

Privatizing Refugees' Human Rights in Hamid's Exit West, Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus and The Schooldays of Jesus, and Hosseini's Sea Prayer

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Abstract: *The contemporary novel seems to be complicit with neoliberalized and economized human rights. It is, time and again, a narrative that attempts to structurally adjust humans' emotions to further the elitism and exclusiveness of human rights to citizens of Western countries. I argue that some modern neoliberal novels are a part of sentimental adjustment programs that strip refugees of their basic human rights, while at the same time celebrate Western societies and their aggressive and negative attitudes towards displaced individuals as equitable. Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, J. M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus and The Schooldays of Jesus, and Khaled Hosseini's Sea Prayer are novels that function as examples of sentimental adjustment programs in which the narrative thread and structure elucidate how refugees struggle to maintain autonomy as they are excluded from human rights discourses as non-citizens. Namely, the aforementioned novels shed light on the failure of human rights ever being established in their storylines because human rights are being obliterated through the introduction of Western compassion as a rectitudinous result.*

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1. Introduction

An in-depth understanding of human rights is essential in the contemporary world in which many wars and revolutions have erupted. What is essential to recognize about human rights is their universality. In *Inventing Human Rights* Lynn Hunt proclaims that "for rights to be *human* rights, all humans everywhere in the world must possess them equally and only because of their status as human beings" (2007: 20). Nonetheless, Hunt further explicates that it is easier to claim the universality of human rights than to see its application in real life. "In many ways, we are grappling still with the implications of the demand for equality and universality of rights. At what age does someone have the right to full political participation? Do immigrants- non citizens- share in rights, and which ones?" (2007: 21). Thus, "the question of whether or not human rights can or should be universal is often connected to the idea of whether or not humans share common traits" (McClennen 2016: 21). Posing questions of such nature entails that immigrants and refugees hold a rank that is defined by the hosting populace as inferior, and less worthy of human rights than the non-refugee nations.

Hunt in her book, *Inventing Human Rights*, argues that the genre of the novel helped invent human rights. She argues that the rise of the novel in the 18th Century coincided with the surge of social activism that emphasized human rights and established them as a necessity for modern democratic societies, because the novel as a genre portrayed individualistic characters with distinctive and unique traits. And, this emphasis on the individual helped shift politicized discourses from being focused on the rights of the collective to the rights of the individual. Hunt maintains that the realization of human rights requires “widely shared interior feeling[s]” of empathy and the genre of the novel created “new kinds of experiences” that made it possible to empathize with others, “which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)” (2007: 27, 32, 34). Johannes Morsink in *Inherent Human Rights: Philosophical Roots of the Universal Declaration* and Elizabeth Anker in *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* concur with Hunt that “the link between literature and human rights has long been traced to the very evolution of the novel as a genre, a connection that usually figures humanitarianism as grounded in sympathetic feeling or sentiment” (Anker 2012: 7). Furthermore, Morsink elaborates that empathy can be viewed as a literary “epistemic equipment” that “every normally healthy human individual has” and can employ “to discover that we all have human rights” (Morsink 2009: 58). Nonetheless, even if this is true of the 18th Century novel, I argue it is not applicable to the 21st Century neoliberal novel. The contemporary novel that represents marginalized and displaced individuals has in many cases become a form that oppresses and deprives these people of their basic human rights. Joseph Slaughter in *Human Rights, INC*, argues that “the largest audience for [the] postcolonial [novel] from the global South still resides largely in the literary industrial centers of the North, where the novels are typically published, distributed, taught, and consumed, and whose readers seem to have an insatiable appetite for the stories of Third Worlders coming of age” (2007: 38). Therefore, novels about refugees that are written by Easterners and refugees themselves “have been commodified and marketized-incorporated- in the era of multinational capitalist globalization” (Slaughter 2007: 34). The commodification of the novel in this neoliberal age refutes the romanticized view many theorists have of the genre. Modern novels are recurrently written upon demand and NOT written to further promote or actualize human rights.

Human rights appear to be lost with the surge of recent wars and revolutions that have caused millions of people to migrate and become homeless and dislocated. According to UNHCR’s statistical yearbook of 2018, nearly one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds, as a result of conflict or persecution. There are 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 25.4 million of which are refugees seeking asylum. This surge of Eastern refugees going to Western countries created a new demand for literary narratives (mainly novels) for a large Western readership, who have created an international “imagined community,” in which the foundation of human rights is imagined empathy (Hunt 2007: 32). So, novels are being written about refugees because

Eastern refugee narratives are on demand by Western readers. In other words, novels written by “historically marginalized peoples” have made human rights their “lingua franca” in response to the extraordinary demand Western markets are imposing (Slaughter 2007: 37). The economized form of the novel portrays refugees as victims and Westerners as saviors, to enforce the imagined empathy needed to make the West feel better about themselves. Costas Douzinas in *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* argues that “the Westerner is placed in the role of saviour of the victims of violence” in contemporary narratives that address otherness and misplaced individuals (2007: i). “Undifferentiated pain and suffering has become the universal currency of the South, and pity the global response of the North” (Douzinas 2007: 80). Reading a novel and experiencing disgust and abhorrence at the demeaning life experiences refugees go through is often more than enough—it seems as though no more action is needed and nothing else is expected of the western denizen;

“The effect of the novel is unconscious: ‘One feels oneself drawn to the good with an impetuosity one does not recognize. When faced with injustice you experience a disgust you do not know how to explain to yourself.’ The novel has worked its effects through the process of involvement in the narrative, not through explicit moralizing... ‘ideal presence’ or ‘waking dream,’ in which the reader imagines himself transported to the depicted scene...” (Hunt 2007: 56-57)

The previous quotation shows that even Hunt, who celebrates the novel as an emancipatory genre, acknowledges that it is a medium that can unconsciously cause cathartic empathy in readers. As such, if a Western “philanthropist” feels bad about the global refugee crisis, they read a novel. This could make the modern novel exploitative, not only in its content that draws a picture of an Eastern refugee as a limited lethargic individual who wants to travel to the West to leech off of Western governments’ aid, but it is also exploitative and suppressive in its neoliberal form.

The contemporary novel could be approached as a narrative that attempts to structurally adjust human’s emotions to further the elitism and exclusiveness of human rights to citizens of Western countries. Joseph Slaughter in “Hijacking Human Rights: Neoliberalism, the New Historiography, and the End of the Third World” and Costas Douzinas in *Human Rights and Empire* argue that the West romanticizes and promotes human rights, because they have become a tool used by hegemonic Western governments to control and limit autonomies of Eastern individuals (Douzinas 2007: 79; Slaughter 2018: 736). Slaughter also contends that the West not only created the myth of human rights in the 18th Century, but also hijacked these rights in the 1970s from the rest of the world through neocolonial “pseudo-humanist” projects (Slaughter 2018: 737, 751). In other words, in the 20th Century when colonialism was over, human rights became the West’s “secret weapon... to subordinate the post-colonial world” through creating “Structural Adjustment Programs” (Slaughter 2018: 757). Human rights movements became human rights markets that promote “sentimental adjustment programs,” in which the “primary currencies of exchange... are suffering and

sympathy, especially non-Western suffering for Western sympathy” (Slaughter 2018: 766). I argue that the modern neoliberal novel is a part of these sentimental adjustment programs as it seems many such novels have become a hegemonic genre that strips refugees of their basic human rights, while at the same time celebrates Western societies and their aggressive and negative attitudes towards displaced individuals as equitable. “In reducing human rights to the suffering of individuals and in promoting personal sympathy as the first and most appropriate response to it,” novels that address the refugee predicament contribute to privatizing and economizing human rights (Slaughter 2018: 768).

Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, J. M. Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer* are novels that can be read as examples of sentimental adjustment programs, in which the narrative thread and structure elucidate how refugees struggle to maintain autonomy, as they are excluded from human rights discourses as non-citizens. By exploiting the emotional basis of human rights, some modern novels invest in spreading imagined empathy: “Novels generated it by inducing new sensations about the inner self. Each in their way reinforced the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations, or even nations to greater universal values” (Hunt 2007: 32). While many scholars maintain that “literary empathy does not point past the reader. It points to the reader” explicating that “[s]cholars who focus upon the way literary empathy transfers from the reader to the external world would make empathy a hostage to cause and consequence and thus miss the point of literary ethics,” empathy stands as an influential apparatus that stirs readers’ emotions and could possibly cloud their judgment and in result their actions (Dawes 2016: 431). Consequently, it could be argued that the aforementioned novels shed light on the failure of human rights ever being established in their storylines, because human rights are being obliterated through the introduction of Western compassion, as a rectitudinous result, when reading becomes cathartic and no more action or compassion is required of the Western reader outside the text.

2. Hamid’s *Exit West*

Exit West (2017) is a novel, by the Anglo-Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid, that tells of a love story between a young couple, living in an unnamed Eastern country, in which a civil war suddenly breaks out. Their lives are filled with violence, aggression, curfews, massacres, executions, checkpoints, technological limitations, surveillance, and most importantly geographical limitations that restrict Nadia and Saeed’s mobility and freedom of movement. Because of the various violations of their basic human rights, Nadia and Saeed decide to leave their country and seek asylum elsewhere. They use magical doors that transport them to western countries that reject them for their status as refugees and non-citizens. While there are multiple crossings that take place in the narrative, the two main characters cross from their eastern country to Greece, England, and then end up settling down in the United States. It is puzzling, then, that such a

narrative, which focuses on the plights that refugees face, does not mention human rights even once, but instead dwells greatly on sympathy and compassion. As a sentimental adjustment program that targets Western readers, the narrative portrays characters that look, sound, and act like Westerners, to make it easier for the target readers to empathize with these characters. Nadia, for instance, is an independent female who lives in her own place and rides a motorcycle (Hamid 2017: 21, 3). She is a rebellious defiant woman who does not shy away from a social challenge. Erin Cortizo in her book review of Hamid's novel says, "When we meet Nadia, she is like any young woman you would come across in the western world; fiercely independent, working through school, preoccupied with the best way to decorate her apartment, and looking for love" (2018: 1). Hence, Mohsin Hamid presents Nadia to the readers as an Eastern female who is Western at heart, because he believes that "[e]mpathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself" (Leyshon 2012: 2). When the reader identifies with the main character the sentimental adjustment purposes of the narrative are realized.

Saeed's description is less prominently Western in traits than Nadia's, but is dominantly Western in lifestyle and context. His parents are two liberal educated individuals leading progressive lives. His mother is a school teacher who made advances towards the father, because she liked him and wanted to make it clear (Hamid 2017: 8, 10). His father is a university professor who likes to take his wife out to the cinema, cafés, and restaurants. "Saeed's mother and father were both readers, and, in different ways, debaters, and they were frequently to be seen in the early days of their romance meeting surreptitiously in bookshops" (2017: 11). Effectively, Saeed grows up in the image of his parents; he likes to take Nadia out to have "breakfast at a café" and they have "coffee and some bread with butter and jam," noticeably Western entrees (2017: 29). Moreover, Saeed's status is distinguishably higher amongst peer refugees, because he speaks English well; "Saeed also had the added advantage of being among those workers who spoke English and so occupied a status midway between the foreman and the others on the team" (2017: 177). His English speaking skills gain him favor from the British foreman he worked with. And, his Western lifestyle gains him favor from the Western reader, and makes it easier to empathize with him. For Hamid, "a novel is like a dance, with two people dancing, writer and reader" (Leyshon 2012: 4). Hamid orchestrates his dance/narrative masterfully to appeal to his target audience and evoke an emotional reaction from them.

It is worth noting, nonetheless, that empathy in the narrative is induced only when refugees are traveling west. Nadia and Saeed are not only traveling west, resembling Westerners in traits and lifestyles, but they also come from an Eastern country that is rife with refugees. Sadly, Hamid does not attribute life-like traits to East-residing refugees, and only describes them in passing, which dehumanizes them and excludes them from the empathic agenda the narrative has;

Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to re-create the rhythms of a normal

life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg (Hamid 2017: 23).

It is a very general and demeaning description that does not result in "a heightened sense of identification, as if the characters were real, not fictional" (Hunt 2007: 42). Nadia and Saeed, themselves, act carelessly and pass by these refugees, as if they are a group of stray dogs/cats. Characters and readers, alike (for the narrative form creates characters with a deep sense of interiority that is so similar to the readers' to heighten that sense of readers' involvement in the narrative), empathize with refugees exiting west only because they can identify with these refugees.

Not only does Hamid expect his Western readers to empathize with refugees, but he also delineates impeccable empathetic Western characters inside the narrative itself. In one instance, a young female participates in creating human cordons in Vienna, to protect refugees from bellicosity and aggression;

For the young woman had learned of a mob that was intending to attack the migrants gathered near the zoo, everyone was talking and messaging about it, and she planned to join a human cordon to separate the two sides, or rather to shield the migrants from the anti-migrants, and she was wearing a peace badge on her overcoat, and a rainbow pride badge, and a migrant compassion badge, the black door within a red heart (Hamid 2017: 104-105).

It is noteworthy that the empathy that this excerpt evokes is not merely towards refugees, but towards this Western courageous female, as well. She "found herself surrounded by men who looked like her brother and her cousins and her father and her uncles, except that they were angry, they were furious, and they were staring at her and at her badges with undisguised hostility, and the rancor of perceived betrayal," for she supports the enemy (Hamid 2017: 105). Therefore, "they started to shout at her, and push her, that she felt fear, a basic, animal fear, terror, and thought that anything could happen" (Hamid 2017: 105). This female's fear, badge of compassion, and identification with refugees as humans "emphasizes above all the ordinariness and humanity of people who become refugees" and provokes the Western reader to feel for refugees, too (Grady 2017: 1). After all, "it's virtually impossible to not feel, at the very least, a sense of empathy" after reading Hamid's *Exit West*, because it is the end result expected to be attained from a sentimental adjustment program like this narrative (Chollapat 2017: 4).

Hamid's novel not only functions as a sentimental adjustment program, but it also endorses a structural adjustment program called "The London Halo" (2017: 169). Structural adjustment programs, according to Joseph Slaughter, are a modern neoliberal tool that promote economic projects, that teach self-reliance, and that protect the financial interests of the West in the globalized economic

market (Slaughter 2018: 757). The London Halo is a European construction project that aims at ensuring responsabilization of refugees, in addition to ensuring their survival, through purely self-reliance means. Thus, refugees provide for themselves when they live in worker camps and build their own houses and towns; governments are no longer financially responsible for refugees. The scenes depicted in the novel that describe this construction project show Nadia and Saeed toiling away, but with decent lives and a purpose. "They ate modestly, meals composed of grains and vegetables and some dairy, and when they were lucky, juiced fruit or a little meat. They were slightly hungry, yes, but slept well because the labor was lengthy and rigorous. The first dwellings that the workers of their camp had built were almost ready to be occupied, and Saeed and Nadia were not too far down the list" (Hamid 2017: 169). It is indicated in the narrative that this is plentiful. They are provided with tools and lands to start anew and are getting all the compassion one could get from characters inside the narrative represented through their supervisors and native observers who keep an eye on them, and also from readers outside the narrative. Hamid's novel, hence, represents an example of structural adjustment programs (the London Halo), which, in turn, reinforces sentimental adjustment programs' purposes.

In an interview about *Exit West*, Hamid states his reasons for writing the novel and says it is because he found himself haunted with images of refugees living in misery and pain. In this interview with *The Guardian* he explicates how the fear of becoming a refugee enticed him to write a novel that highlights the inhumane treatment of refugees. In the same interview, Hamid states that, "In reality, of course, most migrants are kept at bay in camps, in ... an attempt to "impose a condition that humanity has never known before, which is an end to migration." Refugees in camps are deprived of their basic human rights, to guarantee that no new refugees would follow thinking they will find humanitarian environments to survive in. Ironically enough, Hamid's novel seems to inadvertently limit refugees and help oppress them, as it can be read as a sentimental adjustment program that only evokes empathy and, at the same time, obliterates these refugees' human rights. While Hamid thinks "western countries that tout principles of equality fail one group in particular: migrants," I think that Hamid's narrative fails that same group of asylum seekers (Rasmussen 2017: 2). Therefore, it may be inferred that fervent and empathic readers could feasibly exit *Exit West* with a cathartic empathic feeling that does not entice any more action or any further compassion.

3. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*

John Maxwell Coetzee in his ambiguous novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, wittingly employs absurdist humor to banter readers and leave them as befuddled and as paralyzed as the characters in the narrative. Nonetheless, an important and notable difference between *Exit West* and *The Childhood of Jesus* is that the latter is void of emotions. The child in the narrative, David, who is also the center of the plot, is so traumatized by migration, camp life, and hunger that he does not know how to understand life. But David and Simon find the apathy they are welcomed with in

Novilla most shocking. Both characters receive their names and are assigned dates of birth when they reach Novilla because all refugees are cleansed of memories and their past before they are allowed entrance to the camp, because memories are the source of human emotions (Coetzee 2013: 20). *The Childhood of Jesus* is a novel that celebrates a society without human sentiments of any kind. A central moment that confirms the apathy of the Nativists of Novilla is when Anna asks Simon and David to build their own shelter and sleep in the open on their first day in Novilla:

‘There are some leftover building materials in that corner.’ She points.

‘You can make yourself a shelter, if you like. Shall I leave you to it?’

He stares at her nonplussed. ‘I’m not sure I understand,’ he says.

‘Here.’ She indicates the yard. ‘I’ll come back in a while and see how you are getting on...’

In the early hours he wakes up, stiff aching with cold. Anger wells up in him. Why this pointless misery? He crawls out of the shelter, gropes his way to the back door, first discreetly, then more and more loudly.

A window opens above; by moonlight he can faintly make out the girl’s face. ‘Yes?’ she says. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘Everything is wrong,’ he says. ‘It is cold out here. Will you please let us into the house...’

An object falls at his feet: a blanket, none too large, folded in four, made of some rough material, smelling of camphor.

‘Why do you treat us like this?’ he calls out. ‘Like dirt?’

The window thuds to. (Coetzee 2013: 6,8)

While David and Simon experience extreme hunger, extreme cold, and extreme apathy in multiple instances, this first episode is quite shocking to the readers, because humans are wired to believe they need to empathize with others or they lose the humanity within them. But Anna was wiped clean of memories and has been trained to be apathetic and thus she is. Coetzee constructs a society that has only two emotions: Goodwill and benevolence (Coetzee 2013: 55). Residents of Novilla do not display affection or practice any of the other emotions. They are what Simon calls “bloodless” (Coetzee 2013: 30).

Goodwill and benevolence cannot be substituted for empathy and compassion. According to a study in the field of psychopathy, “empathy involves literally feeling another’s pain. An individual with empathic responsiveness upon seeing and or hearing others in pain mirrors that pain in their brain,” while goodwill and benevolence involve wishing others well but not being emotionally invested in them or their lives (Sonne 2018: 11). Simon is told to starve hunger, to get to a point where he is in control of his body and emotions and not the other way around. “Hunger is like a dog in your belly: the more you feed it, the more it demands” (Coetzee 2013: 27). Novillans are humans who have become mechanical. They neither receive nor give affections and compassion. No one in Novilla cares about compassion or physical contact. No one is married. There is

no sense of family. And even though there are brothels in town, they are controlled by the state, and an applicant will need to undergo a psychological examination to determine why they are seeking a physical relationship with another. Novillans believe they have a function in life, they help the newcomers to their camp, they do it every day, and are content with spreading goodwill; “People arrive needing help, and we help them. We help them and their lives improve” (Coetzee 2013: 29). The writer here employs satire to ridicule lack of empathy, which, in turn, causes readers to empathize, especially with a young child who is always hungry for food, for love, for a family, and for acceptance. Anna, the social worker in charge of Simon and David’s case, goes so far as to declare that Simon’s and David’s hunger is naught but anger that needs to be tamed, because desire ruins humans (Coetzee 2013: 30-31).

One cannot miss the similarities between Coetzee’s constructed fictional Novilla that rejects human desires and the rise of the novel in the 18th Century that caused excessive denunciation from authority. Novels were prohibited because it was argued the sentiments these narratives caused “sowed discontent in the minds” of the readers and “undermined morality” (Hunt 2007: 52). “Samuel-Auguste Tissot linked novel reading to masturbation, which he thought led to physical, mental, and moral degeneration... Novels about love—and the majority of Eighteenth Century novels told stories about love—easily slipped into the category of the licentious” (Hunt 2007: 52). The rejection of the realistic novel is parodied in the obsession with the chivalric romance *Don Quixote* in Coetzee’s narrative. David learns to read, to write, and to understand the world around him by reading *Don Quixote*, “to the lady in the library who lent it to us it looks like a simple book for children, but in truth it isn’t simple at all, it presents the world to us in two pairs of eyes, Don Quixote’s eyes and Sancho’s eyes” (Coetzee 2013: 154). This immersion in nonrealistic worlds causes David trouble at school,

The real, I want to suggest, is what David misses in his life. This experience of lacking the real includes the experience of lacking real parents. David has no other anchor in his life. Hence his withdrawal and retreat into a fantasy world where he feels more in control (Coetzee 2013: 207).

David’s preoccupation with imaginative worlds and fantastical realities causes the school therapist to conclude that he has “dyslexia” and thus needs to be transferred to a “Special Learning Centre at Punto Arenas” (Coetzee 2013: 207, 210). Thus, *Don Quixote* is the 17th Century masterpiece that embodies Coetzee’s rejection of the 18th Century realistic novel. Most of Coetzee’s literary works are “structured by an ambivalence bordering on hostility to the forms in which he writes or speaks” (Sayeau 2014: 39). He expressed his dissatisfaction with the form of the novel clearly when he said, “I, too, am sick of the well-made novel with its plot and its characters and its settings” (Sayeau 2014: 39). Nonetheless, Coetzee’s satirical parody fails, not only because the realistic novel is not dead as

a genre and still has a very strong presence in the literary field, but also because his own novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, evokes readers' empathy towards the young child who is being sacrificed (Jesus-like) and is losing love, innocence, and happiness through loss of emotion and through the dislocation that refugees experience. I agree with Robert Kusek in that Coetzee's novel is "to be read as a work of [a] supreme Ironist... *The Childhood of Jesus* is 'fiction of fiction of fiction... like a game of mirrors' and 'its only truth is multiplied and multilayered illusion'" (Kusek 2013: 27). Thus, while Coetzee ridicules the realistic novel and rejects human rights, his novel reinforces their strong literary presence and actual effects on the lives of refugees today.

The parody that Coetzee creates of the Eighteenth Century debates takes its full dimension when the narrative mocks human rights, especially since the rise of the genre of the novel coincided with the emergence of human rights discourses in Europe (Hunt 2007: 41). Eighteenth Century human rights excluded children, because rights were not perceived as essential for an individual incapable of autonomy, "like children, slaves, servants, the propertyless, and women lacked the required independence of status to be fully autonomous... If the proponents of universal, equal, and natural human rights automatically excluded some categories of people from exercising those rights, it was primarily because they viewed them as less than fully capable of moral autonomy" (Hunt 2007: 28). But, J. M. Coetzee's novel gives human rights only to children. In Novilla, adults are not expected to exercise their emotions and thus are not expected to feel or ask for any basic human rights. Children on the other hand have rights that are constantly defended in the narrative. Simon explaining his decision to give up David says, "[T]he rights of the child always trump the rights of grown-ups" (Coetzee 2013: 94-95). And, the school psychologist when discussing David's behavior with his parent figures, declares, "[E]ven a child should have a right to his little secret" (Coetzee 2013: 208). Nonetheless, the readers of the narrative are quickly met with instances that present human rights with absurdity and dark humor.

Just when the reader assumes Coetzee is encouraging the advancement of children's human rights, he ridicules the human rights discourses of recent times and of ancient times, alike. Coetzee shocks his readers with only one lengthy passage that discusses human rights in detail, and it is in regards to who has the right to claim poo. When David and Simon try to fix the plumbing problem in Ines' apartment (Ines is the mother figure who adopts David), the boy insists he has the right to his poo:

The boy shakes his head. 'It's my poo,' he says. 'I want to stay.'
 'It was your poo. But you evacuated it. You got rid of it. It's not yours anymore. You no longer have a right to it.'
 Ines gives a snort and retires to the kitchen.

‘Once it gets into the sewer pipes it is no one’s poo.’ He goes on. ‘In these sewers it joins all the other people’s poo and becomes general poo.’ (Coetzee 2013: 132)

This previous passage ridicules universal human rights to the point that they are paired with poo. Instead of a serious lengthy discussion of the rights to freedom, liberty, and happiness readers are met with a passage that discusses who has the right to poo after defecation. But, Simon explains the allegorical importance of poo when he exclaims, “Toilets are just toilets, but poo is not just poo,” he says. ‘There are certain things that are not just themselves, not all the time. Poo is one of them’ (Coetzee 2013: 132). Thus, human rights could be looked at in a similar manner, as they are often not themselves, in the sense that they do not offer better and happier lives but are used as tools to suppress and control individuals. They are nothing but waste, especially when they are not actualized or implemented. Another instance when human rights are mentioned, also in light of dark humor, is when Simon and Ines do not want their child to go to a boarding school, but the court’s decision is irreversible. When Simon objects saying they have the “right” to an “appeal,” the judge affirms that “you may take the matter to the civil courts, of course, that is your right. But an appeal procedure may not be used as means of forestalling this tribunal decision. That is to say, the transfer to Punto Arenas will take effect whether or not you go to the courts” (Coetzee 2013: 230). Even rights of children are not actualized in the story, they are discussed and debated but are not affected.

Another important piece in Coetzee’s parodical account is language. Language (as in Hamid’s novel or any other contemporary novel representing Eastern refugees) is emphasized as a neoliberal imperial tool. An integral part of linguistic imperialism is the dominance of one specific, usually Indo-European language, while all other languages are inferior in comparison. The language of human rights is English/Western, and so narratives that use human rights as their lingua franca pair these rights with a Western communication mode. Spanish, in *The Childhood of Jesus*, parodies globalized English. A language that everyone speaks presumably unites people and gives an individual the chance to increase their capital and be a part of the global community: “Simón links the use of any language other than Spanish to alienation and disconnection from the majority” (Alqowaifly 2018: 18).

Everyone comes to this country as a stranger. I came as a stranger. You came as a stranger. Ines and her brothers were once strangers. We came from various places and various pasts, seeking a new life. But now we are all in the same boat together. So we have to get along with each other. One of the ways in which we get along is by speaking the same language. That is the rule. It is a good rule, and we should obey it. Not only obey it but obey it with a good heart, not like a mule that keeps digging in its heels. With a good heart and goodwill. If you refuse, if you go on being

rude about Spanish and insist on speaking your own language, then you are going to find yourself living in a private world. You will have no friends. You will be shunned. (Coetzee 2013: 187)

Communicating by using the language of the ones providing help (Novillans in Coetzee's novel and Westerners in reality) is crucial to the process of prompting empathy. Readers would not be able to empathize with characters that are distant and speak a completely different language, since that distance would prevent a highly charged identification with the characters in question. Coetzee constructs a narrative that imposes Spanish as the dominant language in his imagined utopia, but the novel itself is written in English and the readers only come across a handful of words in Spanish. Thus, Spanish is emblematic of its cognate English language. For Simon, learning a new language becomes a barrier and feels like a liability, nonetheless, he is forced to learn it and use it to evade being "shunned." Accordingly, as an Ironist allegorical parody, *The Childhood of Jesus*, appears to defy conventional novelistic structures and storylines. I disagree with Hilmar Heister in that the vast array of situations that Coetzee offers his readers "enhance the ability of the reader to deal with real-life situations," because a closer reading of the text shows that it has the potential to function as a sentimental adjustment program, as it invokes responsiveness and identification and caters to Western readers' imagined empathy (2014: 109). *The Childhood of Jesus* seems to further burden its dislocated characters in content and also in form and, in turn, helps further marginalize refugees in the real world.

The Childhood of Jesus' sequel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), further complicates the parody started in its prequel. J. M. Coetzee's borrowings from *Don Quixote*, which is also written in two parts, are more extensive in his second Jesus narrative. The novel's opening epigraph is taken from Cervantes' second part; "Algunos dicen: Nunca segundas partes fueron buenas. Don Quixote II.4," meaning: some say: sequels never worked out well. Mimicking Cervantes even more, Coetzee's second novel is more philosophical and enigmatic in its approach to refugees' lives and rights. Nonetheless, in an interview Coetzee professed that he has "read Don Quixote, the most important novel of all times, time and again, as any serious novelist must do, as it contains infinite lessons" (Lopez 2013: 81). He further explained that he is especially interested in Cervantes' "conflict between imagination and reality, and in Cervantes' treatment of the effects that literature may have on the lives of readers" (Lopez 2013: 81). Coetzee's awareness and admittance of intentionally creating literary pieces that affect the readers directly and move them is essential at this juncture. Coetzee baffles his readers and guarantees their maximum participation in the text by focusing on ideas and posing philosophically complex dilemmas for the readers to ponder upon. The sequel, like the first Jesus novel, "is far more concerned with ideas than character or plot" (Lowry 2016: 1); but, then again, "Ideologies do not equal passion" (Lowry 2016: 4). Therefore, readers and characters are denied passions alike; they are paralleled again in the sense that characters have no passions and

live lifelessly, and readers find “absolutely no pleasure” in reading the novel itself, as many reviewers confessed (White 2016: 2).

The Schooldays of Jesus is an absurdist and emblematic narrative. The three main characters run away from Novilla to Estrella to escape the prosecution David faces from educational and judicial authorities. David is enrolled at a dance school and learns to dance numbers. Astrology and mathematical viewpoints are the frame through which life is approached in Estrella. This novel does not include any discussion of human rights, but is centered around a crime of passion. Ana Magdalena, David’s dance teacher, is found dead, and Dimitri, the museum’s guard who is hopelessly and helplessly in love with the statue-like Magdalena, claims that he raped her and killed her because she refused his love. Even though readers eventually find out that Ana Magdalena and Dimitri were in a relationship, during which she wrote him various love letters, “following one’s appetite, we must conclude, leads to violence” (White 2016: 11). In a cyclic manner, the ending of *The Schooldays of Jesus* takes us back to the beginning of *The Childhood of Jesus*, where an argument of how dangerous human passions take place between Anna and Simon. The end result is the same, as well: characters are expected to starve their emotions into submission and become emotionless individuals (Coetzee 2016: 29). The cyclic narrative approach completes Coetzee’s parody of the rise of the novel, human rights’ discourses, and readers’ empathic responses in a manner that evokes more empathy and ensures greater involvement in this fictional world that is void of identity, void of memories, and void of emotions.

Coetzee’s satirical approach to passion, human rights, and empathy, through his rejection of these concepts in these two Jesus novels, along with his attentiveness to the great effect literature has on its readers, locates Coetzee’s refugee narratives within the exploitive canon. A recent study of literary manipulation of readers’ emotions shows that very realistic accounts evoke more empathy than fictional accounts. The reader of a “non-literary condition...[feels] more freedom to express empathy... aesthetic distance is easily manipulated through introducing a particular notion of how, and in what frame of mind, a given story should be read” (Kuzmičová et al. 2019: 149). Thus, I believe Coetzee’s eloquent stylistic approach to the refugee crisis that rejects cliché narrative stylistics and breaks through genre conventions aligns his novels with non-fiction accounts that result in a greater surge of readers’ empathy, than do novels that employ magic-realism (Like Hamid’s *Exit West*) or other aesthetic styles (like Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer*).

4. Hosseini’s Sea Prayer

Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer* (2018) is yet another text that can be classified as a sentimental adjustment program that targets Western readers. It is an illustrated novel that is classified as “Western fiction” by Goodreads. This classification is not eerie, nor should it be deplorable, for the illustrated novel is written in English and targets the Western readers. It is about refugees, but not for refugees. Hosseini, the Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, wrote the novel as a letter from

a worried and overly anxious father to his very young son, because they are undertaking a very dangerous sea passage once the sun rises. Hosseini's choice of the poetic epistolary style is noteworthy. "In the epistolary novel, there is no one authorial point of view outside and above the action ... the authorial point of view is the characters' perspectives as expressed in their letters... This made possible a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real, not fictional" (Hunt 2007: 42). The epistolary narrative was one of the first employed to increase readers' awareness of others' capacity for interiority, to establish identification that would result in empathy. The father in the narrative acknowledges the importance of Western empathy as Hosseini perceives it when he says,

I have heard it said we are the uninvited. We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere. But I hear your mother's voice, over the tide, and she whispers in my ear, "Oh but if they saw, my darling. Even half of what you have. If only they saw. They would say kinder things, surely. (Hosseini 2018: 34)

In an interview about his novel, Hosseini comments on the previous excerpt from the novel,

That's what the Alan Kurdi picture proves. When we're faced with a story, we are wired as a species to respond. To act. We need to be invited into the lives of others; this is why I've written this book. It's what I see my role at the UNHCR to primarily be—a teller of stories. Stories remain our best teachers of empathy. (Perrigo 2018: 60)

I strongly disapprove of Coundouriotis' claim that "by narrativizing the experience [of refugees], the author creates a subject who persuasively stands for a rights claimant" and hence refugees are compensated for their "loss of agency" (2016: 78). Telling stories and narrativizing experiences in no way compensate real life losses, but they do help readers empathize and take to heart refugees' predicaments. Hosseini, like many other modern fiction writers, cognizes the importance of empathy evoking narratives, especially in this neoliberal turn. He capitalized on Alan Kurdi's one-year death anniversary, when he read this letter at a fundraising for refugees, and again on Alan Kurdi's second-year death anniversary, when he published this novel. "Pictures of starving children in Bangladesh or accounts of thousands of murdered men and boys in Srebrenica, Bosnia, can mobilize millions of people to send money, goods, and sometimes themselves to help people in other places or to urge their governments or international organizations to intervene" (Hunt 2007: 209). While the narrative is poignant and effectively stirring, the dedication and the inscription at the end and on the back cover are more extensive than the text itself.

The back cover announces, "the publisher will donate £1 from the sale of this book to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. UNHCR is dedicated to protecting and supporting refugees and other forcibly displaced people around the world." Both UNHCR and Hosseini disappoint refugees when they capitalize on refugees' dilemmas, when reading and buying the novel results in a £1 donation that substitutes the actualization of human rights. At the same time, Western readers

empathize and experience catharsis as they read, identify with characters, and donate money to help, at the same time. It seems that the narrative suggests that Western readers do not even need to get off their comfortable chairs, sofas, or couches, or be involved in the refugee crises in any other way. By fixating on Alan Kurdi, Khaled Hosseini participates in the privatization of human rights. Individualizing the experience of refugee deaths individualizes human rights;

However well meaning, the turn to personal stories... not only tends to restrict the moral focus to the singularized spectacular suffering of an individual victim... it also individualizes the receiver of the story, tending to atomize (or privatize) the empathetic response, and turning the relationship between sympathizer and sufferer into a singular problem of ethics, rather than a collective problem of politics. (Slaughter 2018: 768).

Nothing is more private and more moving than a prayer. Hosseini's narrative is not only an epistolary poem that "was inspired by the story of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach safety in Europe in September 2015" (Hosseini 2018: 46), "but it also invokes the language of prayer" (Martin 2018: 2). The prayer mode helps readers imagine themselves transported to the narrative scene and they feel bad— Akkawi and Maqableh in a 2020 study call this "narrative transportation" (Akkawi 2020: 90). Readers might even become emotional, but what guarantees that the empathic attitude will not fade away as they finish reading the sentimental adjustment narrative at hand? All in all, Hamid's *Exit West*, Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and Hosseini's *Sea Prayer* seem to be masterfully employing the novel genre and refugee storylines, to evoke empathies in their readers for cathartic end results. But, these novels are not the only novels by Eastern writers that cater to the needs and emotions of the Western readers, as *The Lines We Cross* (2016) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Escape from Aleppo* (2018) by N.H. Senzai, and *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* (2018) by Atia Abawi are a few examples of what could be perceived as sentimental adjustment narratives that unwittingly privatize and hijack refugees' human rights.

5. Conclusion

Refugees struggle in asserting their identity, find it difficult to carry on with previous lives, and are forced to let go of parts of who they once were, as they adapt with their new surroundings. Modern narratives that address refugees' struggles further oppress these refugees by invoking Western readers' "Empathy [...] depends on identification" with the imagined character (Hunt 2007: 55). Remarkably though, lately, substantial scholarly research examines writers' intentions in creating narratives that evoke empathy: "it would seem that the reading of literary fiction offers the possibility of an intentional intervention to promote empathy" (Thexton 2019: 84). The intentionality of provoking the readers' empathy is meant to generalize empathy related actions in the real world. I am not claiming that writers, from the South and the East, in writing novels about refugees are intentionally participating in the subjugation of the dislocated

masses. They are, nonetheless, unknowingly adopting the medium of sentimental adjustment programs and are participating in generating narrative empathy that is substituting on ground/real-life engagements with refugees and is thus exploitive of their basic human rights. In content, modern novels show how refugees are oppressed, but also the form that modern writers, like Hamid, Coetzee, and Hosseini, have adopted; this Western form, and literary channel is further oppressing refugees, because these writers are catering to Western readers, by providing them with novels that will make them feel better about themselves, that will create the “imagined sympathy” that would ensure these Western consumers of their own imagined “benevolence.”

What is rightly needed is a transfiguration of the understanding of what constitutes a human right. “In practice, human rights are not the natural rights of human beings as prosocial creatures but the positive rights of citizens as incorporated creatures of the state” (Slaughter 2012: 45). And, refugees are rightly citizens of this world that we live, in as much as any other individual is. Literature has always been a tool that is used to encourage and entice righteous revolutions and peaceful celebrations, alike; but, it can only be an effective tool in social activism when it helps advance and universalize human rights, not when it ignores dislocated peoples' rights and furthers the elitism and privatization of human rights discourses. The existent real-life space between readers and refugees must be bridged in fictional spaces and literary narratives by producing novels that address refugeeeness and the lack of human rights in a more lifelike manner that does not solely rely on invoking responsiveness and catering to Western readers' imagined empathy. Because the experience of flight for survival is not a commonly shared experience between readers and archetypal refugee characters, further studies are required to help guide writers from the South and the East, who are narrativizing the refugee experience of flight for survival, concentrate on increasing the readers' knowledge about the various factors, processes, and behaviors that would facilitate the actualization of refugees' human rights.

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