

The experience of migration, a key factor in the shaping of modern Arabic literature, has taken new, unprecedented dimensions in the last decades. Drawing on the finest scholarship in several fields, the contributions of this volume explore multiple representations of the migrant in both contemporary Arabic and Arab American literature, and discuss their role in shaping new forms of transcultural and transnational identities, thus providing the reader valuable insights into a most recent literary production as well as into the deep changes it reveals in the social and political contexts these literary works represent.

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# The Migrant in Arab Literature

This edited book offers a collection of fresh and critical essays that explore the representation of the migrant subject in modern and contemporary Arabic literature and discuss its role in shaping new forms of transcultural and transnational identities. The selection of essays in this volume offers a set of new insights on a cluster of tropes: self-discovery, alienation, nostalgia, transmission and translation of knowledge, sense of exile, reconfiguration of the relationship with the past and the identity, and the building of transnational identity. A coherent yet multi-faceted narrative of micro-stories and of transcultural and transnational Arab identities will emerge from the essays: the volume aims at reversing the traditional perspective according to which a migrant subject is a non-political actor.

In contrast to many books about migration and literature, this one explores how the migrant subject becomes a specific literary trope, a catalyst of modern alienation, displacement, and uncertain identity, suggesting new forms of subjectification. Multiple representations of the migrant subject inform and perform the possibility of new post-national and transcultural individual and group identities and actively contribute to rewriting and decolonizing history.

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# **The Migrant in Arab Literature**

Displacement, Self-Discovery and  
Nostalgia

**Edited by**

**Martina Censi and Maria Elena Paniconi**

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**This book is dedicated to Adelina Sejdini and to all migrant women who struggle daily, with their bodies, against exploitation, oppression, and violence.**

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# 1 Migrating to and in Europe Beyond the Nahḍawī and Modernist Paradigm

*Mudun bi-lā nakhīl* by Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib  
and *Taytanikāt Ifrīqiyya* by Abū Bakr  
Khāl as Novels of Forced Migration

*Maria Elena Paniconi*

## Introduction: The Trope of Migration in Changing Contexts

The enduring theme of migration to and in Europe lies at the foundation of both the late-*Nahḍa* Arabic novel (Ziyād, 2012, 23) and the more experimental novels of the 1960s and 1970s (Badawi, 1993; Hassan, 2017, 148). These works have long been read by literary critics as a sort of reification of the “East–West encounter”, and therefore as depicting Europe through the eyes of the protagonist and the dimension of the relationships established within the context of migration (El-Enany, 2006). The last decade saw the rise of a critical approach more inclined to view the theme of migration not so much as a realistic description of the phenomenon of migration to Europe by Arab students or workers but, first and foremost, as a narrative trope allowing authors to develop the idea of a modern subject. In these writings, Europe – far from being the *portrait* of an objective reality – is a discursive *construction* onto which authors projected elements of the ideological and identity debate underway at the time they wrote their novels (Casini, 2013; Casini, 2018).

In the canonical *nahḍawī* novels (for example, in ‘*Uṣfūr min al-sharq* by Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, *Adīb* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, *Duktūr Ibrāhīm* by Dhū-l-Nūn Ayyūb), the youths migrating to Europe distance themselves from their families of origin, define their own self, experience the tension of a family structure portrayed as a “traditional” family, and try to take their place in a new world: Europe, portrayed instead as a synecdoche of modernity. Jeff Shalan claims that “the modern Arabic novel developed in conjunction with a specifically nationalist mode of thought, and that it was instrumental not only in the dissemination of that thought, but in its very formation as well” (Shalan, 2002, 213). More specifically, we might consider the trope of the student migrating to Europe as one of the main axes around which the nationalist imaginary mentioned by Shalan was built. Thus, the description of the other European and the – partial or total – setting

of the plot in Europe were, in this phase, functional to a codification of the national narrative language.

In the later novels of the 1960s and 1970s, known as “migration and exile literature”, the classic trope of the student on a study mission abroad is joined by political or economic migrants. In these more recent novels, migration and exile are, in turn, a metaphor for an existential exile caused by the historical failure of fundamental ideologies such as Pan-Arabism. Within the social and political condition of the post-*Naksa* Arab world, authors and intellectuals found themselves “exiled” from their own history (Halabi, 2017, 98–130) thus, themes of migration or exile come to depict the contemporary debate on modernity, historical legacy, and prospects of the nation-state at a time of profound political crisis. One thing these writings – that is, the novels of the *nahḍawī* migration and, subsequently, the exile and alienation novels of the late 1960s and 1970s – have in common is the predominance of the issue of identity of the migrant, often defined in national, linguistic, and cultural terms. Paradoxically, this identity would be defined and described precisely *thanks* to the themes of detachment, of exile, of the expropriation of identity.

Starting from the 1990s, a new “literature of migration” in Arabic began emphasising the viewpoints of the refugees, the asylum seekers, the migrants who did not *choose* to migrate but who were *forced* to do so for economic, political, or war reasons (Sellman, 2018, 254–256). Known as novels of “forced migration” (Sellman, 2018, 759–762), these works push the migrants’ quest for identity and interaction with the context of arrival into the background, focusing instead – within the layout of the construction of meaning of the novels – on the actual experience of migration. The stories centre on the coastal gathering points of migrants, on borderlands, on the crossings – whether over the desert in pick-up trucks or buses, on ships or makeshift vessels – endured by the migrants.

By means of various narrative techniques, the plots of these novels showcase the migrants’ attempts to reach Europe by makeshift means and the – at times violent – refolement carried out by the law enforcement agencies in charge of “containing” the impact of migration by applying anachronistic laws (Mezzadra, 2013). Examples of novels about migration are *Safīnat Nūḥ* by Khālid al-Khamīssī (Noah’s Arch, 2009) or *Majnūn sāḥat al-ḥurriya* (The Madman of Freedom Square, 2009) by Ḥasan Blāsim. These contemporary novels, especially the ones describing the Moroccan and Algerian migrations, are also defined as “*Harraga* literature”, from the Moroccan term *harraga* (“to burn”), which refers to the practice of burning identification papers before crossing the Mediterranean so as to avoid repatriation, while also becoming a symbolic act of burning one’s identity prior to the crossing (Sellman, 2018, 752). Examples of this trend are *Hashīsh* by Yūsuf Fāḍil (Hashish, 2000) or *Layla Ifrīqiyya* (An African Night, 2010) by Muṣṭafā Laghtīrī – both Moroccan authors.

While the “*Harraga* literature” or novels of “forced migration” began to take shape in the 1990s, the transformation of the migration theme had already appeared in 1980s novels or short stories. Indeed, once considered a literary trope linked to national identity viewed in terms of cultural specificity and political self-determination, it became a “post-national” theme, avoiding the control of a nation-state narrative by then perceived by many as problematic (Ouyang, 2013, 225–226). Examples foretelling a migratory experience told in post-national terms are the short stories *Bi-l-amsi ḥalamtu bi-ka* (Last Night I Dreamt of You) by Bāhā’ Tāhir (1980), or the short story *1964*, included in the collection *Aisha* by Ahdaf Soueif (1983).<sup>1</sup>

In both stories, the protagonist migrates to a European country where there is no closely knit “community” – in cultural, social, or political terms – in which to integrate. “I knew there was no hidden world, no secret society from which I was barred. There was just – nothing” (Soueif, 1983, 39), to quote the protagonist of *1964*, faced with the failure of her expectations when the much-anticipated Valentine’s Day dance turned into a fiasco. And the narrator says of one of the characters in *Bi-l-amsi ḥalamtu bi-ka*: “Ten years had passed since he had started working in a bank, he had even obtained citizenship ... yet he felt lost” (Tāhir, 1980, 12–13).<sup>2</sup> The protagonists of these two stories are unable to experience either “integration” into the society hosting them or, on the other hand, a rediscovered identity as a consequence of the migratory experience as occurs in the *nahḍawī*/modernist tradition. In both cases, the subject’s interior feeling of alienation is pervasive and mirrors the weaknesses of the national narrative. Tāhir and Soueif’s stories are among the first to deliberately overcome the “developmental” paradigm characterising the migratory experience in the *nahḍawī* novel – a paradigm where migration was generally synonymous with striving towards a more modern and liberal context within which a political and social set-up would ensure an improvement in the living conditions of migrants.

At times, novels of colonial and postcolonial migration to non-Arabic speaking areas are also based on the model pinpointed by Dawes as the “coming-of-age narrative” – that is, the telling of the passage from a world deprived of human rights to a world that instead offers them (Dawes, 2018, 50–53). Externally, this passage takes the shape of a journey of personal growth, thus creating an intersection between novel of migration and the classic coming-of-age formula. According to Slaughter, this literary form is the one that throughout history innervated the spreading of the topic of human rights to extra-European contexts, ultimately becoming the literary equivalent of the “Human Rights Law”:<sup>3</sup>

The narrative homology between human rights and the *Bildungsroman* is not merely fortuitous; both articulate a larger discourse of development that is imagined to be governed by natural laws and that is historically bound to the modern institutions and technics of state legitimacy.

(Slaughter, 2017, 93)

According to Slaughter, in particular, the developmental discourse articulated by both the Human Rights Law and *Bildungsroman* assumes the laws and structure of the nation-state as “natural”, pointing to it as the best possible sociopolitical organisation that modern humanity can aspire to. The fact that in several postcolonial novels the process of obtaining citizenship takes the shape of the natural “transforming” of youth into adult (Dawes, 2018, 94) only confirms the homology mentioned by Slaughter.

The two stories by Ṭāhir and Soueif referred to earlier do not show a progressive journey to citizenship, instead demystifying – whether by means of disillusioned language (Soueif) or an anguished *rêverie* (Ṭāhir) – the very idea of citizenship and identity. With the Arabic novel of “forced migration”, which unfolded mainly in the decade following the abovementioned stories, the developmental discourse at the foundation of the *nahḍawī* novel (and in any case present on the horizon of the postcolonial novel) is further destabilised. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the new portrayals of migrant subjectivities in two novels depicting two forced migrations: *Mudum bi-lā nakhīl* (Cities Without Palms, 1992) by Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib e *Taytanikāt Ifrīqiyya* (African Titanics, 2008) by Abū Bakr Khāl. The novels are analysed in light of a recent study on migration by Nail (2015) that puts the spotlight back on the migrant’s political subjectivity. At the same time, this analysis will also highlight how the political dimension of the Earth-system takes shape, also reacting to human actions, in the current climate crisis (Latour, 2018). In the wake of the abovementioned studies, we have decided to distance ourselves from a viewpoint that hypothesises the situation of permanence and citizenship as “standard” and that, instead, hypothesises migration as an extraordinary phenomenon.

As underscored by Sellman, literature should not be interpreted from a sociological point of view, yet it helps create a collective imaginary that communicates with sociological observation (Sellman, 2018, 755). Therefore, while the novels have not been interpreted solely according to their documentary and sociological interest, this chapter will identify and analyse the elements suited to giving readers a new idea of the identity of the migrant.

The analysis will help emphasise how novels of “forced migration” break away from the developmental migration underlying several *nahḍawī* and modernist novels to release the identity of the migrant from the hidden meanings implied in the previous narrations. In particular, we will emphasise the shifting nature of migrants in the novels of forced migration, where their identity is constantly redefined, also depending on the bodies that control the “borders” of the nation-states and, therefore, define and determine the migrants’ status (Nyman, 2017, 18). However, migrants are not merely “defined” by external factors; they are also active subjects in their own right. This can be inferred by the choices made during the journey (bearing in mind that these people were originally forced to migrate against their will), by their adaptive skills and by the decisions made along the way.



### Migrating Subjects/Shifting Masks

In *Mudun bi-la Nakhīl* – henceforth *Mudun* – Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib’s<sup>4</sup> successful first novel told in the first person, we find the story of 19-year-old Ḥamza, who leaves behind his village in Sudan and his mother and his two younger sisters to travel across Egypt, Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands before returning to Sudan (Hassan, 2017, 428–429). A clandestine traveller, Ḥamza resigns himself to doing seasonal jobs with no kind of protection, and, as we shall see, his return to the village when his migration comes to an end will not, as hoped, improve his life or that of his family. In *Taytanikāt Ifrīqiyya* by Abū Bakr Khāl<sup>5</sup> – henceforth *Taytanikāt* – we find the voice of Abdar, both protagonist and narrator, who tells of his own trip from Sudan and Eritrea to Tunisia. The narrative voice allows for other types of narrative inserts that act as “traces” of the passage of other routes and other lives aside from Abdar’s.

Abdar’s journey begins on a pick-up truck with a group of other migrants and turns into a desperate desert crossing (“everything looks different, the dunes move”) within reach of the Hambata<sup>6</sup> to reach the Libyan coast. Several of his travelling companions die along the way. Upon arriving in Tripoli, Abdar meets his companions for the remainder of the migration, including Terhas, a young Eritrean woman who will share several stages of the journey with the protagonist. But as they wait to put out to sea on a makeshift vessel from Tripoli, they are dispersed by the Libyan gendarmerie. So Abdar, Terhas, and four other migrants travel on foot to Tunisia, where they are eventually arrested, leading to Abdar’s repatriation. Though not autobiographical per se, these novels centre on migratory journeys that, especially in Khāl’s case, parallel the author’s true experience. The two novels describe the situations, itineraries, and encounters experienced by the migrants with vivid realism. Though generally keeping to the codes of realism, the two stories analysed here also set in motion narrative strategies such as de-familiarisation, testimonial narration and, especially in Khāl, narrative inserts as texts within the text. The two protagonists’ past experiences and actions are always included, and recalibrated each time, within the framework of the natural environment, which takes on a central, proactive role in both novels.

In his book *Down to Earth*, Bruno Latour invites us to rethink alternative models to “local” and “global” categories in the wake of the climate crisis, asserting the need to welcome nature’s proactive quality in the placement of people in it and, consequently, in determining what is “local” and what is “global” (Latour, 2018, 25–32). According to Latour, nature is able to act and *react* to society. In other words, it is not a powerless background completely controlled by humans but, rather, plays a leading role in our lives and decisions. In their specific plots and in the network of impressions and imaginaries they build, both *Mudun bi-lā nakhīl* by Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib and *Taytanikāt Ifrīqiyya* by Abū Bakr Khāl assign nature the central role, as if, in Latour’s words, “the decor, the wings, the background, the whole building have come on stage and are competing with the actors for the principal role” (Latour, 2018, 43).

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Indeed, the beginning of *Mudun* describes the bleak drought and famine that strike the village that the main character, Ḥamza, feels forced to leave. In *Taytanikāt*, migration is in and of itself a sort of natural phenomenon that attacks the human race, taking root especially in young people: it is “a pandemic, a plague” (Khaal, 2014, 3) and, thus, like all forces of nature, impossible to control or stem. The two authors, therefore, trace the migratory phenomenon back to a natural context and describe it as a direct consequence of an environmental crisis, a natural phenomenon equal to a flood:

The desert keeps growing, and sorrow, not rain, is all that comes to us.  
Drought and disease, agony and death: we are the dying, the living dead.  
(Eltayeb, 2009, 2)

Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell, sweeping everything along in its wake. None of us knew when or how it would end. We simply watched, dumbfounded, as the frenzy unfolded. From all across the continent came mournful lamentations: “Africa will soon be no more than a hollow pipe where the wind plays melodies of loss”.  
(Khaal, 2014, 3)

In both novels, the act of migrating is described as a reaction to a natural emergency. Furthermore, neither protagonist develops a migratory plan of their own; indeed, both decide to set out without planning their journey and without worrying much about the road that lies ahead. Instead, they seem more worried about what they are leaving behind, as appears clearly in this glimpse into Ḥamza’s thoughts:

I call to my mother and tell her that I have made up my mind about something, and briefly explain my plan to leave. She sadly bows her head and silently looks at the ground for a while – I think she is going to cry. ... I visit my silent city: I go to the graves to bid them farewell. I am not sure how long I stay here. For once I do not sing. I simply sit there, lost in my memories. Suddenly I realize that I am leaving tomorrow. I think less about the road ahead and about what will become of me than I do about leaving my mother and two young sisters alone in the village.

Perched on top of a palm tree, a crow caws loudly and startles me. The palm has lost its fronds – I cannot bear to watch it die like this. I was its sole keeper. ... we have shared so many memories, the palm and I, and now it is dying, silently dying while the crow caws on its barren summit, announcing its dominion over the palm’s ruined kingdom.

(Eltayeb, 2009, 14–15)

Ḥamza barely has time to bid farewell to his past in that land: a farewell that passes through the graves of the people who once lived there and the palm tree that, as we see in lots of poetry and prose of the Arabic literary tradition,

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is something more than a mere fruit tree – it is a landmark of memory.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, migration is described as something that Abdar, the protagonist and narrator of *Taytanikāt*, undergoes without, on the face of it, having any say in the matter:

I was plucked from Eritrea, swept across the Sudanese border and on into Libya, in the dark of night. I was lost, and almost perished in the desert, before slipping through into Tunisia. I remember feeling as though I was fated forever to continue my ceaseless roaming, and that I would never again escape the endless road.

(Khaal, 2014, 4)

In Khāl’s writing, therefore, migration is a “plague” or a “bug”, a mysterious “bell” “calling one and all to its promise paradise” (Khaal, 2014, 3). These early pages already showcase what will prove to be the specific features of Khāl’s narrative language that is, the continuous intrusion between two dimensions: reality and highly imaginative writing, interwoven with oral stories and legends collected by Abdar. Both protagonists become migrants against their will, and both of them – another feature shared by the two novels – will adapt to the various situations and conditions encountered along the way, wearing a different mask each time: that of political refugee, smuggler, economic migrant, aspiring refugee, migrants without papers. The masks worn by Ḥamza and Abdar on their respective journeys foretell the mutable nature of the migrant described by Nail (Nail, 2015). The migrant has multiple identities and is called by multiple names: Abdar in *Taytanikāt* has dozens of *laqab*, or nicknames:

in Khartoum I was known as Awacs (The Airborne Warning and Control System) because I’s refuse to go to bed at night until I’d garnered every last useful scrap of information from the world of immigrant smuggling, by land, sea and air ... . In Eritrea, my birthplace, I was al-Shamman, Arabic word for Sniffer, thanks to a so-called friend who spread it around that enjoyed sniffing petrol-soaked rags ... that nickname soon superseded my original childhood one of Ambsa, the Tigré word for Lion.

(Khaal, 2014, 15–16)

The loss of his own name inflicted on Ḥamza in *Mudum* acts as a counterpoint to this proliferation of names:

The long and hopeless walk through the city has left me out of breath. It is incredibly hot, so much so that the pavement has eaten up my sandals, which are now stinging the soles of my feet. I move to the shade to escape this torment. ... A tall young man suddenly appears in front of me ... . He addresses me:

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“How are you, my friend?”

“Not that well, as you can see. I’m exhausted – this heat is killing me.”

“I can tell from your accent that you are not from the city.”

“No, I’m not. I’m from a village called Wad al-Nār, hundreds of miles from here.”

He closes his eyes and repeats what he has just heard, as if trying to remember something. Wad al-Nār, Wad al-Nār, what family are you from?

“You don’t even know the name of my village, so how would you know the name of my family?”

“You are a light-hearted one, son of Nār!”<sup>8</sup>

“My name is Ḥamza.”

“Your name is not important. Tell me who you’re looking for.”

(Eltayeb, 2009, 26)

The process of multiplication of identities in Khāl and, by contrast, of loss of identity al-Ṭayyib, are emblematic of the narrative techniques that are the hallmarks of these writings: accumulation in Khāl (Luffin, 2012a, 60–63), dis-possession in al-Ṭayyib.<sup>9</sup> Several times, fate blindly distributes the “identity masks” to be put on – for example when a mistake made by the Tunisian gendarmerie allows Abdar and his four travelling companions to cross the border between Libya and Tunisia:

we walked across the street with calm, even steps, waving cheerly at the driver. I felt a great rush of joy. Surely we were through the worst.

At that moment, however, a booming voice rang out: “Hey you! [...] Where’re you lot from?” the man barked. He was standing at the entrance of the police station. My mind went blank.

“Eritrea. I’m from Eritrea.”

“Mauritania?” The policeman yelled.

“Yes,” I replied. My voice a little louder.

“Alright then! On your way, Mauritanian!”

(Khaal, 2014, 89)

In Europe, where the final part of *Mudun* is set, it is the passing of time rather than moving in space that changes the identity features of the migrants, for example turning a seasonal worker into an illegal immigrant.

My first month in France ends, and with it my legal period of stay. Now, in my second month, I am illegal just like all the rest. I walk the streets like a rat, and whenever I see a police car or an officer’s uniform. I scurry into the first alley I can find, or rush into a shop at random – I ask for soap at the butcher’s and for bread at the bookstore. I have heard about

what happens when you get caught; I would be forced to spend the night in prison and would then be deported back to Sudan, while all my money sits in a bank here in France.

(Eltayyeb, 2009, 78–79)

### **The Escape-Plot in *Mudun bi-lā nakhīl*, Storytelling, and Interweaving of Stories in *Taytanikāt***

In both novels, the protagonist embarks on his migratory experience alone, but soon enters into a series of trans-regional crossings where he encounters other migrants. Ḥamza in *Mudun* leaves Sudan (specifically, a small Sudanese village) heading for Omdurman. From there, he will migrate towards Cairo, where he will suddenly decide to migrate to Europe, passing through Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands before returning to Sudan. His journey only lasts a year and five months. After crossing the border between Belgium and the Netherlands “clandestinely”, and after realising that he has heard from his family only once despite having sent them money several times, Ḥamza decides to return to his village to ascertain the fate of his mother and sisters. The style is spare, marked by the frenzied pace of Ḥamza’s departures, arrivals and new leave-takings. As previously mentioned, *Mudun* is always narrated in the first person and in the “historic present”; this element adds vividness and draws readers into the space-time horizon of the action. The novel’s table of contents showcases the order of his movements, stage by stage:

- From the Village
- To the City
- To Another City
- To Other Cities
- To the Village

The chapter titles, read as a whole and in the tension that is created between “Village” and “City”, seem to recall the duality between city and countryside that spans all Arabic literature and organises the emerging of a narrative canon (Selim, 2004). Interestingly, migration to and in Europe is also not defined in so many words but, rather, as “To Other Cities”, thus helping to represent Omdurman, or Cairo, as “cities” equivalent to the European capitals Ḥamza stops in during his brief journey through Europe. Even in the narrator-Ḥamza’s thoughts, observations, and fleeting descriptions, the only place he calls “home” is his village, which he knows like the back of his hand, humanising its palm trees – as we saw previously – before bidding them farewell as he prepares to leave. With reference to the cities – whether Omdurman or Cairo, or the European cities – Ḥamza always gives voice to his state of alienation. He asks himself: “God, what will I do in this enormous city”? (Eltayyeb, 2009, 25), or notes that “Each neighbour resembles

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the other” (Eltayyeb, 2009, 27). All of Ḥamza’s movements are accompanied by the image of the city-labyrinth, or of the inhospitable city. In Omdurman, Ḥamza experiences an interlude of “stability”: after some initial difficulties, he manages to open a small stall and, later on, is hired by a shopkeeper to handle sales alongside his young wife. Ḥamza has an affair with the woman, who gets pregnant. Ḥamza’s stay in the Sudanese city thus becomes a new situation to flee from, and so, after obtaining a permit, he arrives in Cairo via ship (“To Another City”). Here he relies on temporary and illegal jobs – notably joining a group of clothing smugglers who shuttle between Cairo and the free-trade area of Port Said. He finally manages to obtain a travel visa and, in the hopes of escaping a future of uncertainty, travels to Europe via ship, departing legally from the Port of Alexandria.

In Rome, the feeling of alienation that has always accompanied the protagonist’s arrival in cities emerges with greater intensity: Ḥamza loses his suitcase of interwoven palm fronds, leaving it on the platform as he gets on the wrong train (Eltayyeb, 2009, 70–71). In this situation of total deprivation, that single object represented a landmark of his inner geography. Once he has lost the last memento of the palm trees of Wad al-Nār, Ḥamza’s story grows more and more similar to an escape: a succession of European cities and seasonal jobs is interspersed with references to “lost” objects and stolen money, sometimes inflicted on the migrants by their own travelling companions. In the end, Ḥamza is found without papers and arrested at the Amsterdam airport (Eltayyeb 2009, 84).

After a brief detention, Ḥamza rewinds his journey, keeping a tight grip on his amulet (“the only thing I have left from Wad al-Nār”; Eltayyeb, 2009, 84) as he backtracks. Upon arrival, however, he discovers that an outbreak of cholera has killed most of the villagers, including his mother and younger sisters. The ending is, so to speak, bitterly ironic in that it invalidates the reasons Ḥamza had migrated in the first place. The newly completed journey undertaken with the aim of helping his family therefore shows its bitter consequences of total loss and cruel irony. Only one live palm tree remains standing, once a symbol of his home and now a gravestone before which to sit and mourn. Ḥamza’s grief has the flavour of archaic poetry and his words are those of the tragic heroes facing their destiny: “I sit down on it, and face the ruins of the village (*ḥuṭām al-qarya*)” (Eltayyeb, 2009, 89). To sum up, we could say that the model of the escape-plot novel is the foundation driving the narration of *Mudun*: indeed, Ḥamza’s movements are triggered by his finding himself forced into a position or a situation, like when he feels stuck in the village of Wad al-Nār, or when he undergoes his most critical sequence of events in Omdurman: “I have arrived at a crossroads, caught between the wreckage of the past and an aimless future, while the present slowly, mercilessly gnaws on my living flesh” (Eltayyeb, 2009, 47).

As for Abdar’s journey in *Taytanikāt*, with its series of unforeseen events, returns and false starts, it resembles travelling through a maze. Interestingly, *Taytanikāt* also has a “circular” plot and a retroactively ironic ending,

which appears to invalidate the entire journey undertaken by the protagonist. However, Khāl's novel is founded on very different textual mechanisms compared to *Mudun*. Less frenzied in its rhythm, less “linear”, the narration unfolds by incorporating several subplots and texts within the text that span Abdar's story.

Khāl's world is inter-Eritrean first and foremost, with several characters of Eritrean origin (albeit with different ethnic and religious affiliations) who are on good terms with one another, seemingly setting aside any discord ensuing from the civil war (Luffin, 2012a, 60). In a liberating story, before his death during the desert crossing at the start of the novel, the character of Asgedom relives the trauma of the war and, facing certain death, appears to realise the folly of a fratricidal war for the first time:

We were identical ... the lot of us ... our features, our clothes ... even our weapons were the same ... and we all knew the enemy's language ... and when we fought in the dark ... their army would attack each other ... and we'd fight each other too ... we buried their dead beside ours ... because we couldn't tell them apart. ... They did the same.

(Khaal, 2014, 33)

Secondly, Khāl describes an inter-African and cosmopolitan world made up of people from “Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Ghana and Liberia” (Khaal, 2014, 43), who intersect in the makeshift lodgings and various gathering points that form along the Mediterranean coastline while waiting for the many people smugglers to organise the departing groups. Here people wait, feverishly consult the weather reports, strike up relationships that can prove incredibly strong, consider alternative possibilities and routes in case of variations. The journey narrated by Abdar is structured around these junctions and intersections between the migratory routes of the most diverse individuals. Compared to al-Ṭayyib's story, therefore, Khāl's story centres more on the idea of “community” and seems to be pervaded by an underlying trust in the people who end up becoming travelling companions. The narrative voice detects their *pietas* in the midst of death, when the first victims are claimed by the “maze” (*matāha*) of the desert and the “red death” (*al mawt al-aḥmar*), or death from thirst. The tragic crossing of the sea of sand, a sort of “narrative double” of the real sea (Luffin, 2012a, 61), destabilises the common reader, who finds him or herself reflecting, perhaps for the first time, on the dangers and journeys that sub-Saharan migrants undergo *before* embarking on the various “*taytanic*”.

The ironic name given to these makeshift rafts, inflatable dinghies, or fishing boats departing from the coasts of migrants also disorients the readers who, alongside a tale of desperation and death, find the irony with which the migrants exorcise their fear of death. Chief among the voices and stories collected by Abdar are the words of Maluk, his Liberian friend and travelling companion whose tragic end is disclosed in the very first pages. Maluk

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never lets go of his guitar or his stories: he tells of the exploits of his grandfather, “Maluk the First”, who once set off to rescue his wife, kidnapped by local pirates, and of the “adventures of Kaji”, an imaginary character who lives in Maluk’s notebook and is dealing with a grandson who has decided to migrate. Maluk also sets his poems to music and tells stories about Liberia and his fiancée, killed in the war: Khāl’s narrative choice here is to “project typographically the disjunction between the narrator’s semi-realist account and the artistic commentary by italicising the inset stories and poems, many by Malouk” (Wilson, 2017, 7).

Maluk’s stories and the ones about Kaji in his notebook, along with all the other stories contained in *Taytanikāt*, make up several pieces of a larger storyline that envelops the individuals to become a network, a sort of “ancient and heterogeneous” map of the people who, over the years, have defied their own geography, setting sail like “Maluk the Second”. In Maluk’s case, the boat sank, leaving no survivors. The event is reconstructed in detail at the end of the novel, which describes the reasons why the inexperienced ‘Alī took the helm of the boat, the first leaks, the first dead bodies piled up on the bridge, and finally the last days spent starving and dying of thirst, adrift in international waters under the indifference of oil tankers that watch the migrants dying one by one (Khaal, 2014, 107–111). But Maluk’s words and stories do not sink with him. They live on in Abdar; they enlarge and expand his identity, becoming in turn a sort of “amulet” – like the one given to Ḥamza by his mother to protect him from misfortune, like the one that Maluk himself hoped to find prior to his departure, in a poem collected and revived by Abdar:

Without an amulet  
 I slid through the guarded gates  
 Crawling like a worm  
 Trough barbs and wire  
 Swallowed by salty swamps  
 Surrounded by desert dogs  
 I ran on  
 Between wicked trees  
 Clawing at my clothes  
 While rain lashed me  
 I watched my legs  
 Sink into graves of clay  
 Dissolving into watery floods  
 I crossed  
 But now I must find an amulet  
 To cross  
 Straits of fire  
 Towards continents of snow.

(Khaal, 2014, 101)



The ending describes how the narrator-protagonist Abdar and Terhas are escorted back to the border by Tunisian authorities and repatriated, following a brief period of detention during which they were mistreated and tortured. Like in *Mudun*, the ending of *Taytanikāt* shows the mocking smile of an ironic fate: Abdar is forced to repatriate just as he was forced to leave in the first place, while Maluk – the only one of the group of migrants to “escape” the police roundup – manages to leave Tunis only to meet his death. At the end of the story, Abdar wonders if the real reason for his migration was actually to meet Maluk and to collect his tales, his talisman of interwoven verses and stories.

## Conclusions

While *Mudun* sheds light on the subjectivity of an individual migrant (Ḥamza), in *Taytanikāt* we witness the construction of an inter-subjectivity of the migrants – a feature that represents a further deviation from the *nahḍawī* and modernist migratory literature of the early 20th century and the 1960s and 1970s. This inter-subjective dimension replaces the prevailing – and often racialised (identity is white) – idea of a subjective identity derived from the contrast with an “otherness” perceived as culturally superior or inferior. Instead, Khāl reconstructs a migrant identity that is community-based, transversal, and non-racialised. These “imagined communities” acted upon by the migrants and recounted by Abdar are the protagonists of this novel, starting from the beginning of the crossing, in the desert that moves and “speaks” like a human being (Khaal, 2014, 31), and ending with his repatriation.

As previously mentioned, neither Ḥamza nor Abdar *choose* to migrate; they are forced to do so by an emergency that expels them from the place where they were born and raised, opening a new space-time. As in most tragedies, these characters defy their preordained fate and the geography familiar to them. The sense of tragedy surfaces and is detonated in the circular plots of the novels, and especially in the two retroactive endings that question the choices, perspectives, and narration of forced migration. The protagonists who dared to defy their fate and their familiar, everyday geographies find themselves “cheated” by that very fate and brought home almost against their will, just as against their will they had left.

In *The Figure of the Migrant*, Nail explains how, in migratory circulation, movement turns into counter-movement, and how the migratory flow is continually folds back onto itself (Nail, 2015, 28). Once again, albeit without calling for a derivative and sociological-documentary analysis, we could, however, observe how the migratory paths mapped out by the authors examined offer a plastic depiction of *Kinopolitics* – that is, the spontaneous politics of movement theorised by Nail. Ḥamza and Abdar’s backwards movement along the migratory *telos* is a sort of admission of defeat, with migration showing itself in all its futility.

In conclusion, these two novels can be hypothesised as examples of the “forced migration novel” that, despite their structural differences, tend to demystify the traditional “progressive” *nahḍawī* literature of migration to and in Europe, on the one hand, and to demystify the “developmental rhetoric” of “human rights literature”, on the other, though sharing a few of its aspects. Both novels make use of the tools of the imagination to regain possession of functions “normally” performed by the national government. The reconstruction of the memory of those who migrate to Europe put in place by the narrator of *Taytanikāt* and the story of Ḥamza’s desperate attempt to migrate to protect his destitute family are not only plots; they are also starting points for a series of narratives that present themselves as “authentic” in the face of a falsified national narrative. Abū Bakr Khāl’s magical realism and Ṭāriq al-Ṭayyib’s frenzied prose mark a necessary return to the narrated word, necessarily “raised” from the plane of individual experience and, instead, reshaped on the basis of a collective reality, shared by subjects who are marginalised and anonymous in the public discourse. To sum up, these novels make use of different rhythms, narrative models, and viewpoints to portray two tragic and contemporary heroes who – equipped with a physical amulet like Ḥamza, or with an amulet interwoven with verses and stories like Maluk – defy the geography of the familiar to venture into the unfamiliar. Diverging from outmoded models of migration narratives, the two authors likewise choose unfamiliar languages to radically question the concepts of “identity”, “home”, and “nation”.

## Notes

- 1 Originally written in English and only later translated into Arabic, *1964* by Soueif (1983) is a story inspired by the author’s own migratory experience. The tones of the story are realistic. *1964* is part of the collection *Aisha*, where all the stories revolve around the main character – Aisha herself – who was raised in London before returning to Egypt. From the very first lines of *1964*, migration is viewed as an experience where gender, class, and race intersect: the protagonist’s identity is thus complicated, questioned, and not strengthened by her migratory experience. Aisha grows up in her “diaspora” according to social rules dictated by class and gender and, in part, by the further class awareness represented by the “academic diaspora” to which her parents belong. At school, the girl experiences a sort of double isolation, because her behaviour and fluent English set Aisha apart from the stereotype of Arab migrant: “with my prim manners and prissy voice they wouldn’t want me for a friend anyway. I was a misfit” (Soueif, 1983, 31). *Last Night I Dreamt of You* by Bāhā’ Ṭāhir, on the other hand, is pervaded by disturbing tones and resembles a *rêverie* in a foreign land. The story is based on the meeting between the anonymous main character, an Arab youth in a snow-covered European country, and a local girl. After a few chance meetings, the two get to know each other, but the resistance and inexplicable feelings the youth rouses in the girl lead to growing tension and incommunicability.
- 2 My translation.

- 3 The homology between Human Rights Law and *Bildungsroman* is explained in detail in the chapter “Human Rights, the *Bildungsroman* and the Novelization of Citizenship” (Slaughter, 2017, 86–139).
- 4 Born in Cairo to Sudanese parents in 1959 and living in Vienna since 1984, Tāriq al-Ṭayyib is one of the best-known and most-translated authors of the Arab diaspora.
- 5 Abū Bakr Khāl is an Eritrean author who currently lives in Denmark. A former fighter in the ELF, he lived in Libya until 2011. He had published three novels before *Taytanikāt: Rā’iḥat al-silāḥ* (The Scent of Arms, 2005); *Birkintiyya. Arḍ al-mar’a al-ḥakīma* (Barkantiyya: Land of the Wise Woman). For this author’s literature, see Luffin (2012a).
- 6 “Hambata” is a dialectal Sudanese Arabic word used by the author to refer to groups of bandits who attack the vehicles of passers-by, often clandestine migrants heading for the coast (Luffin, 2012a, 61).
- 7 In Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s novel *Adīb*, for example, the protagonist’s departure for Europe is marked by a visit he pays to the palm trees in his village and to the verses that Muṭī’ b. Iyās, a poet who lived between the end of the Umayyad period and the beginning of the Abbasid period, wrote in honour of this tree in his poem: “On Two Palms of Ḥulwān”.
- 8 Ḥamza’s village is called Wad al-Nār, thus the young man calls him “son of Nār”.
- 9 In a May 2016 interview, the author himself told me that he had worked on this novel “by subtraction”, reducing its volume during the final revision.

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