conclusion. This is the destination and arrival point of *Persepolis*. Life is in the telling, the active drawing of oneself into the world and in relation with others. Meaning is collected in-between, with the acknowledged co-presence of contrast and multiplicity, in the “palimpsesting past and present moments together” as constitutive mosaic of “hybrid subjectivities.”¹⁰³

Rhetorical Functions & Effects: Emotional, Cognitive, and Ethical Capacities of Narrative

This graphic register of narrativization thus serves to engage the emotional, cognitive-conceptual, and valuative priorities, crises and needs that rise up as predominant forces in Marjane's being. The story itself keys into the proliferation of effects ramified by this coming-of-age as chapters marked by a series of existential crises across the span of early childhood during the increasing oppression of an Iranian regime; approaching adolescence in the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war; leaving Iran during pivotal years for both the war and her own maturation; then attempting a return to Iran, only to discover the corresponding pains and limitation as she readies and leaves again. Through this arc, Marjane as character initially conceives of herself in an empowered, centralized position, only to realize with increasing awareness the constraints

¹⁰³ Chute, “Women, Comics, and the Risk of Representation,” in *Graphic Women*, 5 & 7, where she gestures here also to Scott McCloud and Art Spiegelman.

upon her, thanks not only to her age (as would be the case in a more traditional Bildungsroman), but essentially and constitutively due to the histories of which her story necessarily takes a part. As subject, she constantly reaches crises points in which she cannot express as she needs to—when she wants to be a key player in the familial and political realities but is too young to know or do enough; when her challenge of authority becomes too dangerous, and she is shipped out of the country; when she is marked with an essential difference from others as the kid from the war-torn country during her school-years, culturally apart and unlike; and upon her return, her difference yet *again* thanks to her years away, and her inability to share her pains in the face of her own guilt and awareness of how they stack up in comparison to the traumas she has missed while gone; finally, even as she discovers and embraces art, the coming into-awareness that she still can only go so far to express herself while within Iran, and the necessity to leave once more.

The execution of form allows each of these crises to be foregrounded and parlayed with nuance, and, what is more, to be “answered” by the narrativizing act. What in the experience itself for character-Marjane is submerged into feeling, where she is unable to process and position this into a larger sense while inside the experience of a given subjective state, becomes rendered into a cognitively graspable form by narrativizing-Marjane, who, in the layering, can both express her then-state of being, in its contrasts and juxtapositions to the outside world and its realities, and in so doing, accomplish what she as-character is unable to do at the time: express herself, without fetters, in each of these subjective-states, while as-narrator cognitively processing and situating these states in a larger context as response and in relation to her experiences. It is not incidental to consider the categorization graphic-narrative theorists as Hillary Chute give the work, typifying its style in counterpart to other narratives as “minimalist *expressionism*”¹⁰⁴ [emphasis mine]: indeed, its formal techniques and executions combine to provide, essentially and constitutively, an act of expression as-being, which accomplishes what the experiences of oppression, war and forced migration have necessitated and demanded. This valuation, in the ethical prioritization of expression as processing and assertion of being, refuses the limits and pains which have been imposed, to create through the graphic narrative space what such experience and its resulting states-of-being contains.

Narrative Results: Structural Setup and its Conceptual Yield (on the Subject and Story Coming-into-Being)

As to the schematization of its structural setup in the context of the rhetorical effects of form, the particular stylistic opportunities and possibilities offered by graphic narrative allow for its composition across the following elements: the iconography of the visual imagery (in the graphic building of characters and world), is constructed alongside the verbal (presence of words), each type of which serves a separate function when distinguished further between dialogue (words ascribed as spoken by and between graphic characters, within the diegetic world of-then), character direct-address¹⁰⁵ (character-Marjane breaking the fourth-wall frame to

¹⁰⁴ Chute, “Women, Comics, and the Risk of Representation,” 6.

¹⁰⁵ As Kai Mikkonen catalogues: “Graphic narratives have a variety of devices available for presenting a character’s subjectivity. These include perspectival techniques, narrative voice (external/internal, explicit, implicit, in legends and balloons), the presentation of dialogue and thought (speech and thought balloons), the technique of following (as sentiments and thoughts are revealed through action in a sequence of images), and other means of visual showing such as facial expression, gesture, body language, gaze, and the character’s position in the image in

participate in narrating-Marjane's narratorial act, speaking outside the diegetic world of-then), and linguistic labeling plus narration of the older narrating-Marjane (descriptions applied to certain images, as well as the placement of explanatory asterisked footnotes, in addition to the greater orientation of narration in boxed text above, below, and around graphics). In each, the specifics within the individual sub-category of form serve a distinct conceptual and constitutive function. The story is broken up into vignettes, sequences which are categorized and begun with a minimalistic, reductive object-noun based name, paired with a corresponding iconographic reductive and simple image-graphic, as in "The Veil" (the first vignette-sequence, its title accompanied by the image of a woman's eye out of blackness, contoured as to suggest the wearing of a veil).¹⁰⁶ Such construction serves to heighten, demonstrate and illuminate the narrative's larger constitutive rhetorical effects, where narrating-Marjane's act is one which distills and renders her individual subjective-states of then into striking expressionistic iconographic markers—the way of rendering-sense and turning an emotional, perceptual state into clear expression is its transformation into recognizable iconographic symbol, and the method of assembling these states-of-being into the greater narrative an assignation of these into similarly categoric sequences. And so, a panel will show then-Marjane's inner state, in all its contrast and contradiction (a then-Marjane gesturing in the peace-sign alongside a then-Marjane bearing a sword, side-by-side)¹⁰⁷, while the larger narration situates her subjectivity and state-of-being in relationship to the larger world of-experience in which it fits.

The narrating-text above, below, and around the graphic-narration taking place (for the symbols are telling a story of their own, qualified and informed by the linguistic text-elements) allows narrating-Marjane to in effect be communicating both with a narratee and with her then-selves: the sense of awareness which marks her narration infuses the way she situates her then-selves, and to re-experience as to project her then-self as both inextricably part of who she is (as cumulative expressive subject), and crucially apart from enough to gain better understanding and appreciation (for each then-self's relation to the larger story and subject-being). In every component, the formative and formational intricacies of narrating-Marjane's act is parlayed to its greatest effects, including: the asterisks which provide greater contextual or cultural detail, reminding of narrating-Marjane's expertise which she has gained through her experiences (as when relating a story which mentions a dowry, the text-box continues on while an asterisked footnote elucidates with Marjane's larger knowledge "In Iran, it's the husband who must pay his wife a dowry"¹⁰⁸); the labeling which reminds of the narratorial graphic-making process (as when a panel both contains a text-box with "This is Mehri," *and* an arrow pointing to the figure within the graphic-space labeled with the word "her,"¹⁰⁹ it explicitly foregrounds and reminds of

relation to other visual objects"—in this case, I argue the execution of these devices reveal something not only about Marjane as-character (in her then-selves as drawn within the graphic-frame), but also, and essentially, about Marjane as-narrator. Kai Mikkonen, "Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives," in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narratives*, Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon eds. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 101.

¹⁰⁶ Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

the agential-force of Marjane, drawing and labeling); and the greater narrating-act taking place, which through the text-box relay undergirds and provides further nuance to the iconographic story unfolding. It is also a significant and essential choice within this greater narration that, while creating and deciding not only the graphic figures but the dialogue taking place within and between, the graphically-rendering and narratively-authorial Marjane metafictionally gives her then-selves explicit moments of expression that transcend their then-times: as in a panel where young-Marjane looks out and speaks to say “My faith was not unshakable,”¹¹⁰ versus a narrating text-box which could technically relate the same, then-Marjane is built as constitutively agential in her own ways. Each Marjane is not a puppet being pulled by strings—the narration that *Persepolis* builds explicitly and deliberately gives each Marjane a place, a chance for expression, and the honor of being, essential and in answer to what has been repressed, restrained, and finally given voice and space in the doing.

Perception and Destruction, Dissolution and Dis-Illusionment

One defining element of her experience, in its corresponding subjectivities and the resultant narrative mandate it provokes, is the arc in which her perceived self as-character, and her perceived corresponding positioning in the world, is put at odds with reality, the actualities of violent political regime then war both making a juxtaposition for her is not just painful but existentially destructive and ontologically repressive. This experience holds higher stakes than the traditional bildung arc, in which the innocence and self-centrality or aggrandizement of childhood is supposed to be challenged by the process of maturation and increasingly more nuanced knowledge of self and world; in comparison, the nature of contrast between what she once perceives or knows and how those entire subjectivities-of-being are destroyed in these contexts leave her not with a new formation-of-self and the comforts of being, but facing voids instead. Constitutively dangerous in comparison, this dissolution brings her as-character to the brink—and what makes her re-constitution of these selves through the narrative all the more recuperatively powerful and agentially purposeful.¹¹¹

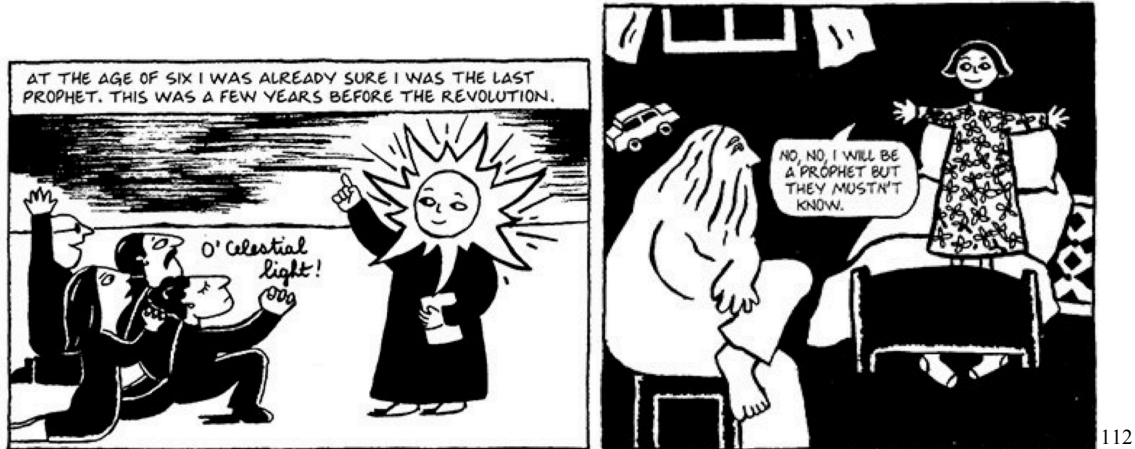
Proclamations of the Self – Where One Stands with God (and Family)

To chart this, young then-Marjane’s initial introduction to the story as-character becomes an especially useful register. For here the narrative takes pains to express the degree to which then-Marjane perceives and positions herself with self-possession and self-confidence: the (selves)-aware narration of the boxed-text emphasizes the hyperbolic surety, with a hinted premonition of what is to come: “At the age of six I was already sure I was the last prophet. This was a few years before the Revolution.” The pairing illustration depicts a baby-faced Marjane as

¹¹⁰ Satrapi, 10.

¹¹¹ Bound up in this, and in relation to graphic narrative’s particularities, is what Nancy Pedri engages in “Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact Nor Fiction” as the explicit constructedness of the cartoon image, which constitutively participates in a “creative interplay” that further “dismantle[s] notions of self (and reality) as anything other than always mediated and assumed, not given”— in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels*, 148. In this case, I see the conceptual implications of these formal effects extending beyond postmodern challenges to the self as given, where the particularities of Refugee and Forced Migration experience make the constitutive act through narrative a yet more specific personal-as-political affirmation of an (alternative) state-of-being though-experience.

radiating sun, holding her Holy Book (of self-prescribed declarations) with an authorial finger raised at devout followers kneeling in belief and supplication before her.



This form of narrative permits several levels of meaning to be operating at once here. For one, the graphic register both inhabits and communicates her then-subjectivity; out of an affective state, in the feelings and perceptions of herself knowing-all, of having power, of her latent abstract destiny-of-being as teleological self-belief then, the narrative channels into iconographic clarity. At the same time, the accompanying text not only implies in its tone a later self-awareness, which informs her depiction of this subjectivity, but also gestures towards the way in which larger machinations will affect (and affectively unseat) her. This starting position thus establishes her self-assigned orbital centrality to the rest of the world.¹¹³ She knows the way, she writes the rules, and all others should follow. At least, so she thinks in this particular now.

This state-of-being is further delineated by its orienting confidence of belief where the narrative stages embodied encounters with a graphically-rendered God. Again, her subjectivity of-then is inhabited and lent iconographic form, where her sense of assurance and the comfort of connection to higher power is depicted in the pictorial of God as rather patient conversational partner, listening to a little Marjane holding court with disproportionate authority. In one such sample frame, Marjane can be seen perched atop her bed, standing over God, arms outstretched as she declares her prophet status; God, meanwhile, sits with crossed leg, leaning in to the pajama-clad prophet at her de facto pulpit. The evocation of this iconographic instantiation evokes with declarative force the degree to which Marjane believes herself in the know. Soon this all, of course, is to change.

¹¹² Satrapi, 6 & 9.

¹¹³ As Rachel Trousdale ascribes in her “A Female Prophet? Authority and Inheritance in Marjane Satrapi,” “However devout she may be, Marji’s religious beliefs are unorthodox. She is the center of her own moral universe—and intends to not simply remain central for herself, but to become central for others.” Rachel Trousdale in *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art* ed. Jane Tolmie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 243.



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The fall comes fast, as unfolds in a sequence soon after, in which Marjane is not only summarily flipped into the role of supplication, as perhaps would befit a child, but, in the particular intricacies of experience midst a context of violence, repression, and danger, reality vacates her previous sense of belief and surety, leaving her in the darkness of the void. It is crucial to consider here the setup of the scene, which begins with Marjane holding another big-talk conversation with God as her parents discuss the realities of the Shah's rule and the ravages of a cinema fire which has just taken place. Marjane begins the sequence essentially grandstanding to God himself, her self-assumed revolutionary capacities already qualified as the depiction of a child playing dress-up, figuratively donning the hats of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. When the real-world, of grownups talking police brutality and the Shah's lies, protests and insurrection, intervenes, God literally (or literarily, in the designs of the narrative) leaves the room. She hears her parents on the other side, discussing a real-life demonstration; the threat of actual violence stands in the air, and she wants to be a part. It is at this moment that Marjane's position is to undergo a quick change, and her entire vision of self, structure of belief and dialectic discourse of self-with-world, is destroyed. Now, Marjane is revealed to be very much at the mercy of the adult world: she wheedles her parents, who ignore and refuse her. Her position in this exchange cuts her down to size both figuratively and literally; as her parents impress the magnitude of the context she cannot yet understand, the realities she does not yet know, her smallness and vulnerability are exaggerated, her form clinging like a desperate doll round her parents' necks. When she is placed back into her own bedroom, it has been transformed by the reality that has deflated and confused her out of her grandstanding *or* understanding. God is no

¹¹⁴ Satrapi, 17.

longer there. And she is very much put into a place where she knows she does not know, and does not hold the power.

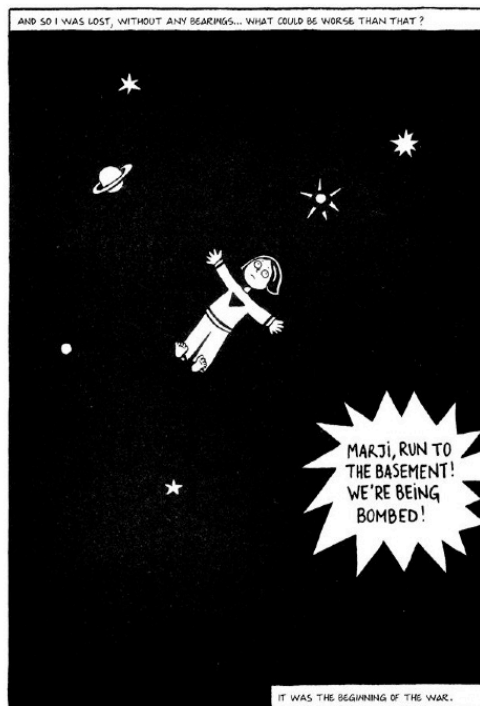
It is her relationship with her Uncle Anoosh that catapults the final stage of crisis, the final evacuation of belief, and her final transformation from childhood innocence to something-else in this non-canonical Coming-of-Age. Indeed, it is when first entranced with Uncle Anoosh, the revolutionary and former political prisoner, that Young Marjane takes for herself a somewhat “adult” role in offering him hot chocolate for his conversation, playing host, preparing it at the stove with self-pleased lowered lashes, and carrying it to the table to serve them as she reveals she knows about “dialectical materialism” (though it is through the comic-book version she has read).¹¹⁵



As he confides in her and relates to her the importance to not lose the family memory (“Even if it’s not easy for you, even if you don’t understand it all”—“Don’t worry, I’ll never forget.” She promises – a relevant hallmark for the novel at large, as an act of re-membering, and rendering into tangible, inescapable form the traces into being)¹¹⁶, the bond is cemented; when, he asks to see her as his one visitor before death when the Islamic Republic arrests him as enemy of the state, her childhood as it once was ends. It is with his death, and seen directly underneath the depiction of an official state newspaper’s propagandist lies of a “Russian Spy Executed” (with her “beloved Anoosh”’s photo), that the narrative figures Marjane actively banishing God from attempting return or comfort. This time, it is not God that disappears but she who refuses him—again up on her bed, asserting her position in the midst of her powerlessness, she shouts at him to leave, and is thus left, at the end of her chapter as-child, unmoored, unsupported by her former beliefs...right as war begins.

¹¹⁵ Satrapi, 59.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 60.



Her relinquishment of God here becomes not a progression from need to self-sufficiency, but more a cutting-loose from the final tether of comfort: she is shown “out at space,” not just alone in the darkness of her bed now, but out where there is no atmosphere, where human beings cannot survive—eyes wide, arms spread in gravity-less surrender, she floats like a martyred satellite, the deafening abyss of blackness pierced by her parents’ call: “Marji, run to the basement! We’re being bombed!”

For the next sequence, Marjane is shown differently – her hair is longer, her face and body more mature, less rounded, and it is made obvious that change has come.

While the change from the first stage to the next seems quite dramatic, it is revealed that this older subjectivity-of-self is only about one year apart from younger Marjane¹¹⁷, dramatizing the effect of the shift by showing her in this more grown-looking context without explaining immediately how much time has passed or what year events are taking place (this is particularly noticeable as a technique when elsewhere in the novel the age and date are explicitly given at a sequence’s start). Now, unlike before, Marjane’s parents allow her to participate in a demonstration (her mother, in fact, encourages it), but when “things got nasty” and Marjane sees for the first time violence firsthand, she is seen being spirited away on her father’s shoulders, a notable indicator that while relatively older, she is still young (enough) to be yet a child.

This older Marjane pushes against the desires to take on the roles of “grownup” while realizing, too, in turns, her own limitations of understanding of the greater situations unfolding.

¹¹⁷ Satrapi, 76.

When her mother's best friend must flee bombing in the border states, she and her family seek refuge in Marjane's home and she "takes" the two young boys under her wing, directing them: "You two, follow me." (Still pajama-clad, but this time taller than her fellow occupants, younger boys shorter and literally looking up to her)— back in her bedroom when the elder boy inquires "You don't have any toys?", Marjane replies with great surety "No, I'm all grown up. I have books. If you want, I can read you a story." Looking at a book with sly self-assumed maturity, the boys look bewildered and disoriented in contrast; not insignificantly, Marjane herself had realized the importance of reading as a conduit to self-education back in a previous iteration, when, after not understanding the politically-implicated humor of her parents and grandmother, she settles herself in her bedroom with a book, determining: "I realized then that I didn't understand anything. I read all the books I could."



Now positioned as this "older, wiser" Marjane, the protagonist assumes greater responsibility while still coming upon the limitations of her own understanding – the most pivotal scene to demonstrate this, perhaps, comes when she goes to the supermarket with the kids, her mother, and her mother's best friend, thinking to herself as she stands tall above them "God, what brats!"¹¹⁹ After bonding unexpectedly with the two young boys over, of all things, flatulence humor (child's play par excellence), she is interrupted by overhearing (as she had once overheard her parents discussing political events in the next room over) nearby shoppers disparaging the groups of recent refugees, speaking of how the "refugees have descended upon Tehran" and cleared out the grocery stores, and that the women have gone so far as to prostitute themselves, suggesting "Soon, it won't just be food. With all those sluts out there, we're going to have to watch our husbands."/ "Anyway, as everyone knows: 'Southern women are all whores.'¹²⁰ Whereas once Young Marjane was the one unaware of what was going on, now (Middle) Marjane leaves the store with eyes downcast in knowing dismay and sadness, holding the youngest boy's hand to escort him outside the store though he remains unaware of what is happening, still laughing from the innocent and oblivious joke from before. The sequence is

¹¹⁸ Satrapi 32, then 91.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

ended showing this shift with poignant graphic clarity, as while Marjane is once more in the backseat (as she has been before, always in the backseat of the car as her parents or the adults in front discuss matters of importance that she has not been able to fully intervene in or comment on), now she holds two younger children in her arms beside her, and takes in the reality of what is happening to affect her inner understanding and behavior; whereas the trip began with her dismissal and annoyance of the two young refugees at her side, body turned away from them and eyes upturned, now she brings them close eyes down as the narration marks: “I felt so ashamed for myself...”—There is something she now knows, and a sense of responsibility and stakes in how she meets the world and the events around her.



Despite her attempts, she becomes aware of own limited positioning, resigned to the backseat, self-shamed by her own ignorance, sheltering the younger boys in her arms but unable to do more. The adults' treatment of her, still as-child, is put in tandem with the literal figurative positioning of her in an iconographic register that puts her looking up to or apart from the very adults she wishes to be equal-to, separated from the dialogues in which she wishes to take part.¹²²

¹²¹ Satrapi, 92 and 93.

¹²² Another case in which the particular range of devices made available by graphic narrative are utilized to their utmost—here, the relationship of Marjane as-depicted in relationship to the other visual objects in-frame as highlighting and further conceptually illuminating her subjective-perception and perspective, drawing even further and in greater finite detail than as catalogued by Kai Mikkonen in his “Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives,” where this positioning delineates not just the perspectival intricacies between then-Marjane and narrating-Marjane, but further separates then-Marjane’s subjectivities as changing *within hours or minutes* (in the

As the chapters recount Marjane’s continued growth and her desired expressions-of-self which manifest in increasingly jarring contrast to the societal expectations and demands around her, the narrative reaches a tipping point when this Marjane, the Marjane who has grown and become something, and someone, that cannot live in her own home, necessitates a departure. By the age of 14, she has experienced not only a growing awareness of the world around her and the larger contexts and implications to the political events that she has been privy to with personal proximity, but when she also sees the mangled rubble and almost unrecognizable remains of her young neighbor, Neda Baba-Levy, killed in a weekend bombing, her experience exceeds expression in suffering and anger¹²³, and marks a turn as “I was fourteen and a rebel. Nothing scared me anymore.”¹²⁴ This Marjane confronts authority figures, to the extreme of pushing her principal to the ground for trying to remove her bracelet (a banned good), and standing in class to correct her instructor’s propaganda with a narrative of the oppression being perpetrated by the current regime:



The graphic register here illuminates both her acts of defiance, and the stakes of doing so—while, in the case of the principal, Marjane stands above her after striking her down, she conditions it with a backpedaled “Excuse me! I didn’t mean it!” while the principal asserts her

supermarket, she perceives her superiority which is matched with an adult-ish position towering in relation to the younger boys, while by the trip back home she is shamed in the backseat).

¹²³ The final panel of this sequence significantly goes “all black” as the narration recounts “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger,” Satrapi 142.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 143, 144.

position once more with an exclaimed cry of “Satrapi, you’re expelled!” When at the next school, a position her family has to finagle her into due to her behaviors, she then literally stands up to her teacher, shown as the lone standing figure midst a sea of seated veiled classmates, but though she raises her finger (a repeated iconography through the novel demonstrating instruction and assumed authority) and asserts her word, the standing teacher’s word goes – to direct a phone call to her parents, and the realization that Marjane cannot continue as she is.¹²⁶ This is the final mark crossed, at which point her parents sit her down and declare that “considering the person you are and the education you’ve received, we thought that it would be better if you left Iran.”¹²⁷ Her coming-of-age, into this person she has become, necessitates, in essence, her removal for her survival – apart from the traditional bildungsroman in which the individual comes to be as the citizen who fits into the society surrounding, here Marjane’s knowing results in a being that cannot be recognized within Iran’s domain. She is driven, for the final time, in the backseat,¹²⁸ to the airport, then must watch from behind the airport glass as she sees the impact of her departure on her parents -- seeing her mother stricken down (in a pose reminiscent of the Pietà), held in her father’s arms, Marjane can no longer be the child that she once was, and indeed, must see her parents as something other than the unshakable source of authority and comfort and control, as vulnerable and human and wounded, just as she must leave, to live, on her own.

Set Apart by Difference—Culturally Damned Dualism (Expressions of Sex and Gender)

In the stages which follow, one area used as a critical index in demonstrating Marjane’s resulting isolation and difference, both in the new-country and upon her attempted time of return, is expressions of sex and gender, and how she is found wanting no matter where she goes or seeks refuge. For Marjane, her time in Austria marks a steep learning-curve in the transition from veiled women and separated sexes to the birth control pill and her witnessing of free and uninhibited sexualized interaction; while she has attempted to undertake her own education, reading Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* upon memory of her mother’s own reading collection,¹²⁹ this pales as woefully inadequate once confronted with the realities of real-life, made excruciatingly clear in a sequence set with a party thrown by her roommate Julie. Painted and made up by Julie to look appropriately “beautiful,” sexy and adult, Marjane feels appropriately the part, until the party begins. A full-page panel depicts a quick splash into isolation, her protective crouch making her a definitively overwhelmed and outnumbered form in the midst of her substance-using, amorously engaged Austrian counterparts.

¹²⁶ Satrapi, 143 & 144

¹²⁷ Ibid., 147.

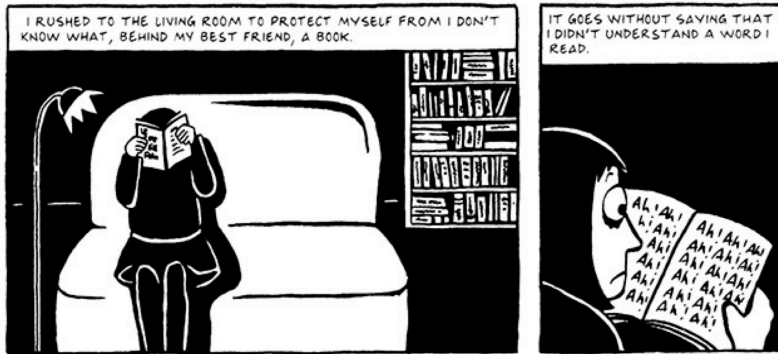
¹²⁸ Ibid., 151.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 175.



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Upon the party's conclusion, Marjane cannot successfully wipe her makeup away, her insufficiencies literally bleeding down her face like cartoonish tears- realizing her roommate is in the throes of a sexual encounter, she seeks escape behind a book, recalling for the reader the numerous instances throughout the narrative in which reading has provided an escape and an understanding, a power and a grounding for Marjane. In this case though, such a "prop" proves useless, with the following frame demonstrating in comic graphicness the inability to either block out or adequately process the onomatopoeitic auditory-witnessing of passion she's suffering. Encountering the couple in-the-flesh next, she is dramatically positioned as apart and on the outside from the synchronicitous pair.



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¹³⁰ Satrapi, 185.

¹³¹ Ibid., 187.



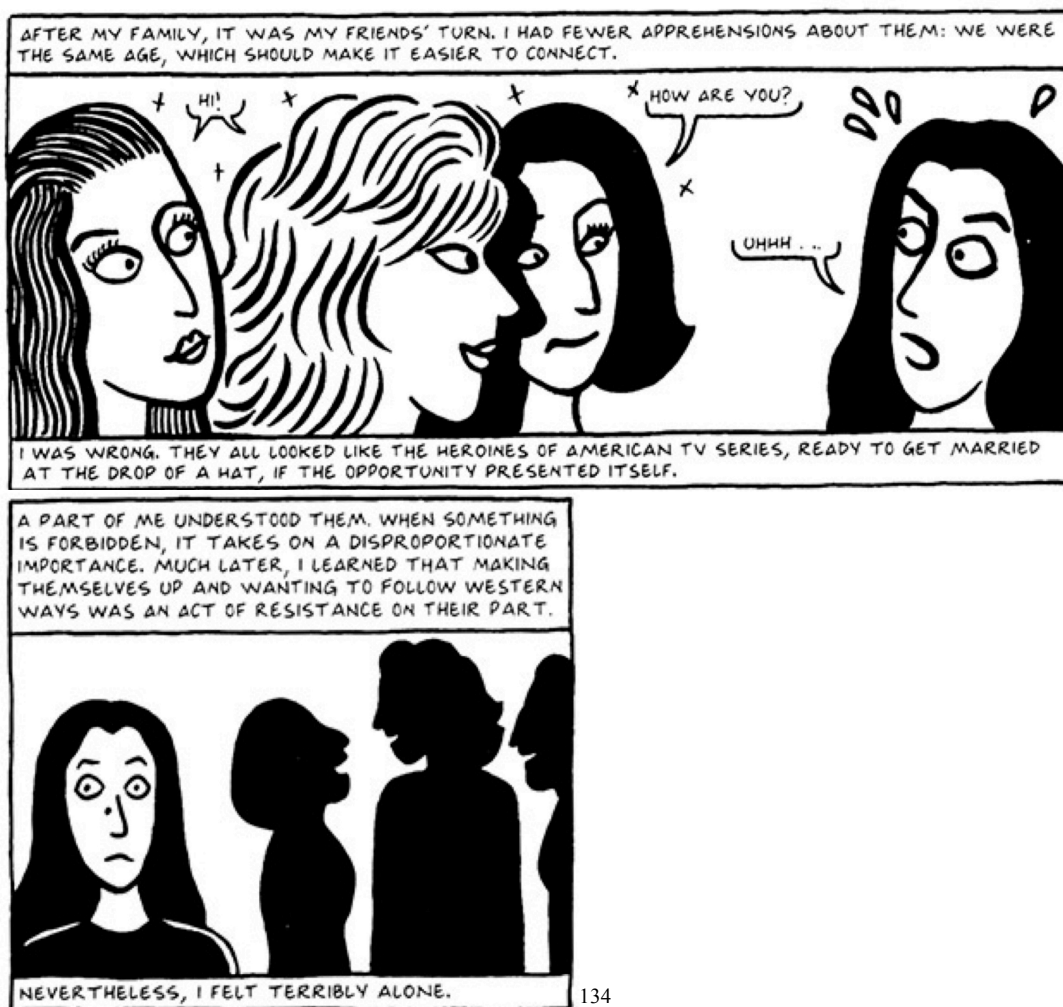
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While her “first big step” towards assimilation into Western culture, in the realm of sexual liberation, seems traumatic and unappealing at best, Marjane indeed proceeds to mimic and more closely match the behaviors she is witnessing (see later section on imbibing substances as an additional area of enculturation, in addition to that of sexual congress). Yet her romantic endeavors, as depicted and described, do not provide a great outlet of self-expression and existentially-fulfilling connection. Her spurned offerings to a man she later discovers is gay provide more opportunity for rejection and confusion than acceptance, and the one great romance she believes to have founded turns out to be, in her eyes, a great foolish lie.¹³³ While more will be expounded upon on the note of romance and relationships in a successive section, for the time being, the depiction of Marjane’s positioning in this area as one somewhat stilted, horrified, and relegated to the outside proves essential to understanding her experience.

And so, if the narrative painting of her status as “other” in this area has been thus far stitched into the fabric, part and parcel, of a culture-shock of essentialized differences between herself and the Western world, it would seem a return to her place of origin would re-seat her among friends and familiar faces. Yet instead of ease and like-mindedness, her experience is one oddly mirrored to that which she encountered on the other side – Marjane, though supposedly the one who has undergone her coming-into-age as a sexual (and sexualized) being through her time in the West, stands comparatively plain-faced and shocked against her glamorously gilded former friends. Beats of sweat or surprise form an exclamatory halo around her in comparison to the feminine twinkles accenting their aura; she is as out of place in this lineup as she was in the former tableau.

¹³² Satrapi, 188.

¹³³ Ibid., 210-214, 233.



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Though the narration recounts later understanding at a deeper level the context behind such manifestations, and their positioning in relationship to the West, again, though her own people and her home culture, the scene replays the gaping smiles of others who are connecting while Marjane stands alone and apart. The irony here, of course, in the parallel is all the more acute for Marjane failing to excel as a part of things in the Western world, yet so too failing to both connect to her Iranian peers or look enough the role of the idealized and reproduced Western model.

Yet she is pinioned quickly, too, for acting *too much* the part where her looks have failed to impress. At what is supposed to be a purportedly shared activity between friends at a skiing trip, Marjane reveals her sexual activity with several partners and her sweat-surprise beads make a repeat appearance as the stakes are raised with a friend's exclamation of "whore" (see below) – while the reader can see the narration recounts, once more, a later, more rationalized understanding of the situation, the choreography of the scene sets her apart. The final frame of this sequence markedly shows, that while all friends may seem at an unknowing glance indistinguishable at first, with their dress of black headscarves, black clothing, and black

¹³⁴ Satrapi, 259.

sunglasses, proceeding in a lined up row, Marjane walks noticeably apart and separated from the other three. Whatever the unifying principle and experience that binds the others together separates Marjane and holds her behind; while the reader knows too from a previous panel that the shading on Marjane's cheeks are meant to be associated with color from the sun and indications of a tan, such marking in the context of this scene also beckons unspokenly to a register of blush or an indicator of what, in other situations, might be embarrassment or shame.



While the narrative voice aligns deeper contextualizations of meaning for *why* the experiences flesh out in these ways for Marjane, the visceral and bold graphic register of these scenes which position the character of Marjane as they do in relation to others surrounding this topic make clear and painful the rock and the hard place between which Marjane never seems to be able to escape. She is neither enough the one nor the other, and must instead walk a path her own. The depiction of Marjane surrounding sexuality as a theme thus becomes an index for not merely sexuality, as iconic to many if not all bildungsroman as an essential component to the maturational process, but an explicitly personal litmus revealing the divide and existential sundering which has taken place in her shuttering between East and West.

Altered States- Seeking Escape, Separation of Self from World

In Marjane's trajectory of acclimatization, so too do various mood-altering substances factor in as a relevant index and factor into how she feels and fits (or not) into the world around her. Perceiving her own difference, and her incapacity to express herself and feel fitting, she seeks escape. It begins as a fakeout, pretending to partake with the rest as the frame reveals her standing apart from her friends in her behind-the-scenes strategy. The humor in the self-aware ludicrousness of this portrait is tempered, as with the experience of sexual norms related before, in realizing the degree of Marjane's internal isolation that is being drawn in the same stroke; the clownish extremes of the scenes that unfold become almost grotesque as a funhouse distortion to accentuate her acute sense of alienation from that which is occurring around and within her. As a coping mechanism, her initial ability to ape those around her and become seemingly part of the circle makes the reader all the more practiced in discerning where the mood lands apart from the image. The laughing faces, none more extreme than Marjane's toothy gape accentuate instead the falsity on which her belonging is predicated.

¹³⁵ Satrapi, 270.



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Soon, her relationship to drugs becomes more than an act. As she fails to connect romantically or otherwise in any kind of meaningful way with those around her, she joins in the communal experience of recreational drugs. The visualization of her altered state goes alongside a companion-text that relates how she would rather do so than contend with her “solitude” or disappointments¹³⁸; the whimsical curlicue-caricature of her likeness is followed by a similarly warbled but in this case disappearing portrait (“of Dorian Gray”), setting up a loss of and a disconnection from self as the preconditional state in which she will meet her declared “first great love of her life” (and who will later, as she will recount, almost lead in her telling to her death by failed romance).

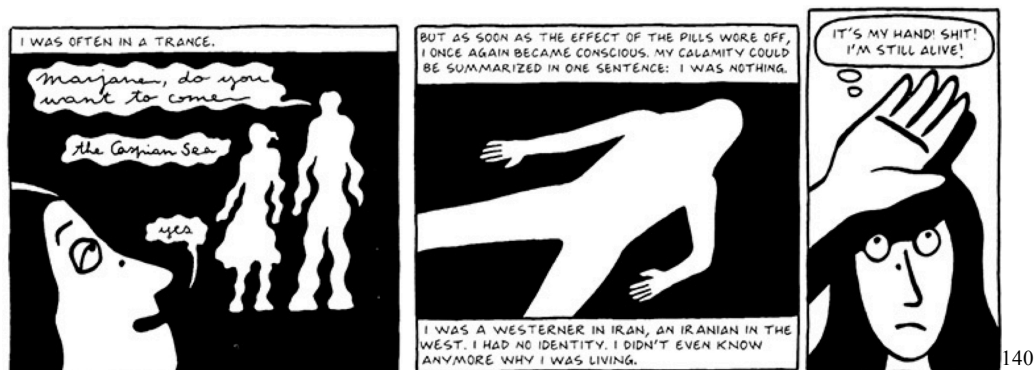
¹³⁶ Satrapi, 192.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹³⁸ Ibid.



With Marjane's descent into drugs illustrated as initiated by loneliness and isolation, and exacerbated by relationships predicated and encouraged by her continuing, it would seem she would turn a new page once the spiral completes with her boyfriend's infidelity, a resulting near-death experience from lack of self-care on the streets, and her eventual return to Iran. However, once again, her isolation is rendered all the more acute upon coming home – the reaction and reception she receives from others who remained, and all of the larger history of the war she is not a part of while her personal histories are rendered moot or insignificant in comparison make her even more depressed. She takes drugs prescribed by a psychotherapist this time, which render her again detached and disconnected – her dopey expression at the cartoonish silhouettes seemingly depicting her own parents make vivid the degree to which she has telescoped in to an entirely insular and unreachable state. Without the pills, the succeeding panel illustrates, she identifies as nothing: a literal blank-slate whiteout (evoking shades of crime-scene chalkouts, eerily frozen while dynamically posed). The consequences of feeling “a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West” results in perhaps the worst of all distortions, which, while not as dramatically “altered,” implicates a nothingness that challenges the use of living. It is in this state she finally tries to take all of her pills to end it all. It is when she still wakes to a new day that her rendering is returned, and again is depicted as “herself,” the Marjane the reader has come to know as her self-identified avatar; and once more in herself, she decides to survive and take her life into her own hands.



¹³⁹ Satrapi, 219.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 272 and 273.

Again, as with the novel's indexing of sexuality as a significant trope, the altered-state (as spurred, enhanced, or exacerbated in relation to drugs and substances) becomes a critical lens through which to view Marjane's experience. Beyond more typical narratives of adolescent isolation, suffering and self-medication, Marjane's relationship to mood- and world-altering gateways grows out of the particular crisis set into motion by the war and her divide, again, between East and West; a split which isolates her not only from others but in fact from inside herself. While doubting who one is is surely a canonical trope to the teenage years, Marjane's struggle resides within the additional contextual framing of a failure to be able to situate herself comfortably within history—the world in which she resides in Austria never is fully hers, never completely fits, and yet upon her return to Iran she finds the history she has missed as her own renders her personal-history (of the Austria years) unknowable and meaningless. The frameworks of signification on both ends make for a bind in which Marjane feels inescapably foreign and would rather seek escape, and yet she must ultimately confront how to forge an existentially affirming sense of self (and self-rendered meaning to her existence and the world). The explicit and concrete example of her flight from reality through drugs and what she must face in the bright light of day provides a bold marker of this larger narrative-spanning need.

The Party Escape – The Personal in the Face of the Political (Attempted Release and Expression)

While not as fully self-evacuating and subjectivity-altering as her trips with altered substances and drugs, another venue which is sought for escape is partying. In this case, the trope of partying as depicted across the narrative gains particular valence and layered meaning as the story and time progress, and reveal how escape is not simply a personal struggle for Marjane but extends to contain a more historical collective struggle for existence within Iran. Before Marjane has left for Austria, as the war sets deep, partying is set up in relief as a kind of counterpoint to the life-and-death realities taking place outside the doors of home. The political becomes deeply personal, as, for instance, Marjane discovers when their family housekeeper's son is courted to fight with a (fake, cheap, plastic) "key to paradise."¹⁴¹ The final panels depict those young and poor bodies being blown to their deaths, as the narration takes pains to land home: "The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life..." – the following frame uses repetition of form to powerful effect with parallel lines and positionings depicting, in this case, Marjane and her friends dancing at a party. The seemingly mundane "meanwhile" transition of the narration, tracking from death to dance at breakneck speed, caps off its juxtaposition with the seemingly oblivious if not callous sartorial note, "I was looking sharp."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Satrapi, 99-102.

¹⁴² Ibid., 102.



Having those bodies mimic each other in position and form at close proximity highlights to extreme degree both the similarity (of the age and being of these bodies) and stark difference (the socio-economic and political factors determining which bodies dance and which die).¹⁴⁴ It is significant to remark here that the shape of self-aware narration being utilized in this telling gestures to its own indulgences, parlaying a simultaneously aggrandizing and effacing tone of

¹⁴³ Satrapi, *ibid.* 102.

¹⁴⁴ Theresa Tensuan explicitly notes the same relevant execution of repetition-with-difference as well here, where “this tension is illustrated through the juxtaposition of two panels, one that shows the bodies of young, poor, conscripted soldiers being blown apart on the battlefield while their upper-class counterparts flail themselves to the trains of punk rock (102)”; for Tensuan, “The similarities between the representations... accentuates the differences between their situations and highlights the dissonance of a social, cultural, and political context in which one’s ‘opportunities’—in this case, for martyrdom—helps secure another’s pleasures and privileges,” one valence which is certainly present in this representation. However, I wish to recuperate too how the partying itself can be unpacked with further nuance, not *just* the privilege of pleasure, but a possible space for release or attempt at agency within a dominant socio-political domain of conscription and repression. Theresa Tensuan in “Comic Visions and Revisions in the World of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4, Winter 2006, 960.

tongue-in-cheek positioning. Marjane as character is as potentially insulated or self-focused or disproportionately sheltered as narrating-Marjane is more widely conscious, reflective, and ambivalent in tone.

One may appreciate here the way in which Satrapi's intentional juxtaposition and contrast, using repetition, similarity and meaningful difference to politicize the personal and include, self-effacingly, the reader in her own realizations of complicity in the system and place in the world around her, delineates part of a larger theme of *Persepolis*' formal and conceptual style; the nature of the graphic novel allows Satrapi to draw attention to levels of awareness, positional understanding, and the necessity of embracing the imperfect and subjective as constitutive to art and life. Her "this is me" approach does not shy from the critical and in fact constantly performs positioning and re-positioning on herself as character, narrator, and author at large, welcoming the experience of the reading process as a reproduction of the analysis she, arguably, advances as the process of understanding oneself in relation to others and the world (the ultimate lesson of the bildungsroman, the work as lesson itself). The narrative is a product of this practice as much as the individual (in this case, Marjane) is outside the bounds of the page—the aesthetic signifier to the real-world signified.

The effect comes to even greater levels of significance by the chapters of Marjane's return to Iran in the midst of an especially repressive regime of cultural and personal-political control. As Marjane had formerly narrated in the context of her family going to parties as previous forms of resistance and survival, enjoyment and excess in the midst of war and prohibition, she now no longer subsists at the role of child witnessing the grownup games. Actively participating and initiating such forms, she is at the heart of these parties, and narrates from within one night when a party is broken up by the Guard and results in a friend's death by failed-escape. A failed escape in this context holds dual valence, both with the literal inability to pass beyond the guardsmen's reach and the figurative failure to maintain a bubble outside of the regime's reach of control. In the wake of this failure and loss, with the threat all the more present, physical, and real, Marjane is with those friends who opt to continue, as an explicitly political through-personal act. The final frame of this sequence declares with seemingly bacchanalian shamelessness "I never drank so much in my life,"¹⁴⁵ the motion lines previously evoked to convey her friend's plunge into death in this case repeated for the shimmying of her hips;



¹⁴⁵ Satrapi, 311.

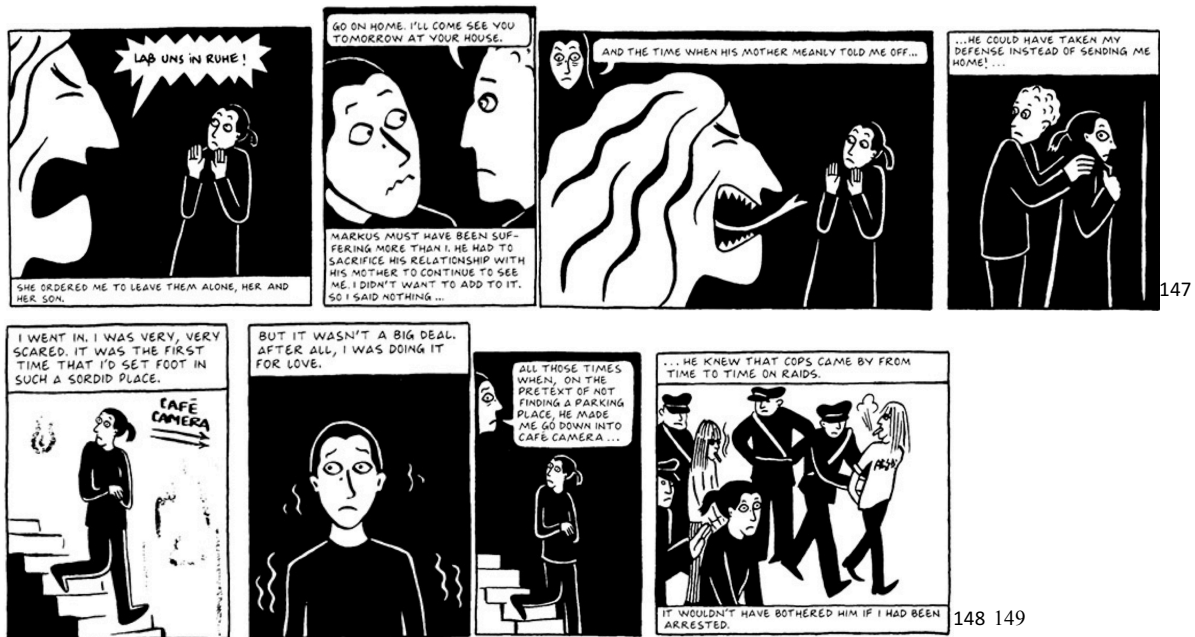


however the deliberateness of this duality and contrast is utilized to powerful and critically self-aware effect. Whereas Marjane's consumption at parties taking place in Austria was posited as emerging from a desire to belong and escape from the self's awareness of isolation and disconnection, here the escape is given a collective capacity. The necessity of "escape" carries over from previous chapters, but in this evolution arrives at a declaratively unapologetic purposeful landing. Yet too there is always the pull, the danger, of sliding too far into escapist excess, where, what seems rebellion can continue into oblivion. Marjane's narration recounts the constant need to pull back into the register of awareness, without which action loses all its resistance, relevance, context or meaning; the resistance which seems so deliberate can prove another form of drug as-distraction. While a more effective means of escape than drugs, it still fails at the level of expression, and so Marjane's character-journey continues, in her Forced Migration coming-of-age.

Seeking Refuge in An-Other: The Failures of Romance on Both Sides

The final area which serves to elucidate her need to stand for herself and express herself both productively and meaningfully comes from the disastrous learning-experiences which are her forays into romantic relationships. Another source which seems to recur as both a site of escape and an essential jumping-off point for Marjane in her growth is this realm of romance; if drugs furnished an escape and are eventually left behind for clear reality, and partying provides a controlled outlet to escape but must be tempered by an awareness and consistent return to the self in larger-history, romance (as Marjane engages her sexuality through the roller-coaster of cultural norms as explored above) proves both an intoxicating quest for connection and a completely self-deluding avenue for escape. Particularly in the two major relationships of the novel, first with Markus in Austria then with Reza in Iran, Marjane seeks great investment in the returns of love, but it is ultimately in realizing the ways in which she has been stunted by these relationships, and the termination of them in turn, which spur the greatest growth and change. Both relationships engage again a distortion of reality, and it is standing alone, Marjane in relationship with herself, that she lays claim to the greatest, closest connection yet.

¹⁴⁶ Satrapi, 309 & 311.



In the case of Markus, the relationship represents what Marjane describes as the one source of emotional connection she felt in Austria;¹⁵⁰ its dissolution (and her belief it was all founded upon lies and distortions) collapses her whole world there, and initiates her return to Iran.

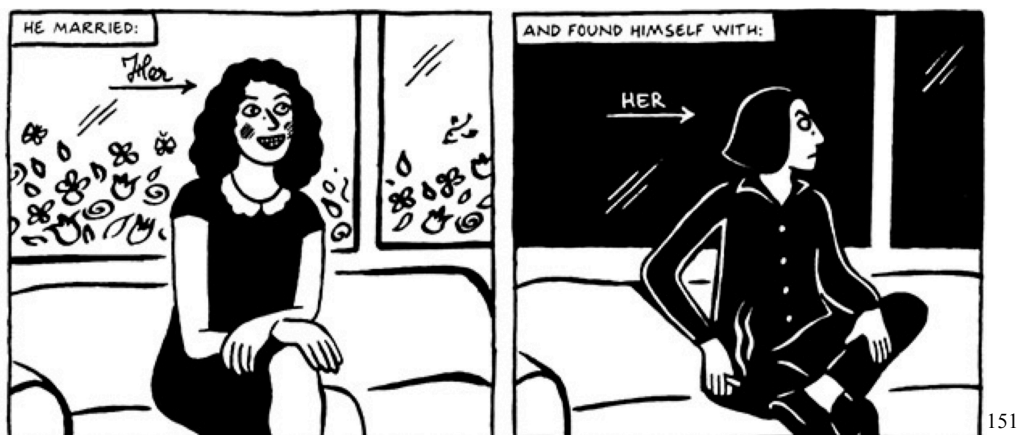
In the case of Reza, the relationship represents Marjane's attempt to furnish a grownup life of her own in Iran, but instead proves that her genuine self can subside neither with Reza nor in Iran. As her split from Markus initiates her departure from Austria, so too does her split from Reza mark her departure from Iran. Her future, as drawn by the narrative, lies with what Marjane will draw for herself.

¹⁴⁷ Satrapi, 220 and 236..

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 222 and 236.

¹⁴⁹ This dually-rendered sequence, in which narrating-Marjane illustrates first her more-naïve-then-self's perceptions in relation to Markus, then re-imagines the same once her then-self discovers Markus' cheating and is thrown into an existential subjectival tailspin, demonstrates yet another case of conceptually-relevant repetition-with-difference here, and the particular depictions of subjectivity (in juxtaposition) made possible by graphic narrative. In the representation of the same events, two different ways, it makes even more explicit the narrativizing-act as the assemblage and expression of "hybrid subjectivities," a la Hillary Chute, "Women, Comics, and the Risk of Representation," *Graphic Women*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 233.



Arriving at Art, Departing Iran– Claiming Art as Expression of the Self in History

Her process of taking her self into her own hands, and claiming her own essential qualities of both selfhood and expression, are also vitally intertwined with her capacities as an illustrator and artist. It is the act of rendering her internal and external world into visually graspable form that brings Marjane (as character) to life, and by so doing additionally performs the personal as inextricably fused to the political, her imaginative center of subjective experience hybridizing the input of history with the output of her own experiencing mind, body, and hand.
¹⁵²

The inclusion of her artwork in the story also allows the reader a particular pleasure in recalling what seems to be a synthesis in repetition and evocative echoes across story and time – for instance, as in the case of her drawing qualification for entrance into the local College of Art. While previously Marjane’s re-entrance into Iran is marked by an overwhelmed incapacity to process (see earlier sections to illuminate in greater detail this failure to align), the very imagery used to symbolically oppress in its magnitude becomes the material for Marjane’s creation.

¹⁵¹ Satrapi, 318.

¹⁵² For a paean to the particular strengths of the graphic-novel form in this area, as in relationship to the importance of the conceptual yield delivered by the explicit embrace of the “constructed and interpretive” in life-(and)-story see Nancy Pedri’s “Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact Nor Fiction,” in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narratives*, ed. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, 127-153 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).



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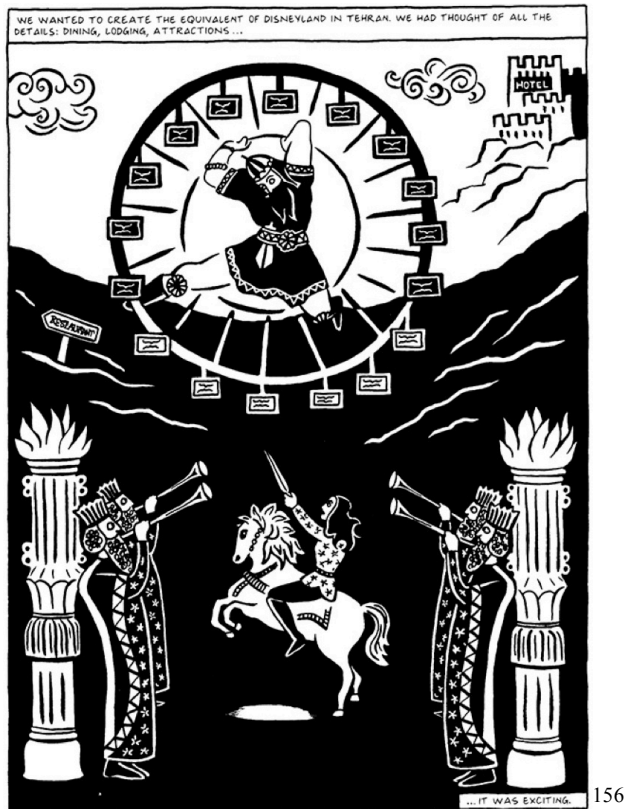
*IT'S SAID THAT RED TULIPS GROW FROM THE BLOOD OF MARTYRS.

The image of martyrdom which the narration positions as part of Marjane's initial reintroduction stands as a sixty-five-foot-high mural towering above Marjane, making what she has been away from both inescapable and overpowering. When the image reappears, with a twist, it has shrunk down in scale, being rendered at the selfsame moment by Marjane's own (drawn) hand, placing her in the seat of control. So too does her image, interestingly, recall Marjane's scene of

¹⁵³ Satrapi, 250.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 281.

departure at the airport when she first goes for Austria,¹⁵⁵ suggesting the personal has been woven into the political, Marjane's experiences as the material from which her creative process draws (literally and figuratively).



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So too does her final product, drawing upon the mythological history of Iran, for art school suggest a kind of maturation of her own imaginative process. As once she imagined her grandpa as a prince, the rendering cartoonishly childlike, now another figure rides astride a horse, but the

¹⁵⁵ Yet another area of re-purposing, repetition-with-difference, and the re-incarnations of Marjane's experiences across-time—see “Conclusion” to follow.

¹⁵⁶ Satrapi, 329.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

imagery is more professionally produced, more obviously projected for consumption.¹⁵⁸ And, significantly, it is Iran's failure to accept this creative expression of hers that provides the linchpin for Marjane's decision to both leave her marriage and the country; creative expression in this sense functions as a synecdoche for herself. If the fruit of her synthesis of the personal and political cannot be consumable within Iran's borders, her future for growth becomes preordained for spaces beyond its lines.

Conclusion: Expressive Departures and Graphic Stakes

And so, standing, on her own, in two very different but connected contexts, the depiction of Marjane at the point of departure, both for her time in Austria and finally, at the novel's conclusion, for her ultimate leaving of Iran for schooling in Strasbourg and beyond, underscore a relevant thematic *mise-en-scène* as to that which gets left behind and lost in the processes of growth and self-realization:



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In both, visually rendering the stakes reveals the poignancy of the shuttering show of frames; family become the iconographic totems for all the memories and connections that soon will become animated only through the mind and the pen that Marjane (as creative force) holds. While “escape” is in this sense necessitated by the impulse, nay need, to survive and thrive, this kind of departure maintains a strict and stark awareness of the realities under which such journeys are necessitated. The scenes explicitly create a *déjà vu* sensation of recall and repetition, illuminating both what has changed, in Marjane's size as index of age and maturity,

¹⁵⁸ In the character-progression that demonstrates both the continuously generative expressive-impulse that the “Marjanes” across-time share, and the process of maturation which brings her to new levels of capacity in allowing her imagination to spur externally-expressed, recognizable images (the internally subjective now graphically rendered), this thematically arrives at the act which the narrative has formally been per-forming throughout.

¹⁵⁹ Satrapi, 153 (L).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 341 (R).

her growth in confidence, self-possession and optimism for what lies ahead, and what remains the same, in the family which gets left behind in all its emotional multi-valence.

Step 3: Connection – Rabih Alameddine’s *The Hakawati: A Story*

Introduction: Intertextual Connection

For the final stage of Discourse as Construction of the Refugee and Forced Migration Subject (as Mosaic-Being) through Bildungsroman, Rabih Alameddine’s *The Hakawati: A Story* keys into the essential function of Connection, following release and expression. Advancing upon the constitutive capacities and effects of “Metafictive Intertextuality,” particularly out of KP Smith’s conceptualization in his *The Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction*,¹⁶¹ this chapter hones in on the utilization of formal features causing those “metafictive effects that are derived from the way they utilize their fairytale intertext,” as a more than mere narratological technique, indeed as deliberate performative methodology chosen where “stories are being told as the life-stories”¹⁶² of fictionalized protagonist. Here, the novel which portrays “the *act* of storytelling in such great detail,” by incorporating narrative “including recognisable fairytale motifs addressed to a physically present narratee”¹⁶³ in the *con*-text of Refugee and Forced Migration experience positions the infrastructure and intricacies of storytelling as an answer to what such experience demands, building from *Shards*’ (Inside), to *Persepolis*’ (Outside), where *Hakawati*’s focus expands to the In-Between, as an embrace of confusion, inter-relatedness, blurring and the processual in narrative as Refugee and Forced Migration experience into-Being.

Subject-Self Built Through Storytelling Technique

The subject of Alameddine’s *Hakawati*, appropriate and constitutive to fictive-storytelling being thematically and formally put forth as the most faithful construction of subjectivity out of Refugee and Forced Migration experience, charts the most deliberately and deliberately explicit release from strict adherence to reality yet. The narrative’s character-protagonist, here *non*-eponymous to the novel’s author, continues his process of self-realization through the novel’s coming-into-being, only fully realizing himself by and in the novel’s conclusion, which brings him into himself by bringing him into the position of storyteller. In a life as-experience which has been marked by war and disjunction, confusion and displacement, this subject-self wanders as through an epic, and mythic, journey, then relates that journey through story (which becomes a story of-journey, and epic, mythic journey at that). If such schematization seems dizzyingly circular, it is purposefully and constitutively so: indeed, the argument of *Hakawati*, in its being and unfolding, is that a “truthful” narrative can *only* be so, circular and referential, layered as to create the sensation of infinity. The subject can only delineate himself as in-relation— past to present, present as an accumulation from-past; self to other, self as accumulation of-others, family and friends, cultures and stories, the stories which make cultures and people into-being. When characters within the narrative are tasked to illuminate their identity, to define their-selves, either to them-selves or others, it is, crucially, coached as “telling their stories.” Whether conversationally or dramatically, in introduction or in death, characters are asked to “tell their story” *as* (meaning) to tell their lives, to define who they are as identity and being. And it is this story-telling *as* telling-into-being which *Hakawati* as-

¹⁶¹ Kevin Paul Smith, *The Postmodern Fairytale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

narrative performs. Where truth can prove stranger than fiction, where experience can reach beyond belief, story encapsulates and connects to the essential, and what is. Where the obsession or insistence, the rigidity which confines itself and asks only for what is true, and denies what is “mere” story, within this narrative is proven a false fiction in itself: those characters who brush off storytelling as foolishness, or who relegate mythic technique as lesser narratologies to fact, miss out, the narrative suggests in its own telling, on what is most true, ironically and tragically to their own understandings.

Rhetorical Functions & Effects: Emotional, Cognitive, and Ethical Capacities of Narrative

Indeed, the *Hakawati* as narrative act advances an argument which suggests storytelling as uniquely charged and capable of encapsulating the Refugee and Forced migration experience, and of bringing the affected resulting subjects therein into-being. This bears even more profound and specific significance in function to what Richardson evokes by citing Linda Hutcheon, in the suggestion that “the process of narrativisation has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events”¹⁶⁴ Such may seem a broad gesture, and vague, non-revolutionary line of thinking amongst greater schools which have already engaged narrativization as a tool for comprehension, meaning-making, and bringing into form—see, in particular, in these contexts for instance theorists in trauma studies, or yes too Refugee and Forced Migration, in addition to narratology at large, just to begin, which have all included narrative-making as potentially containing such capacities and functions—however, what becomes further unique, interesting, and provocative as a contribution in *this* case is the particularity of the fictive form, and its interposition here for comprehension, meaning-making, and coherence where Refugee and Forced Migration experience has otherwise *failed and resisted the same*.

As in the case of *Hakawati*’s character-protagonist, the Refugee and Forced Migration experience, necessitated by the burgeoning of the Lebanese civil war, is entangled with an increasing emotional confusion, and corresponding cognitive incapacity to process and incorporate such feelings and experience into a coherent-being. Comprehension, meaning, and coherence here, if posited as essential and constitutive to successful, whole and content human-being, are in Refugee and Forced Migration experience constitutive *crises*. The Bildungsroman this story tells is not that of the individual beginning in relative ignorance and growing into increasing awareness of the “truths” of self and (in relation to) world through the frameworks of rationality, cultural valuation, and societal participatory belonging. Instead, the growing awareness is that such frameworks fail experience, and that not only are alternate structures of understanding, meaning-making, and connectivity all that becomes respite, solution, or tool to the subject in such situations, but that these alternatives prove better suited, the narrative would argue, to answer what each structure is actually intended to demand. Where such experience belies traditional understanding; where nothing seems to make sense; and where all the pieces could become a non-sensical jumble, narrative here answers. The discursive particularities of the fictive form, in the explicitly mythical, interwoven processes involved in story-telling, become that which brings it all together. *Not*, crucially, “together” in the sense of parts which assimilate into uniform unitary being: here, “coherence” is understood not as the logical and orderly, the clear or reasonable relationship between parts,¹⁶⁵ but as that which *sticks together*¹⁶⁶, a

¹⁶⁴ KP Smith, *Postmodern Fairytale*, 120.

¹⁶⁵ As in <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/coherence>, etc.

descendent of its Latin root “cohaerere”¹⁶⁷ in that which joins and attaches. It is, in this, the final component in the Refugee and Forced Migration Mosaic-Being. The separate pieces which are released, then expressed by arrangement, and cohered through story: the formation of the Refugee and Forced Migration subject, out of the Refugee and Forced Migration experience, through functions of Discourse.

Narrative Results: Structural Setup and its Conceptual Yield (on the Subject and Story Coming-into-Being)

Moving onto how this all is built, the particular structure of *Hakawati* as-narrative, into a proliferation of constitutive effects, is as unique and purposeful as the works that preceded. The character-protagonist shares the previous novels’ central arc, in the Refugee and Forced Migration Coming-of-Age, where childhood is interrupted by the outbreak of war, a forced departure is necessitated for the maturing subject while other family must remain, and the attempt at a necessary-return is eventually negotiated, with the ultimate impossibility of staying suggested and engaged in the doing. This novel breaks the narrative into four separate Books, each of which is announced with a title page, but no named-title apart from the book and its corresponding number (Book One, Book Two, Book Three, and Book Four). The next page of each contains a selection of Epigraphs, then the Chapter begins on the page that follows (cumulatively numbered, not starting from a beginning again, so Book Two’s first Chapter is “Chapter Six”). This results, in the context and as part of the greater narrative at large, in a proliferation of effects. The lack of named title to each Book apart from its number is in keeping with the sense of mystery evoked by the narrative’s unfolding: the contents of each Book prove a complex blend, moving between narrating-“I” sections (narrated by the character-protagonist); stories as-narrated by various characters within these sections (as when a family member narrates a story to the character-protagonist); stories as-narrated by various characters within stories being narrated by various characters within these sections (as when a character narrates a story in one of the stories being narrated by one of the characters in these sections); also, what at least in the beginning of the novel’s unfolding is an even more mysterious line of narration, in sections being narrated by an as-yet unnamed narrator, with stories of a more obviously mythic, foregroundedly folkloric and fable-istic nature versus the character-protagonist’s narrating-“I” sections; then stories as-narrated by various characters within those as yet unnamed-narrator narrating sections; and stories as narrated by various characters within those stories being narrated by various characters within those sections and so on.

As each of these is separated in some cases by only a new paragraph, at most a transition taking place between chapters, the effect is a vulnerable dependence on the unfolding of the words as they happen in order to attempt to determine or situate what level a given story is taking place on, who might be speaking, and as the novel goes on an attempt to recall what that story’s previous segments may have been as to pick up and continue its unfolding. In certain points, the ease and frequency with which the narrative transitions from one to another almost demands an even more extreme relinquishment of control—if in any given section, the timing of transition to

¹⁶⁶ See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/coherent>.

¹⁶⁷ As utilized and further explored, for instance, in Mauro Giuffrè’s “The Concept of Textuality in the Procedural Approach: Seven Criteria” (Cohesion/Coherence/Intentionality and Acceptability/Informativity/Situationality/Intertextuality), in *Text Linguistics and Classical Studies* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 56 etc.

another cannot be pre-anticipated, nor which section the narrative will be pivoting towards next be guessed, when enough layers are piled into the unfolding and the narrative within recalling too vaguely which precise section at times it may have originated from, the attempt at schematization moves in counter-purpose to simply seeing what a given narrative beat unfolds and its corresponding cumulative effects.

The structure is of course anything but incidental, unplanned or random. This is borne out and brought to even greater effect in the succession of the Books, as, while each Book is a complex interweaving between stories and narrative sub-levels, each Book when taken in context to the others builds upon the previous, and sets up for the next (as supported by the cumulative Chapter-numbering across Books, “One” to “Twenty-one”). The epigraph-pages in the division between Books further serve an interesting purpose here, in providing a kind of tonal anticipatory setting-of-the-stage as to the rhetorical narrative function each Book serves to address. To best understand the progression, first a schematization of the most predominant stories taking place across Books: there is the narrator character-protagonist “Osama’s” first-person narration of his life, and coming-of-age – the narrative-present of this story is when he is older and has had to return to Lebanon to visit his sick father who is in the hospital; there is the fairy-tale telling (by the mysteriously unnamed-Narrating Force) of former slave Fatima’s epic quest; and there is the telling, ascribed to Fatima, of a tale of another former slave Baybars, who, the story goes, grows up to one day become king.

While this is a great simplification, it aids in illuminating the most centralizing arcs as they are interwoven, and how the Books set up their unfolding to cumulative effect: Book One’s epigraphs engage the presence of God, the purpose of story and literature, telling and the world created inside inside¹⁶⁸-- the Book that follows reaches to the point of a post Eid-meal with the character-protagonist and his family, when his father’s condition drastically worsens, matched with Baybars going to meet his destiny; Book Two’s epigraphs engage the bid to tell story, the mixing of self-story with hi-story with life, and story as necessarily a constant re-telling¹⁶⁹--this Book reaches back further to unfold the character-protagonist’s history, in family and life, reaching to the point in his past when his father had to have surgery, his mother still alive and family surrounding, combined with Fatima’s labor and birth impending; Book Three’s epigraphs combine a citation from the Koran on the dangers of the poet, another quote on lineage, legacy and family, and gods mixed into life—this Book reaches to the brink of the character-protagonist father’s current impending death, and the character-protagonist’s attempts to cope, alongside Baybars’ emergent victory, where “Now our story begins” *¹⁷⁰; then, the final Book Four, with epigraphs on man as eminently a storyteller, stories as necessary to finding meaning and arranging pattern to life, a Koranic citation questioning the capacities of the poet, and a final quote asking if literature is ignoring life—this rounds up the novel, to the point of Baybars dying at the end of his life and story, and the character-protagonist facing his father’s imminent death, reaching for him bedside, and assuming the narrative mantle as he begins to tell him their stories.¹⁷¹ In this way, not only does each narrative thread inform the others, across stories (“Osama’s” story is informed by Fatima’s, is informed by Baybars, and so on), but the separation

¹⁶⁸ Rabih Alameddine, *The Hakawati: A Story* (New York: New Anchor Books Edition, 2009), 3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 403.

and progression onto each Book, as further charted and set-up, conceptually and thematically heightened by the epigraphs that begin it, both satisfy and affirm the content of the Book that precedes and its concluding points, and better prepares and illuminates the function of the Book that follows.

Narrative Technique: The Metafictive Creation of Story-Telling as Life

The story of the character-protagonist, which all the other narrative threads inform, is, yet again, not the traditional Coming-of-Age arc. This experience delineates early childhood as essentially analogic, where the degree to which the child knows (and does not) is “known” by the stories he is privy to (and is not), these years as the time of simple morals, as through the stable of fables told to him by his family. Yet this is soon complicated, the clarity lost, through growth in those years of factional tensions and impending war, ever-increasing unease, dismay, disconnection and alienation. If this stage creates an ever-growing sense of internal distance, the next, in the extremity of external separation rendered by officially leaving home and country midst the war, then pushes it to the level of existential sundering, distant and apart, an outsider midst distanced-others. In having to come back home, the subject must reckon with the clear comparison that familiar and familial spaces-across-time evoke, as all that has been lost, and the distances-as-chasms which have ripped the constitutive relational fabric of self into a state of ontological diaspora. This Bildungs’ solution, the metaphysical answer to the problem caused by this experience, is in the embrace of stories and storytelling as that which can bring it all together—not to clear linear simplicity, but to narrativizing and the narrating-act as the metafictional constitutive binding-agent which allows presence of all its corresponding parts to *be*.

Hakawati, appropriately, again, metafictionally and inter-textually, re-creates this experience through the experiential effects of its narrative techniques. That which might start out seeming an easy journey of simple stories and clear morals is quickly confounded, threads knotted and understandings confused—as time unfurls, it gets worse, becomes almost unknowable, but out of that, something else takes hold, in the distinct and re-newed, better informed and appreciative embrace of story as-story, and the experience as journey itself. The lessons which emerge out of *this* experience, complex as it is, become all the more rewarding, for allowing ambiguity, co-presence of constituent parts, and a deeper relationship to each and every-thing in-between.

Introduction (to the Metafictional Intertext): Building the Narrative-Voice-as-Storyteller, Establishing Effects of Narratorial Address

The method to the madness in this case takes the shape of numerous strategies enacted to perform several essential facets of experience that parallel the lead character’s, in: the importance of the relationship forged in direct address between narrator(s) and narratees, as analogue to the greater constitutive relationship formed and between narrator and listener, re-creating the dynamics of relationship forged between protagonist-Osama and his storytelling family members (his grandfather and his uncle, especially); the process of confusion and disorientation that the text creates in experiences of gyroscopic narrative turns, acting as simulational experiential proxy to the same process Osama undergoes midst the outbreak of war in his home country, his departure, and the disjunctions felt in his eventual visit of-return; and the advancement of a realization that it is all in the telling, for both the experience of text as-narrative and (as) the experience of Osama, who comes to assume the narratorial-mantle. Out of this, predominant themes emerge therein, as results of the experience of the text-(and)-as-telling, in lessons of what is outside one’s control, and what one can or cannot do: and, it is, ultimately,

in the telling that the greatest forms of agency and potential lie. Story becomes life in itself, as both Osama's most profound conclusion and the experience of *The Hakawati* at large, where to "know" is to experience. For all involved, and at every stage, it is not about one person, or one character – the process of storytelling here insists upon a building-of-subject that is inherently and inextricably relational, through a narrative process of co-herence which makes the subject not only an accumulation, but also a dynamic and ongoing state-of-being. The full title of the work here is not incidental, but constitutive of its function: *The Hakawati: A Story* advances the central subject which it emerges, orients, and defines. There is the role of the "Hakawati" itself, which, in yet another area of metafictional exploration, the narratorial-voice deliberately discusses, explaining it as "a teller of tales, myths, and fables (hekyât),"¹⁷² but the title and the work itself goes further in ineluctably foregrounding this act as a metafictional one which binds story to story, in a story *about* story. This circularity, which at first might seem non-sensical and in-coherent, through the experience of the narrative itself instead becomes the methodology to forming its own teleological whole: the stories about stories which become life.

First, Listen

As a beginning to this dense and intricate work, the opening words prove a resoundingly telling introduction to the form and function of its constituent parts, in the salvo: "Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imagining. Let me tell you a story./ A long, long time ago, an emir lived in a distant land..."¹⁷³ In mere words, several crucial facets of narrative form and function emerge. First, comes the aura of mystery, in both the tone and the lack of precise identity in the narrator who speaks. It is a quality that will make up the entirety of the book to follow, and one that initiates the narratee into the kind of mystical ride being proffered. Indeed, as will soon become clear, who exactly is narrating what is not an exact science, for the narrator assumes multiple guises and the succession of framing stories increasingly succeeds in confounding understanding; from the earliest, the permission being asked of the narratee is thus one that must contain a certain amount of trust, or at least allowance for ambiguity. Out of this conjuring, too, the relationship between narrator and narratee emerges as essential, and in fact becomes the kind of ontological precondition making possible the narrative itself. While many a book in its very existence seems implicitly founded upon the agreement that an eventual reader is to consume and experience it, the nature of this address posits a very important constitutive act at its very beginning: the opening builds and establishes not only two roles, in that of the narrator and narratee, but also the relationship in-between. It establishes both as co-present, "live" and active—the narrative is unfolding as a narrative—"now" which is taking place *between* (and thanks to) a narrator who is now-telling and the listening-narratee who would permit it. The narratee is thus given an explicit participatory presence at the very start, and furthermore lauded and flattered for holding such a decisive role.¹⁷⁴ The as-yet

¹⁷² Alameddine, 36.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷⁴ This opener would fall under what Alexandra Georgakapoulou describes as the technique of "deictic simultaneity," where "the simulation of co-presence is corroborated by reference to the oral modality as the one of immediate communication: cf. 'You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking' [J. Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1968: 35]"-*Edinburgh Working Papers*, 2-3; the nature of *Hakawati*'s start here further aligns with her ascription of the particular strategy of metacommunication in which narrators "reach out to the

unknown narrator, asking permission for the enabling force of the storytelling act, makes servant of himself and master of the narratee in the same stroke as asking for the powers of a god; the play of this dynamic keys into an impish grandiosity that flavors the storytelling throughout, but additionally foregrounds the expectations of what the narrator (and narration) is meant to serve.

Within this, too, thrums another particularly relevant vein, in the choice to rhetorically position such an exchange as evocative of a legacy of orality in the traditional storytelling dynamic between listener and teller, versus reader and writer. The fact that the narratee is not asked to “Look” goes beyond semantics in this case; the language of the narrative and the performance of the narrator consistently reminds of the contours of embodied tradition. The narrator is given voice in this way at the same time that the narratee is given the receptive capacities to receive it. The rhythms of the narrator who exclaims and sighs in frequent auditory-reminiscent riffs gives shape to the senses as it brings the narratee into greater proximity. The conversational tone used in the direct address is also one that continues, productive to the oral lineage, as the narrator periodically checks in to inquire on the interior experience of the “listener,” and anticipate what is wanted or felt. The unfolding of the sub-stories within is interspersed with interruptive temperature-takings, at times declarative (“And now you want to know how the hakawati was conceived, so listen...”¹⁷⁵), other times interrogative (“Do you know the story of the mother of us all?”¹⁷⁶), always re-establishing and reminding of the constructed discursive act being put into progress. This rhetorical dynamic builds a narrator who is constantly re-established as the one-who-knows in the doing, and the narratee the one who must listen and learn, even as the narrator too is the one who must entrance, seduce, and enchant, the narratee who holds the power to stop listening. Already from the beginning too is established a significant tone, in this first sub-story and the building of the first frame, with the canonical-rhetoric of fairytale in a “long, long time ago” and faraway “distant lands,”¹⁷⁷ which sets out to effectively launch this unfolding as an incarnation of something viscerally already known, as in the stories one has heard from childhood on.

Young Osama (and) as Narratee, Older Osama as-Narrator—Meaningful Alignments

It is a relationship and reminding which will be further put into use as continually reminiscent of the dynamics Osama experiences from his own childhood on, for not incidentally, so too has Osama heard such stories from the earliest; indeed, the relationship crafted between narrating force and narratee meaningfully overlaps and is often duplicated in the stories Osama tells about storytelling itself, and the relationship posited in the doing between his family members and himself. When recounting, in his first-person narrative sequences, his coming-of-age as marked by a series of stories told to him, Osama’s narration of those storytelling-acts, especially in the case of his grandfather, become eerily familiar to experience of the narrative itself: after a narrative technique which has already become familiar with its interspersion of “Ah”s¹⁷⁸, and “Ah, listen”s¹⁷⁹¹⁸⁰, this is revealed to be a kind of narrative-inheritance, as Osama

audience like oral performers and attempt to establish a strong interpersonal involvement based on dialogue and participatory immediacy...Pleas for communication and sympathy are frequent here.” Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁵ Alameddine, 37.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷⁷ Also the recurring trope of Once there was, Ibid. 81 etc.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 35.

ascribes this selfsame technique to his family-members waxing narratives to young Osama. When this same embodied practice and dialogic style becomes the hallmark of the story-teller across time,¹⁸¹ even as narrators and levels of storytelling become further confused, intertwined, and ambiguous, the sense of security in this relationship comes through; at the outset of Osama's life, and at the outset of this story, the comforts of the story-telling dynamic sooth as familiar—and when life and story start to spiral, eventually it will become all that can be held onto or relied upon, in the nexus between content and form.¹⁸²

Narrative Tangles, Confusion Descends: A Conflation between Narrative and Refugee and Forced Migration Experience

The structure of *The Hakawati* and the stories that follow are indeed dizzying, and purposefully so. The initial narration that begins the book is spoken by an unknown source, and after weaving the beginning of a tale, the narrative transitions without ceremony or context to a new beat with, significantly, the words: “I felt foreign to myself”¹⁸³; six pages in thus marks the enunciation of a subject, “I,” who is speaking – but whether it is the same narrative-voice has yet to be determined. The content seems entirely different, the first beat a fairytale while this one a rather realistic sidewalk examination of post-war Lebanon. As was established from the outset, this is not a narrative for the linear-thinking. By the next page, page 7, the current subject narrating states ““Listen. I lived here twenty-six years ago.””¹⁸⁴ The deliberate repetition of “Listen” in this context not only begins to lay the groundwork for a cyclical rhythmic repetition of framing, in the use of “listen” to mark and begin a new story-frame, but also creates a sensation of discovery, beginning to ask the question of whether the narrator(s), Osama and the unnamed-narrator from the start, could be one and the same. The intentional sense of teasing information in dribs and drabs, while switching narrative beats and sub-narrations, effectively draws in participatory interest, providing clues but demanding choice towards understanding the narrative as a whole. The ambiguity is heightened by the written form, where words across beats and sub-sections bear the same font, and may seem at a glance to hold no clear distinctions: there is no easy way to immediately distinguish that a new narrative beat and sub-narration (with perhaps new narrator) has begun until the sub-story begins to unfold.¹⁸⁵ This kind of discovery-sensation throughout provides a unique kind of experience of the story and allows for a constantly transitioning interweaving between elements and voices.

¹⁷⁹ Alameddine, 36.

¹⁸⁰ Also *ibid.*, 46, several times etc.

¹⁸¹¹⁸¹ Osama, as narrator, will later use the dialogic address as well, thinking to palpate the audience's response as in “You'd think there was no way. You might say...” and the dramatic call to the reader to “Settle down” 215 and “This story...arrives from far away, so listen.”229. This stylistic evocation of the recurring devices that have appeared from unnamed Narrator's beginning to Osama's grandfather and beyond help lead to the cumulative effect of coalescing voices and the final conclusions to which the reader will arrive by the narrative's end.

¹⁸² Interesting to engage here KP Smith's subfields on the storyteller within the text, in particular to the context of transmission and “narratees”—92&95, *Postmodern Fairytale*.

¹⁸³ Alameddine, *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁵ What A. Georgakapoulou would say is the reader being “constantly prodded into action”—*Edinburgh Working Papers in Linguistics*, 4.

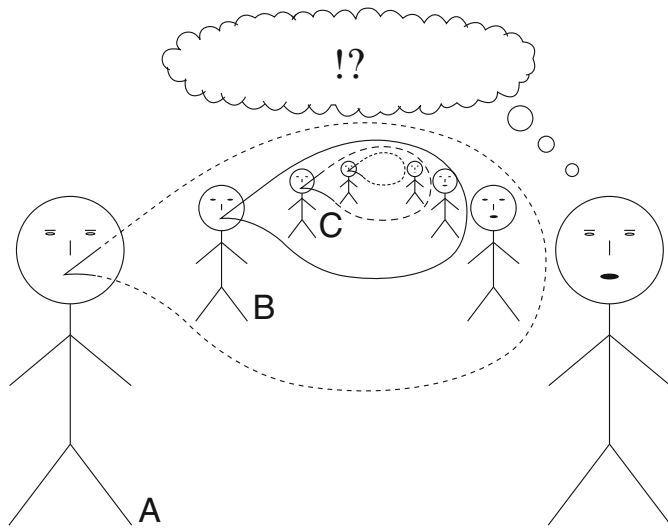


Figure 3.2 Revision of Genette's figure.

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Apropos to Kevin Paul Smith's mirthful diagram on the effects of nesting-stories in those techniques delineative of "Metafictive Intertextuality" in "Defining the 'Storyteller' Chronotope," such narratological designs when applied to content as in the case of *Hakawati* create an even more purposeful sense of the confoundingly inter-connected. Not only are there multiple narrative threads and levels, in stories which pick up and leave off amongst non-announced narrative transitions and a seemingly endless proliferation of narrative-voices within, but the stories themselves further heighten this sensation and effect by making use of a rhythmically enchanting but conceptually mystifying execution of Repetition with Difference. This device becomes a formal as well as conceptual theme on the nature of storytelling and life, occurring in numerous iterations. In one register, names of characters will repeat across different frames, as in the case of Fatima, the slave-girl protagonist of the emir-level frame story, and Fatima, the similarly rebellious and strong-willed childhood friend of Osama, master-storyteller at the helm of the narrating-"I" sections. Which Fatima is being narrated, between the two, can only become known by the context of the surrounding story, and in certain moments, deliberate obfuscation or delay of this grounding only heightens the ambiguity. The beginning of Book Two, for example, starts with the words "So, what do you think of the emir's story?" Fatima asked Afreet-Jehanam."¹⁸⁷ With no opening quotation mark to signal dialogue, the first words of "So, what do you think of the emir's story?" could seem another direct address to narratee, a not-unlikely supposition especially given the unnamed Narrating force's predilection to do so. Only upon the closing quotation and the next two words "Fatima asked," can the narrative-experience be adjusted to include the question in the frame of a character—but then further memory-recall and conceptual schematization are required, as to situate which narrative level and frame

¹⁸⁶ Kevin Paul Smith's apropos diagram of nesting-stories, particularly when applied to the content of *Hakawati* – from his "Metafictive Intertextuality: Defining the 'Storyteller' Chronotope," *Postmodern Fairytale*, 91.

¹⁸⁷ Alameddine, 139.

corresponds with the emir's story, and thereby which Fatima is bound up in the telling. The last Fatima mentioned, at the conclusion of Book One, was Osama's Fatima, the childhood friend, in a segment of a narrating-"I."¹⁸⁸ Without completing the sentence, both Fatimas come to mind. In a quick moving assessment, the question refers to the emir's story, and yet the emir has, at least as far as the unnamed Narrator has related, only told his story thus far to his own wife—how would the Fatima within the same story-frame be aware of his tellings? This mind-bouncing beginning to the next Book further establishes, in addition to the confusion, the meta-reflection that the novel constantly performs, for the reader, experiencing the text as a confluence of narratees, is constantly being asked to reflect upon the proliferation of story in all its artifices and effects. At the end of Book Two, on another example, the shape-shifting imp friends of (slave-fairytale character) Fatima transform into parrots, leading to a sequence in which an imp parrot tells a story of another parrot who tells a story of another parrot (and so on). While not an unending series of repetitions, the effect is just enough to create the sensation of infinity, or the narrative equivalent to "parrots all the way down"¹⁸⁹; mirroring and repetition, with difference, inculcates a mesmerizing rhythm to the proceedings, wherein the unfolding of each story as it comes engages in the same pass as it mystifies. A constant game of (dis)orientation (which Fatima? Which parrot is this now? Where am 'I' in the repeating matrix?), which is, itself, impossible to meet at a perfect score, the narrative is meant to elude, where perpetual disorientation becomes part of the point of the experience itself.

This narrative confusion is, essentially and constitutively, matched to the confusion Osama experiences from his coming-of-age through the disorientation of war, then the successive fragmentation that comes with living a hybridized exile-life. From a narrative confused with where and what and who and why, constantly demanding re-orientation, Osama's self-narrative emerges sprinkled with admissions as "I felt foreign to myself,"¹⁹⁰ "I was a tourist in a bizarre land. I was home," and "I woke up confused, unsure of where I was" The story shuttles between places and times as he has, narrative unfolding thus performing the interior experience of this confusion and disorientation, making the only reliable constant story, and the tie twisted therein between teller and audience.

Story-Telling as Cumulative and Collaborative, Constitutive and Relational

Over the course of the novel, several distinct sub-narrators seem to emerge, or at least be demarcated as separate entities for the framings of the story that follow, but the two most essential are: the unnamed narrator, who begins the novel, and the narrating Osama, who commands the narrating "I" sections. While Osama is the named character-protagonist, the conduit-force for the experiences and bibliographically steeped strains of story, it is the unnamed narrator who returns again and again as the central unifying force and narrating power to the gathering strands within. Only as the novel is consumed can these signifying values be assigned through narrative experience, as part of the effect of the lastingly ambiguous, impermeably mysterious entity that it is. The result of this is a shifting-sands re-assignment of primary and secondary lines of narration – when the narrating "I" sections first begin, the tone and content of

¹⁸⁸ Alameddine, 122.

¹⁸⁹ A telescopic example of the frame-story, or *1,001 Nights* in miniature- Ibid., 251 to 262; the parrot tells a story ("There was once" 251) of a storytelling parrot, who tells a story of a parrot ("Once, in a land far away" 257)...

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 7.

these blocks seem to present as the most realistic and grounded, while the unnamed narrating force that re-appears throughout introduces a seeming infinity of fantastical sub-stories and narrators, though primarily: the emir who unfolds a tale of Baybars, while the tale at times seems to have been appropriated by the unnamed narrator; and Fatima the slave, with her loyal imps, who themselves tell cascading levels of stories within the tale. When Osama's grandfather is introduced within an "I" narration, he as hakawati suddenly shifts the balance where the sub-stories he (and later Osama's uncle Jihad as well) tells are as equally fantastical and steeped in myth. Osama's sections begin to be narrated by a blend of first person "I" segments and direct address (to "you," the reader), which formerly only the unnamed narrator (and narrating characters within) laid claim to as a signifying mark. Somewhere within this weaving, an unspoken sensation as cumulative effect takes place in which the unnamed narrator takes primary position, where the narrating "I" sections explain and fill in a more complete and rational, internally motivated backstory, but it is the unnamed narrator who seems to have been "birthed" or revealed to be, though never explicitly spoken or affirmed as, the Osama who results from all the content of the narrating "I"s within. The payoff of this ambiguity is a forced meaning-making that takes place as the novel's constitutive success, hitting at the essential constitution of the storytelling experience as definitive to a meaning-ful existence itself. By the time the content of the story-making arrives at this lesson, the narrative has already performed it and proven it true.

Narrative Confusion, and the Lesson of Baybars (Where Fact Meets Fiction)

Out of this narrative confusion, one particularly significant progression results as a cumulative denouement from the process, further advancing the predominance of the unnamed narrator and performing the novel's own greatest argument in the telling of essential truths through lies. As has been previously explored, the opening of the novel begins with the unnamed narrator structuring the first frame-story, with an emir who lived a "long, long time ago." This emir goes on to tell his own story, marking a new sub-frame, which, relevantly to note, begins, yet again, with the enunciation of " 'Listen.' The emir began his story thus:/ In the name of God, the most compassionate, the merciful./Once, long before our age..."¹⁹¹ In this case of repetition-with-difference, the constant recurrence of not just the storytelling trope, but variations on *this* enunciative opening form the words into a manner of metafictional constitutive speech-act, a script that serves as a kind of magical conjuring to make whoever speaks it a Narrator and whatever is to follow a Story. As with J.L. Austin's schematization, these words do not describe but perform and enact something *in and of themselves* – by saying they make it so.¹⁹² The opening "Listen" launches the possibility of story-telling to follow, and the bid to God provides an incantation that bestows a sanctioned air and permission, perhaps value as well, to the content of the story itself. Yet again the "Once, long before" as opener then casts the story into the realm of epic, or fable, as the story that is not of this-time and yet relevant for-this-time, in whatever message the story will be revealed to contain.

While the emir is thus marked as one of the narrators within, as technically a character in the as-yet unnamed overarching-Narrator's introductory story, his storytelling could be seen as still coming from the unnamed Narrator (an act of ventriloquism or role-play)—the relevance of

¹⁹¹ Alameddine, 118.

¹⁹² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 (the William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955), 7 etc.

this fact comes to the fore in crucial moments such as the conclusion of Book One (more on the use of separation into Books as narratological act later, and its effects as a literary technique influencing the experience of traditional telling), when Osama's father is worsening and the story layers are being woven in time with Baybars' transition into battle. When the Baybars narration (which has been ascribed at its introduction to be narrated by the emir character) states, "As his sword killed its first victim...our hero banished the child he once was,"¹⁹³ the effect of the "our" in its instantiation is to pull the reader in as intended included-audience, and sounds part and parcel of the continuing relationship that has been inculcated by the overarching unnamed Narrators' continuing calls. However, a beat of reflection seems to remind that, if the emir is the intended (if not explicitly stated) narrator here, the "our" to which this speaks would be first to his wife as primary audience ("our hero," dear wife, so to speak)—a reader of the novel would, in this case, technically be the reflected non-primary incidental audience, while inhabiting in effect the wife's position in this moment. A flicker in this moment which serves as yet another reminder of the constantly complex narrative layers and subjectivities which execute particularly intricate rhetorical turns: for at each, the reader who would be experiencing the narrative is overwhelmed with not just a bewildering succession of frames, transitions, and events, but a proliferation of voices, intended-audiences, and subjectivities. When considering all the reflected angles and overlapping layers, as to what each story serves become a furthermore complex question—for what the emir's wife would take away from a given story is not equatable to what Fatima (the former slave-character) would, which is not equatable to what the unnamed-Narrator's narratee would, and so on. This further elucidates, and demonstrates, through the process what becomes one facet of the argument of *Hakawati* as an experiential narrative-text, in the idea that stories are constant re-tellings and incarnations, in which agency or authorship comes not from the origination of the story, but in the unique purposing for which that story will serve, for teller and audience, in an intermingling constantly open for transformation and re-purposing at other moments and times. For the *Hakawati*, no story belongs to any given individual, just as the stories within begin to transcend not just their individual originary audiences but also their home-frames, as in the Baybars-story, which runs the length of the novel and reappears throughout, in an experience which begins in a contained sub-frame (of the emir's story), but then transcends its bounds to run parallel and co-present to the narrating-"I" sections, seemingly taken up by the unnamed Narrating Force with the emir cut out as middle-man.

Interestingly, this sensation, in what might seem initially to be a case of reading too much into too little, is expanded upon and encouraged over the experience of the novel entire. At the conclusion of Book Three and as setup to Book Four, for instance, a particularly relevant shift emerges. Unlike previous sections, as when the emir's wife is in labor, or is later concerned about the behavior of her would-be son¹⁹⁴, the emir is not explicitly mentioned in a frame-setup for the continuation of the story; the Baybars sections are related without preface or orienting context now, interspersed between narrating-"I" segments that are taking place in the hospital. As Osama struggles with his history, and the memories of his past, with the family at his rapidly-worsening father's bedside, Baybars is finally crowned king, and the narration recounts:

¹⁹³ Alameddine, 132.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 241 his wife in labor, the emir asks "Should I stop the story?"/"No, husband go on..." and later 321, "What can I do to ease your suffering? Would you like me to continue the tale of Baybars?"

“Finally, fate aligned with history, fact shook hands with storytelling... You have before you the greatest hero the world will ever know. This is the famous tale of King al-Zaher Baybars. Now our story begins./ Listen.”¹⁹⁵ No explicit handover of narrating-responsibility has taken place—the Baybars track could, in theory, still be at the helm of the emir—however by this point the grandiosity of tone, and the degree of luxuriating in a direct address that raises stakes and demands hearing, becomes somewhat of a trademark of the unnamed Narrator’s form (or style). The patterns which have come to be recognized through the unfolding of stories allows for this inner ear to “catch” the shift, where, though not announced, the unnamed Narrator behind the scenes has come to the fore. The gesture to “our story,” in this context, begins to feel larger than a circumscription to the emir’s story could hold—at the conclusion of one Book and as entrée to the next, this moment feels like an intimate breaking-through of the wall and crescendo to Narrator’s increasing relevance. The circuitous route makes more rewarding, and fruitful, this moment of coming-together in which the reader realizes the unnamed Narrator has always been there; a reminder that the layering of the emir’s narrative has been as deliberate as Baybars, the series of sub-narrators and stories proliferating from one central, cohesive source. The Narrator becomes in this case the exemplar of the Storyteller, as the one that inhabits the many in order to tell truths from tales. The dizzying process makes more poignant this quieting down, in the intimate connection between Narrator and Narratee, and reminds that the act of storytelling, as *The Hakawati* is itself, is the making of stories “ours” (those who listen and those who tell).

The role of Osama, and his connection to the unnamed Narrator as well as the story of Baybars, is further illuminated in Book Four, during an especially revealing narrating-“I” section in which he recounts his family waiting out a wartime shelling by telling stories. When Osama is asked to tell a story, he replies, “ ‘I can tell the story of Baybars,’ I said. ‘It used to be one of Grandfather’s favorites.’” This link rewards beyond a sense of repetition— it is the first time an explicit knowledge and reference to the unnamed narrator’s story-frame is made. Though there have been obvious overlaps (in the emir-world, the heroine Fatima bears the same name as Osama’s similarly strong childhood friend Fatima, etc.), this connects Osama to the Baybars story and highlights it as belonging to the storytelling lineage through his grandfather, the career-hakawati. Trained, so to speak, in the storyteller’s ways by his grandfather, Osama is equipped to tell the tale.¹⁹⁶ This beat not only proves an essential moment in the overlaying of Osama with

¹⁹⁵ Alameddine, 399.

¹⁹⁶ For those requiring an even more obvious rational proof of this, by the novel’s end in Book Four, the unnamed Narrator describes how the emir’s wife has been seemingly vanquished (“The emir’s wife breathed no more.” *ibid.*, 505), then, after a quick beat with Osama’s father’s failing health and impending death in a narrating-“I” section, the Baybars story continues with his final administration of justice against that story’s longstanding antagonist Arbusto (“ ‘And what shall we do with the odious one?’” asked Baybars...” *ibid.* 506). By this point, the emir, who began the Baybars story as a bedtime tale for his wife, would have no logical reason to be telling the story (to a now-dead, no longer applicable wife-audience). The continuation of the Baybars storyline thus seems to have been subsumed by the overarching Narrator, the primary Narrating Force that tailors the tale to his Narratee. The obviousness or extremity of this fact now gets to a matter of rational conclusions (when the emir’s wife is no longer able to fulfill the audience-role, a suspicion becomes otherwise confirmed), after the accumulating suspicions of numerous twists and turns back.

the unnamed Narrator's potential identity, and the further confirmation of the larger meaning and scope of the unnamed narrator's story; the conversation on Baybars, and the question of truth in fiction, that follows provides a thematic peak to what the sensation of the story's unfolding has already proven, when Osama's uncle Jihad tells him: " 'Listen...the only true event in that whole story, in all its versions, is that the man existed.'"¹⁹⁷ As his uncle goes on to relate the rather horrible non-heroic acts ascribed to the historic figure of Baybars himself, a dismayed and rather disoriented Osama receives the following final lesson: " 'Here's a fun fact, in almost all the remaining versions of the story, none of them are about Baybars... The tale, even during its inchoate years, was never about Baybars but those around him...' "¹⁹⁸ This segment plays out in a multi-valence of implications. The fabulous tale that has been cast in the light of legend has been simultaneously aligned with, then broken from, history—while the story of Baybars has first been introduced as a story-within-a-story, and a kind of "long ago" fable at that, the existence of a historical figure and "real-life" man bearing the same name has since been brought to attention. That allegiance is then called into question, however, with the "lies" revealed at the same time as a larger truth is birthed; so too has this been an experience of confusion and disorientation yielding greater insights in the doing. So too does this reveal something not only about the Baybars story, but also about the enterprise of the novel as a whole. The truths that can be yielded from story are truths, *The Hakawati* argues, apart from the false illusions of distinction that traditional frameworks of understanding would demand. The attempt to determine how much the Baybars of story is the Baybars of "real life" becomes, in this case, as misguided a line of inquiry as the game of assessing how much the characters within each narrative are based on human beings "in real life," for it confuses how much quantitative veracity can be authenticated with how much qualitative truth-through-narrative-experience can be gleaned. While the former valuative pursuit dominates outside the fictive realm, *Hakawati* argues, it is a shift to the latter that reveals the most. In the realm of story, it becomes about all of "us" who are woven into the telling – in the experience of *The Hakawati*, the reader inhabits a succession of positions while the whorl of lives within ultimately comes down to the one who is telling the story, and the one who would listen. It is from this release and embrace that the greatest insights come.

Meaning from Chaos: What Emerges in the Telling

Indeed, far from haphazard or careless, the narrative twists that combine elements are part of larger schemata, in a seemingly purposeful construction and order to the stories which end up affecting the possible meaning-yield. The effect becomes most poignantly felt in the case of transitions between beats of storytelling and Osama's narrating "I" sections: in this realm, the side-by-side lends both a personal and political infusion of meaning. On the one hand, when the mythic unfolding in the fantastical tales stand alongside Osama's family vigil by his father's bedside, the pitch of battle becomes metaphoric partner to the struggle for life – as protagonists fight their demons, so too does the body fight to persist. On another hand, when this same mythic unfolding is paired with moments in the relief of a historical context to Osama's experience, something akin to commentary results, as in the case of an allegorical struggle of good versus evil being twinned to Osama's childhood memories of Lebanese conflict. It is a more profound extension and complication of what K.P. Smith sees as one of the effects of incorporating fairytale elements in this way, which he sees as potentially drawing parallels between

¹⁹⁷ Alameddine, 440.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

characters¹⁹⁹ - here, alignment allows for more than similarity to emerge, where a montage-esque succession and proximity of scenes, characters and narrative layers yields a more complex reading of all than the individual components would themselves. In all cases, the effect of having a split weave that has multiple stories (levels and layers) unfolding between each other, and without explicit explanation or transition when so doing, makes for a more complex experience that transcend simply equating the one with the other. Instead, the reader is asked to make relation between them—how does the one both reflect and transform the other? The same meaning-making act that is required in the process of reading (i.e., these letters, in combination and proximity, one after the next in this way, yields this signifying result- “c”+“a”+“t” yields cat, the furry creature) is thus extended to the reading-act of this novel as a whole (this story-thread, in combination and proximity to this one in this way, yields ---).

The same holds for the “lessons” that emerge between the mythic and everyday realms, where one informs the other. For the nesting and repetition, too, not only succeeds in confusing, but also in bringing to greater cumulative effect the resulting themes which emerge out of the experience therein, as Osama’s coming-of-age and the narrative at large. Where the allegorically pure strains in the explicitly fantastical and crafted stories where Good battles Evil, where there is an orienting sense of Fate and Destiny, and where something is Meant to Be, then parlays an interesting question of carryover into the narrating-“I” sections of the piece. The surety with which these beliefs are being put forth as self-evident in the folkloric tellings is not matched as precisely parallel to the more realistic super-frame timeline of Osama’s narrating-“I” present. The world in which Osama’s “I”-subject lives is much more confusing, even more confusing still than the repeating designs of the narrative twists and turns of the fantastical. The everyday is also the realm where clear bad guys and happy endings, through the following of what is good and true, is not promised. The ending not yet known. As the narrative weaves between one and the other, the stories which are not “realistic” become, by the end, not naïve lies or mere diversions in contrast to more muddled and ambiguous real-world, but instead an infrastructure which realizes its own truths in the doing: such stories become a way of making-sense, a casting of characters and a forging of narrative arcs, which, the *Hakawati* argues, is what man must make of his own life. This is the ultimate lesson Osama as character-protagonist takes away, and what he and (as) the narrative as meta-narrative performs.

Who and What is the Story-Teller

To arrive at this final conclusion, the re-occurrence and constantly reminding presence of the orienting narrative-force is especially crucial, particularly in this case the overseeing Narrator at large (in he who speaks and “knows” as a kind of mystic transcendental undergirding the narrative structure entire)—as previously engaged, this is interestingly another facet of ongoing ambiguity, as this agent implicitly becomes suspected to be Osama through the narrative’s unfolding, but technically the lack of self-admission to confirm this as fact leaves open the possibility that it could be another authorial entity. The conscription of Osama to this role will become a kind of payout to the sense of inevitability constructed by the narrative throughout, and the fulfilling conclusion to Osama’s character arc which positions him as the protagonist-force compelled to take up the narrative mantle; however the process of this is a cumulative one, and the actual experience of the (more omniscient) Narrator from the start of the novel is one cloaked with particular deliberate intrigue and mystery. The tone, significantly, of this Narrator differs

¹⁹⁹ KP Smith, *Postmodern Fairytale*, 103&105.

somewhat from Osama's in his narrating "I" sections—there is a grandiosity and a grandstanding, a confidence and a pleasure in the performance of the Narrator that Osama, at the outset, lacks. The Narrator conjures the aura of the traditional, stereotypically imagined storyteller which gains currency as overarching connective thread between the stories themselves. Storytelling is what holds the novel together, and it is what brings the characters together, making meaning of associative bits to render something legible and cohesive. It is the storyteller who becomes the proxy and analogue for the human being at large, making the Narrator sections all the more meta-reflexive on the experience.

When the Narrator gives shape to his subjectivity, de-cloaking from the obscurity of narrative omniscience and becoming a (virtually) embodied presence, it is to connect to the reader directly. The reader's wants, needs, and reactions are palpated and gauged live-time—this device purports, on the face of it, to be engaging with an individual narratee, the "You" to whom the Narrator speaks, who is feeling this, or wondering this, etc. However, of course, this "You," must be, of necessity, abstract and constructed, a projection of individuality blanketed upon each and every actual individual who might be reading the book. So while the gauging of audience reaction and the rapport established between reader and narrator becomes, obviously and conspicuously, a device, rhetorically it serves as a very relevant and rife purpose. The Narrator in this case constantly evokes both the oral storytelling legacy to which it adheres and the meta-aware self-reflexivity of the novel to which it conforms. This intimacy, though simulated, constantly re-asserts storytelling as a connective force, in another form of repetition with difference which in its being binds teller to story to audience, past to present, story to story. It too, in suggesting the subjective wants, needs, reactions, and expectations of the would-be Narratee, reminds continuously as constitutive to the narrative-fabric the fact that although the Narrator "knows" the story, it is the listener who must make from the signifiers the ultimate meaning that the story will incorporate into being.

What emerges through the whorl of stories is a unifying register of irreverence, in an approach that deliberately mixes darkness with humor, the sacred with the profane, the mythic with the everyday and the impossible with the profoundly true. The approach with which these moves are accomplished leads with a kind of self-effacing playfulness, which parlays and continues the traditional storyteller mode which the style both evokes and advances upon, while further conditioning the takeaway that results from the stories and their would-be lessons therein. Let it be known, this mixing, which yields a kind of continual surprise and visceral response in the tumble of the touching with the ridiculous, the wise with the fool, could be seen to perform the exact methodology it describes on a final meta-level as the trade of the "hakawati"—the fibster who beguiles,²⁰⁰ who is inherently suspect and yet convinces by the sheer plying of his trade as an excessively enjoyable act of communion between story, teller, and audience. This combination seems to evoke the choreography of a telling that would take place at a Lebanese café, described in Osama's narrating-"I" sections with his grandfather²⁰¹ -- all that is missing is the chortles or guffaws that an outrageous statement would seek as its landing, or the quieted suspense of the crowd that awaits denouement as a hero meets his final journey. The novel in this

²⁰⁰ Alameddine, 36.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 100 (Osama's recollection of his trip with his grandfather, uncle Jihad, and sister), and 89 (Osama's memory of his grandfather's story on his introduction to the world of hakawatis in Urfa).

way is, inherently, an experience that knowingly beckons to the process of story as dynamic, embodied, life. Operating on this proliferation of inter-woven levels, the narrative brings this storytelling procedure to a fever-dream height, where one becomes inextricable from others, the tangle not a curse but an opportunity.

Conclusion: From the Process Emerges This

The process thus becomes part of the lesson, or meaning, itself. The experiential unfolding of story that enacts repetition with difference and demands meaning be made by the preceptor-observer (reading participant) is form providing function, story making life. As the novel explicitly states by its conclusion, it is in storytelling that the human being, it is so argued, defines itself – the constant call, and trope, to “listen,” which repeats throughout the novel no less than twenty-some times literally said, many more times figuratively requested, and becomes, in this way, in the larger context of the novel, the mystic one-word signifier for the request of the novel as a whole, in the other side to the coin of the human that must “tell.” Osama’s arc, as the main character coming of age through story, is one that takes him from listener to teller, both within the diegetic world of the narrative (as he speaks at his father’s bedside) and in the extra-diegetic realm (by seeming to assume the mantle of the unnamed but predominant Narrating force). The satisfaction of repetition, whether it be through the Narrator who addresses, yet again, directly to “You,” who listens, or the beginning of a story-beat with the auditory-acoustic transition word of the “Ah,” (also featuring in approximately double-digits through the narrative entire), the experience of repetition-with-difference in this way becomes the life-blood of the storytelling experience here as analogue for life itself.²⁰² So does the book make its own argument, by enacting its own promise, and making come true the story.

To complete this study, back where it began: What is the *Hakawati*? Osama says:

What is a hakawati, you ask? Ah, listen.

A hakawati is a teller of tales, myths, and fables (hekyât). A storyteller, an entertainer. A troubadour of sorts, someone who earns his keep by beguiling an audience with yarns. Like the word ‘hekayeh’ (story, fable, news), ‘hakawati’ is derived from the Lebanese word ‘haki,’ which means ‘talk’ or ‘conversation’...²⁰³

Mixed into this is the blend of all the novel encompasses: a beckoning for reciprocity in the “conversation,” and something that demands participation to “listen”; the intoxicating bewilderment of the “beguiling”²⁰⁴ ride, through that which the “troubadour” has found, invented, and composed²⁰⁵; and the explicit blend of “news” with “fable,”²⁰⁶ “teller” with

²⁰² KP Smith on the human need for stories as meaning making, and narrativisation as essential for human comprehension- *Postmodern Fairytale*, 125 & 120, respectively.

²⁰³ Alameddine, 36.

²⁰⁴ “beguiling” which connotes both charm and the element of potential trickery, in that which beguiles “to trick or deceive/ to attract or interest”

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/17166#eid24370010> , <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beguile>, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/beguiling>, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/beguiling>.)

²⁰⁵ Per the etymological possibilities of troubadour, drawing upon “Old Provençal *trobador*, from *trobar* ‘to find,’ earlier ‘invent a song, compose in verse’”—alternate theories as to the influence

“story.”²⁰⁷ The collective yield of this experience is Story-Telling. It is *The Hakawati*. And it is, *The Hakawati* argues, life.

of Arabic *taraba* “to sing” would speak more to the embodied elements of telling as well.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/206762?redirectedFrom=troubadour#eid>,

<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Troubadour>

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=troubadour>,

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/troubadour>.

²⁰⁶ “news” as information or report,

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/126615?rskey=l54esD&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>,

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/news>, but also more colloquially that which is disseminated without necessarily passing rigors of fact-checking (“have you heard the news?” gossip etc.); “fable” keying into the elements of story and the possibility of lesson/take-away- a story “intended to teach a lesson/a story or statement that is not true” but bears truth in the message

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67384?rskey=Nfba4I&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>,

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fable>.

²⁰⁷ The relationship between the subject who tells and that which is being told—the medium and the message.

Conclusion:

Con-text: Refugee and Forced Migration Discourse Today

As to why the contribution of a Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman could matter beyond the scope of a Literary Refugee and Forced Migration Studies, one need merely turn to a consideration of the current geopolitical context of today. There is, after all, a reason that the field is so burgeoning and de rigueur: In what the UNHCR has described as a momentous “Global Trend,” “We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.3 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18.”²⁰⁸ And so not only is the Refugee and Forced Migration coming-of-age a more common experience than it might have been before; it is also a very non-fictional one, as part of a continually growing surge in those being forced to seek shelter, home and belonging elsewhere, and those who would or would not receive them.

Discourse surrounding the Refugee and Forced Migration subject in such times is not resigned to scholarly concerns, but has become a topic of heated and daily debate across demographic categories. With forced displacement comes forced new considerations, interactions, and potential relationships, as those who would otherwise have remained in their home-countries instead must seek permission to enter new countries and participate in new communities, and a manifold response must come in kind, where those prospective host-countries get to decide who becomes the temporary recipients of aid, who would become permanent new residents, and who will be turned away as rejected supplicants to find shelter, belonging, and safety elsewhere, and more local communities must then reckon with those freshly arrived individuals who have been granted presence in their ranks. The Refugee and Forced Migration subject becomes, in such contexts, a startlingly pressing quantity: those who might otherwise have ignored or discounted such a being as an abstraction, relegated its nature to an over-there quality of distance, instead find heightened stakes in the necessity of contemplating its corporeal form. It is a dynamic which is irrevocably changing lives through a relentless proliferation of effects across demographic, sociopolitical and interpersonal levels, and it is into this terrain that contributions to the discourse would intervene.

In such a climate, no matter the former training or “education” one might have had in such matters, or not, anyone can become a self-appointed expert or delegate in the assignation of a definition to the Refugee and Forced Migration subject. From politicians and lawmakers, to journalists, to average citizens, the discourse is currently marked by a significantly broad diversity of participation. The result could seem a contradictory mire, where the Refugee and Forced Migration subject becomes a kind of chimeric projection of larger constitutive beliefs in which the Refugee and Forced Migration narrative becomes a part—yet let such jawboning not be discounted as a dissemination into subjective democracies. This is not a story of “everyone has an opinion.” For amongst those competing voices, a dominant discourse emerges and perpetuates itself. The discourse is not an abstract one; its stakes are very real. Across the spectrum, the constitutive effects of narrative bear out in that rhetoric which defines a reality, in

²⁰⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (also known as the UN Refugee Agency - UNHCR), “Figures at a Glance,” statistics & infographic <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

those “enabling fictions” as Slaughter would term them²⁰⁹ which dole treatment to those subjects correspondingly to whatever the given story purports them to be. As expostulated in *Human Rights, Inc.*, just as the “average” (as however is defined within the purview of a given nation-state) citizen is afforded certain rights and responsibilities deemed natural and inalienable, those who fall outside such definitions are not assured equal treatment. Belonging becomes not a given, as in the traditional teleology of the *Bildungsroman*, where the individual gets to grow into his or her place in society as a culturally and legally recognized participant in the nation-state system; instead, the migrated-“other” receives whatever treatment the prevailing system’s narrative constitutes due. If, in the given discourse, the Refugee and Forced Migration subject is assigned the role of threat, so does this fuel and regulate policies and treatment which would withhold, contain, or punish. If the Refugee and Forced Migration subject is afforded the role of helpless victim, they may be afforded the beneficence or donative efforts of others, but their place is similarly marked passive at the mercy to those cast as power players. MELUS’s call to recuperate the Refugee and Forced Migration subject as active agent within the narrative becomes, in this context, a notable intervention that could become part of larger dynamic shifts—seeing further complexity and nuance becomes more than an aesthetic contemplation, where such investigations seek to recuperate within the capacity for those being constituted by the discourse to define themselves rather than to be defined.

Current Rhetoric and Action Surrounding the Refugee and Forced Migration Subject

If, as Slaughter says, literature may be seen as part of the cultural forms that constitute and regulate society, what are the current dominant flows of discourse into which such narratives would intervene? A moment spent attending to the contemporary manifestations, in the twinned forms of rhetoric and action, helps contextualize, particularly when considering the audience which such works in the Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman* might address. To engage, as a start, those works selected for study in this dissertation and each text’s initial design: for Precic's *Shards* (whose protagonist, as with its author, moves to the U.S.), its original publication was in English; for Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (whose protagonist, as with its author, moves to France), its original publication was in French, then English; and for Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati* (whose protagonist, as with its author, moves to the U.S.), its original publication was in English. On the level of language as well as content, as will be explored at greater length in the concluding rumination on the particularities of the *Bildungsroman* form, the audience may then be said to be that of host- versus home-country, and particularly a Western one. Taking to task a precursory survey of what discourse within such countries might include, one may be well served to merely glance through the day’s news feeds to see what is occurring—in the standard rigors of routine and expectation, implicit bias and mean thinking, the approach of one who falls within the bounds of “outsider,” who has intruded into the public and political sphere of another country’s confines as refugee/asylum-seeker/displaced-person/forced-hand-émigré, triggers a certain cascade of response and inclination. As the current geopolitical rhetoric demonstrates, there are specific answers once perceived, or labels once affixed, which rouse particularly extreme adjudication—the hotbutton reception of religion, for instance, as casting an all-consuming blanket-definition of identity on a subject who is, say, Muslim, and yes, “here” now, wherever here is, as no longer within whatever zone has been vaguely considered safely demarcated for other-being; so too with all those subtle

²⁰⁹ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 4.

markers of difference which could signal danger (“too different”), as in the wearing of a veil, the darkness of skin, an accent or foreign language, be it expressed through tongue, dress, gesture, or being. It is as Slaughter has engaged in the context of majority/minority dynamics within the nation-state system,²¹⁰ but it also keys into that particular facet of what the prevailing *narrative* of that system dictates...If a certain subject is determined “other” by the given discourse, it may not matter whether reality would seem to contradict it. Even if given the pro-forma protections and belonging of citizenship, for example, an individual faces the power of de-facto fictions. It is here where the U.S. citizen may be told to “go home,” as a slur intended to demarcate otherness and the impossibility of the *Bildungsroman*’s promise to achieve integration and equal participation. The more extreme reactions, and corresponding rhetoric, to be seen today may seem obvious, in the counter-response which has met the recent surge in migratory bodies and refugee flow, in particular in those Western countries, and the same countries which the authors this dissertation is concerned with address. Action, whether (for a sample smattering) it be the U.S. election of Donald Trump and the recent advent of the so-called “Muslim Ban”, the successful vote by British citizens to exit from the European Union, or the rise of the far-Right in France with the likes of Marine Le Pen and the National Front party, the discourse surrounding and undergirding these developments are crucial to consider. Selecting even a scanty handful of examples, as: Donald Trump Jr.’s campaign-time tweet with an image of Skittles and the words “If I had a bowl of skittles and told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem.”²¹¹; the UK Independence Party’s Brexit campaign ad, depicting a flow of refugees with the caption “Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all—We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders”²¹²; or a statement released by Marine Le Pen in response to what was deemed Germany (and Angela Merkel)’s overly-lax refugee policy, which asked ““How many massacres and deaths will be necessary for our governments to stop bringing in a considerable number of migrants into our communities without borders, when we know that Islamist terrorists are among them?”²¹³; The connection between rhetoric and action, discourse and decision, is real. And certain discursive repetitions and themes emerging in the current geopolitical context present, as the above, with eerily alarming clarity. But to perceive its danger is to perceive too its power, and its potential.

Why Fiction

When millions are being displaced and the world is being wracked by strains of conflict, persecution, and violence, latticed under ever-growing currents of migration, and bandied about in the throes of political positioning and counter-surges, why enter into a discussion about

²¹⁰ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 27 etc.

²¹¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/us/politics/donald-trump-jr-faces-backlash-after-comparing-syrian-refugees-to-skittles-that-can-kill.html?_r=0,
<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-jr-defends-skittles-tweet-simple-metaphor/story?id=42293369>.

²¹² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/06/brexit-anti-immigration-ukip-poster-raises-questions-160621112722799.html>,
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>.

²¹³ <http://www.thelocal.fr/20161220/french-far-right-blast-germanys-open-refugee-policy-after-berlin-attack>.

fiction? How much can literature do? One could argue can the literary realm, and fiction within that, could be uniquely suited to address several problems in particular.

For one, there is the question of openness. Where decisions outside the literary realm are made in the “blink of an eye,” as Malcolm Gladwell has explored in his popular sociocultural explorations,²¹⁴ entrenched in larger narratives bound to those pesky ideological and teleological underpinnings²¹⁵, the literary-fictive realm becomes a space designated for more openness and time. The entire enterprise of reading a novel postulates that reader spend what will likely be hours with one work, under the aegis of another’s control, willingly following the unfolding of a story. What is more, the process and pleasure bound in the reading of the novel is also constituted by its aesthetic— it is not just to transfer units of data in the form of letters and words into the cognitive processes of the reader, but to provide an *experience*, though the contours, nuances and intricacies of form. This experience should, if effective and enjoyable, furthermore very much hit at more than the cognitive processes, where the aesthetic experience engages the affective, the emotional, the beyond-thought. This, as Phelan suggests, should open up effects that are potent not only for existing, for their being there through the literary aesthetic experience, but because their nature, such an argument goes, contains within them the incitement for deeper rumination, on *cause* and-(as)-effects. That an experience can spur and encourage time, energy and attention spent, let alone the power of an exercise that could proliferate from the spark of the question *why* (*why* one feels what one does, *why* one thinks what one does, and *why* one values what one does) says something of the potential contained in the literary here.

For what the current condition seems to incubate, where flows in one direction spur closures in another, is the breeding of another “Global Trend,” in a lockdown on beliefs and the foreclosure of possibilities. When stakes are high and space is limited, openness can become the exception where suspicion is the rule. Any claim or statement, rather than an offering, becomes a threat, like an unmarked package on a city street—is it gift, garbage, or bomb? Bureaucratizations of being manage how close any average member of a society will come to a liminal figure or an outright outsider...those marked by-difference who are numbers of a mass, statistics in a sea, can find sympathy, but widespread understanding...? How many of those who catch the buzzword “Syria” while scrolling through their Facebook newsfeeds will know what it has been, to survive the experience being mass-marketed for public pablum? How close does the average person come, how carefully does one listen, to those bearing witness? Even for those circulated totems of reality that catalyze a surfeit of emotion, as in the video of a catatonic, rubble-dusted child, or the image of a drowned infant, the moment passes, and life resumes...for those who are still living. Those unaffected by the events, even if affected by its reportage, can return to their previously scheduled understandings as if nothing has happened and nothing need change. It is here that, this work argues, fiction enters. Story seduces, makes safe in its explicit fabricatedness the experiment of inhabiting and the experience of feeling. Fiction is just the right degree of dangerous—it exudes the promise of control (*you, reader, decide—you read me, you stop when you want to...I am here for you...*) while demanding the reader’s relinquishment of

²¹⁴ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), in the gesture to the prevalence and power of those experiences five minutes or less (called “thin slices”) that tell and at times decide all.

²¹⁵ Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, guest eds. *MELUS* 2015 Special Issue and *MELUS* 2015 Special Issue Call for Papers.

total agency for reward in the ride (*but you must let me take you where I want you to go...*). This deal, made implicit in every act of reading, becomes particularly appealing in the case of these stakes and contexts, where the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman may become the vehicle of fiction that can transport the reader into the experience of coming-of-age through exile itself. Form follows function: the narratological devices become more than a neat trick, to transform the description of events into the *experiencing* of those events themselves, and allow the reader to end somewhere greater than where they began. From there a more meaningful discussion could be initiated, a more profound appreciation bloomed, into the areas of distance and the chances for approach. The opportunity to speak, but most crucially, better listen. As *The Hakawati* begins: “Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imagining. Let me tell you a story.”

The Danger of “Facts”

That this is a Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman, somehow transformed from the strict confines of a purely “realistic” non-fiction section, is a crucial delineation and component of its possibility. In all three cases, *Shards*, *Persepolis*, and *Hakawati* refuse to pretend that their exercise is one of divine transcription from real-life into written form. If the genre of autobiographic or memoiric writing is beset by an obsession with veracity,²¹⁶ subjects of Refugee and Forced Migration experience know too well a further heightened and acute high-stakes game of authentication. If an average writer is fool enough to miscast his work as “truth” where the audience cries “fiction,” he may be marred by scandal, the objects of his creation discounted and discredited as lies. The censure comes when gleeful expectations of readership have been transgressed, where consumption of the outrageous or unbelievable (whether it be escapades of sex and drugs, or the tumult of trauma and war) is made sublime by its true-ness; a reader, captivated and moved by this stranger-than-fiction headiness, can easily channel the emotion into outrage if the trust is felt broken, the believer made fool. For those who are fleeing or who have fled their home country and are seeking entrance into another, the question of how their accounts are received, and whether the narratives of their lives are deemed false or true, are less a kind of lovers’-spat (as between reader and writer), and more of an almost grotesque adjudication—if the power dynamics in the former dance around the prize of success or reputation, the latter too often takes place amidst a staggering imbalance wherein security, acceptance, life or death are at stake. In this case, the judgment of the testimonial reaches beyond personal feeling (*I like this, you’ve been honest with me* or *You have deceived me, I don’t trust you*) to become so much the emperor’s thumb at the coliseum (*You have told the truth, you may stay/enter* or *You have lied, you are not welcome/you will be punished*).

²¹⁶ Think merely of the James Frey scandal with Oprah’s book club, for instance, and the hysteria induced by the suggestion that certain events in *A Million Little Pieces*, once deemed memoir though defended as novel, may not have actually occurred... See, for instance, Nicole Smith Dahmen’s “Construction of the Truth and Destruction of Million Little Pieces,” *Journalism Studies* 11:1 (2010): 115-130, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700903172080>, Julie Rak’s “Memoir, Truthiness, and the Power of Oprah,” *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 34:3 (2012):224-242, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2012.751260>, etc.

And thus within this too, as those within the field of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies know at length,²¹⁷ the confluence between design and identity in this form of discourse takes on a sinister valence: where narrative is converged with narrator, and listener becomes positioned with a disproportionate power, charged with the efficient ferreting-out of a (transcendental) “truth” (“I, the interlocutor/assayer ‘know’ you now, your essential identity and being, your story as that which you are, and what you are to me...and I decide *this*.”). The result can be not only terrifying, weighted, and unrealistic, but stripping, reductive, and dehumanizing; just as Slaughter has warned, those mechanizations in which, as Ismet Prcic’s eponymous character-protagonist describes experiencing in the process of giving his narrative for refugee-status to one particular INS officer:

The INS officer was a fucking robot encased in a blob of doughy human flesh. His eyes were devoid of humor. His brain had the motherboard of a Commodore 64 and his thoughts were written in BASIC (IF 1, 2 AND 4 / GOTO 10, 10 being NO ENTRANCE). He was programmed not to see me as a person.²¹⁸

What such an exchange presupposes, in the ideological and teleological underpinnings of the narrative, or the conditions which would make such a narrative possible, is the Western model of subject, in that transcendental quality of being which can be “known” and which the individual comes to know as obvious, discrete, clear—and that which these works precisely reject as impossible to the subject of Refugee and Forced Migration experience. All that the experience would actually encompass, and what the character-protagonist would have to say, is collapsed and foreclosed by the system’s constraints. One question then becomes how to recuperate strategies and embrace venues which lend narrative back its nuances and intricacies, and the experience beyond binary (YES/NO, IN/OUT, TRUTH/LIE). It is here where the Refugee and Forced Migration Bildungsroman enters.

There can be no pretense that the narratives as unfolded by authors Prcic, Satrapi, and Alameddine are creatively rendered expressions of Refugee and Forced Migration experience. Each explicitly untethers story from the strictures of autobiography and the confinement of reality, choosing instead to forge bold-facedly aesthetic transmogrifications. The novelistic form demands the reader lose attachment to binary programming, and go along instead for the ride. What that novelistic experience constructs *is* a building of narrator-through-narrative, identity through design...but through the journey of aesthetics, the opportunity of literary openness,

²¹⁷ A well-known area of inquiry within the Refugee and Forced Migration field has surrounded questions of testimony, as Slaughter engages in the context of human-rights abuses, but which are applied to particular cases as in immigration and asylum-seeking, and those systems which allow or disallow migration depending on the narratives given and the constraints and contours of the discourse within; this connects too to discourses in those fields surrounding trauma narrative, agency, victimhood, witnessing and representation. See, for instance, “Politics of Compassion and Refugee’s Agency” in *The Refugee and Forced Migration Handbook*, Caroline Moorehead’s *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* (New York: Picador, 2005), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman’s *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), Abdelmalek Sayad’s *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (Malden: Polity Press, 2004), Lilie Chouliaraki’s *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Malden: Polity, 2013), etc.

²¹⁸ Prcic, *Shards*, 302.

consideration and time. It is thorough this that the *Bildungsroman* can parlay its possibilities par excellence.

The Aesthetics of *Bildungsroman*: Possibilities of the Literary Encounter

As to the potential audience of these texts, and the function these works as-discourse could serve: the Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman* makes optimal use of the *Bildungsroman*'s generic expectations to ironically execute a reverse operation to what the standard *Bildungsroman* would perform. Instead of a narrative composed around the arc of the narrating-individual learning "what everyone already knows,"²¹⁹ as Slaughter describes the usual process, the text here is structured so as to allow *the reader to learn what Refugee and Forced Migration subject already knows*, from experience. It is in this way a kind of education-opportunity for the reader, though not as a didactic but as an experiential-aesthetic process.

Within the *Bildungsroman* form, the use of first-person character narration here allows this to be woven into the charm of the narrative dynamic: it is the teller who knows the story to be told, after all, and the audience who must learn it through the telling. On a more prosaic educational level, what this allows for is self-aware narrators who explain certain cultural norms, historical occurrences, and regional in-jokes which shared participants in their home countries would presumably already know; this promotes an interesting effect, as it suggests that the narrator encourages a certain feeling of dependence, reminding that without such aid and generosity, these important pieces which are "common knowledge" to the narrator would not be otherwise known. This is, in a way, an ironic flip on the realities of experience which the narrator is simultaneously narrating, in that dependency and powerlessness he or she has experienced as-character-protagonist midst conflict and war, displacement and dislocation, at the mercy of others and the inhabitants of the host-country. The narrator hereby self-admits and utilizes the position of relative privilege at the helm of the discourse, in order to serve a larger, more nuanced purpose. For these texts serve as more than just pleasing cultural translators between home- and host-country; it is not just cultural knowledge, but an essential difference in *experience* and *being* that each work posits as its place to breach. And it is here that literary narrative devices, in the particular freedoms of fiction and the *Bildungsroman* form, are executed to their utmost capacities.²²⁰

That the *Bildungsroman* is oriented around the expectations of the coming-of-age structure holds further benefit in positing the narratee in a relatively comparable position to the

²¹⁹ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, throughout on the general abstraction being performed by those enabling fictions which would call obvious or natural what the Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman* calls into question, and challenges with an alternative presented and constituted by the refugee and forced migration aesthetic through-discourse.

²²⁰ This work seeks to make a particular contribution in the context of a Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman*, subject and study, but for more generic explorations into the contributions of *Bildungsroman* as form and discourse see, for instance, Anniken Telnes Iversen's "Towards a Polythetic Definition of the *Bildungsroman*," *Postmodernism and After: Visions and Revisions* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), Kenneth Millard's "Contemporary Coming of Age – Subject to Change" in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), Tobias Boes' "Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends" in *Literature Compass* 3/2 (2006): 230-243 etc.

character-protagonist—that, as such, the narratee should be able to “grow” along with the protagonist avatar(s) as they come to know the world of Refugee and Forced Migration experience, and become part of the Refugee and Forced Migration subject of mosaic-being. This lends both the advantage of innocence and the insight of experience in the presence of both the narrator (already-aged) and growing-character self. That this is not the traditional *Bildungsroman* means that what the reader comes-to-know, as the character-protagonists and their narrating selves do, is that the world, both on a personal and historical level, as once known and understood is tossed and transformed into something entirely other by the ravages of war and the upset of displacement. The landscape of the understandings that the subjects of the novels, and, that is, the subjects of Refugee and Forced Migration experience, arrive upon is built not around the solidity of nation-state participation and socio-cultural/familio-personal belongings, but rather the tumultuousness of un-healable fissures, dissolutions, and disjointments on all fronts. In a traditional *Bildungsroman*, the growing pains of an individual are rewarded by eventually successful enculturation; for all the twists and turns along the way, what Slaughter describes as the predetermined nation-statist grid²²¹ holds steady, upon which the subject-citizen will chart him or herself in relation. Here, the forms of the narratives are constructed so as to parallel the content they hold within, which is distinctly other: the subject, and reader, instead are constantly thrown off guard, and learn that life-experience is not a safe settling but an awareness in perpetuity of a human condition of precarity and vulnerability. The individual is fated to exist in a suspended state of in-betweenness—the permanent presence of those interstices in the pieces of the mosaic, between cultures, between countries, between the self of old (before-war and displacement) and the self of new...the narratives not only mimic but perform this being and constitute this state. Thus the impression left, out of this constellation of disparate parts from which the reader has jarred between bits, is an ever-growing sense that this *is* the lesson, not just the experience. That telling of these stories, in the assemblage of these works, is a deliberate and poignant assertion of being, in the failure of form and content to meet prior expectation: *I, the narrator who tells you these things, am the collective of these pieces. They do not run smoothly, they do not fit neatly—just like I do (not).*

It is a constitution of this kind of subject, the result of this kind of experience, that the Refugee and Forced Migration *Bildungsroman* offers; it is the definition of its aesthetic, and its being. And it is too its own condition of possibility—that the encounter with the Literary may provide something to inform and contribute to the greater discourse, intervene in dominant narratives and approaches by being something, in itself, different. The literary which allows an “opt-out” on snap-judgments and binary-thinking, and the fictional ride which gives permission; the chance to explore the aesthetic contours of the experience itself, which, in lending shape and nuance, text and context, may arrive, once completed, at a more fruitful, fecund, and optimistic beginning. That which opens and which complicates, lends space for experience other than what one has previously known, and an opportunity to become part of the mosaic: in a world where nearly 34,000 people are forcibly displaced every day,²²² such a possibility for inclusion matters.

²²¹ Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 128.

²²² UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance,” *ibid.*

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