

REJECTION OF VICTIMHOOD IN LITERATURE: BY ABDULRAZAK GURNAH, VIET THANH NGUYEN, AND LUIS ALBERTO URREA

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In recent years, both the UK and the US have been conceptualized as hostile spaces for migrants and racialized communities, with nationalist and right-wing discourses ever-present in the context of Brexit, Donald Trump's inauguration and the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Bosman 2021: 2). Preoccupations with racist and hegemonic violence are also reflected in literature and its narrative treatment of marginalized migrants, with authors such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Luis Alberto Urrea exploring memory, belonging and institutional violence in relation to diasporic spaces. In his book, *Rejection of Victimhood in Literature: By Abdulrazak Gurnah, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Luis Alberto Urrea*, Bosman discusses the representations of transnational individuals and communities in the work of these three authors, paying particular attention to their rejection of essentialist conceptualizations of migrants as helpless victims, and as unable to enact agency. Throughout the book, Bosman focuses on and establishes numerous comparisons between the works of Gurnah, Nguyen and Urrea in order to critically examine how hegemonic discourses affect transitional subjects and stories.

Chapter 1 is centered around Gurnah's fictional work, particularly the two "immigrant novels" (Lewis 2011: 59) *By the Sea* (2001) and *Gravel Heart* (2017). Both novels center on the economic precarity and social instability suffered by transnational individuals, while exploring the construction of Zanzibar as a

diasporic space. Bosman also elaborates on how Gurnah's characters rely on strategies of hybridity, performativity and mimicry to navigate vertical and hostile systems of power—which allows for the reflection of “vastly different transnational experiences” that nonetheless have a certain “shared sense of homelessness” (Lewis 2011: 60) in common. There is also a strong emphasis on the role played by storytelling and the “entanglement of stories” (Gurnah 2006: 120) in these two novels, as Bosman argues that Gurnah relies on circular and non-linear narrative structures to highlight the critical role of language in negotiating the colonial past and present and in questioning the “links between history, memories and identities” (2021: 72). Again, the centrality of these elements allows for a diverse and complex representation of migrants and racialized communities that rejects both essentialist binaries and nationalist discourses. In this way, Bosman is able to offer a critical account of Gurnah's work, as this chapter's concern with the connections between power, memory and discourse allows for a rereading and reexamination of transnational identity and agency, as well as the figure of the ‘helpless victim’.

Chapter 2 revolves around the work of Viet Thanh Nguyen, specifically the treatment of Vietnamese migrants in the novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) and the short stories “Black-Eyed Women” (2018) and “The Transplant” (2018). Bosman describes these texts as “explor[ing] Vietnamese transnationals' potential to inflict harm on others as well as themselves” (2021: 73), emphasizing the centrality of trust, betrayal and remembering in the construction of “fully ethical subjects” (109). The chapter also comments on the “industrialization of memory” (Nguyen 2016: 13) and its impact on the fictional representations of Vietnamese communities and the Vietnam war. Here Bosman draws from Grice (2012) to explain that “representations of the war have largely been one-dimensional, depicting it as an American conflict, with American casualties” (96), resulting in the deliberate erasure of Vietnamese suffering. Again, many of Nguyen's characters occupy liminal spaces, and are seen as subhuman, unwelcomed and undesired due to their transnational status. The author often relies on the supernatural to develop these issues further in the stories, using speculative elements to thematize and focus on how identity, harm and memory are intertwined and interconnected. It is in this context that Bosman points out the centrality of ‘just memory’ in the construction of migrant and transnational subjects as in order to recognize one's agency we must also acknowledge the possibility of causing harm—here we may allude to Nguyen's idea that “to frame oneself only as a victim is to oversimplify power” (2006: 10). The chapter ends with Bosman drawing attention to the fact that, despite Nguyen's concern with just memory, his depiction of Vietnamese women draws from gendered stereotypes and that “[f]or his authorial project to remain ethical according to his own model, Nguyen needs to acknowledge the potential harm that could result from the representation presented in his own writing” (106).

The third chapter deals with the work of Luis Alberto Urrea, particularly his 2018 novel *The House of the Broken Angels* and his 2015 short story “Mountains Without Number”. Urrea’s fiction seems to explore the US-Mexico border as a diasporic space, and its connection with the figure of the “illegal alien” (Ibarraran-Bigandolo 2016: 20). Here, Bosman is interested in studying the ways in which the colonial legacy of the US shapes ideas of belonging and citizenship, as well as how these same ideas are destabilized by the presence of transnationals and Latino communities. Bosman also emphasizes that, “Urrea’s works depict the border as a porous site of multiple crossings” (2021: 123) and that, despite Urrea’s rejection of the term ‘border writer’, his relationship with the term is not only a complex one, but one that is (re)shaped by gender (113). In particular, Bosman examines the questioning of racial stereotyping in Urrea’s fiction and how it intersects with both the “Latino threat narrative” (Chavez 2008: 2) and the representation of gendered identities and familiar structures —arguing that the precarity that pierces Gurnah’s stories is also present in Urrea’s, and that it is, in both cases, directly linked to racial and colonial violence. All of these factors, Bosman argues, contribute to the creation of narratives that reject the idea of migrants as helpless victims, as their experiences are shown to be not only heterogeneous and diverse, but also directly influenced by their sociopolitical context.

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The last chapter is a comparative analysis of the work of the three authors. Rather than focusing on the plots of the different novels and short stories, Bosman tries to highlight the fact that Gurnah, Nguyen and Urrea share similar concerns. All of them explicitly reject essentialist and nationalist discourses that depict migrants as powerless and agentless, portraying transnational individuals instead as people with complex relationships with both their identities and their host countries. Their characters are often unwelcomed, and their narrative evolution is linked to ideas of guilt, shame and harm —as well as to the ways these accounts of harm are remembered, discussed and told. Again, Bosman sees the “ethical agency and responsibility of individuals” as “a concern central to the authorial projects of each of these authors” (2021: 162), and argues that that preoccupation shapes the diaspora space and its depiction in the works of Gurnah, Nguyen and Urrea. There is also an emphasis on memory, particularly the ideas of ‘just memory’ and ‘the industrialization of memory’, as Bosman explains that the (re)telling of immigrant stories is directly influenced by racist and essentialist discourses. Overall, this chapter highlights how Gurnah, Nguyen and Urrea “are all interested in the entanglements of families, histories, just memories, and full ethical agency” (177).

In short, Bosman is able to critically examine the narrative representations of migrants and transnational individuals while integrating issues of agency, guilt and identity into his analysis. Again, I would argue that, because of its multifaceted

nature, Bosman's work is not only of interest to those concerned with Gurnah, Nguyen and Urrea's literary production, but it can also be beneficial for those whose work falls within the scope of hospitality, memory and diasporic studies.

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