

# Interrogating Triple Marginalization through Refugeehood and Disability in the Graphic Narrative *When Stars are Scattered*

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In the contemporary literary trends, refugee literature foregrounds childhood and adulthood as the critical phases through which refugee trauma, identity disruption and border politics are scrutinized. As it leaves a critical scholarly gap in representing disrupted adolescence passage and disability through refugeehood, particularly within the graphic narratives. This research paper critiques that the graphic memoir *When Stars Are Scattered* as a representation of triple marginalization, in which refugee status, non-normative adolescence developmental challenges and disability as reinforcing conditions than the sites of vulnerability. By the highlighting the traumatic experiences faced by Omar and his non-verbal brother Hassan in Dadaab refugee camp, the graphic narrative addresses how liminal zone transforms into the space of uncertainty and precarity. The article further addresses that disability is shaped only through bodily difference, but through educational constraints, institutional neglect, and restricted mobility. By incorporating visual and textual analysis, the article proposes the concept of triple marginalization as a conceptual framework to understand the multidimensions of vulnerability and intersectionality of disability studies, refugee studies and graphic narratives.

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## 1. Introduction:

Exile or involuntary migration leads to a profound loss of social, cultural, political and psychological identities among the individuals. As the perpetual limbo, they navigate through a sense of 'non-place' due to their harrowing transit period including frontiers, camps and centers, results in precarity, vulnerability and instability. In the contemporary epoch of global migration, refugees and undocumented migrants often experience a sense of anonymity and exception in transit zones such as camps, carceral detention centers, checkpoints and transit hubs. Such sites create intense geopolitical schisms between the refugees and the others, while Michel Agier critiques the state of refugee as "world's residual 'remnants', dark, diseased and invisible" (Agier, 2011).

The border crossing and liminality creates a "hybrid transition zones" (Nail, 2016), which is called as "ecotones" (Arnold et al., 2020), because the border itself creates a "mixture of territorial, political, juridical, and economical regimes of division" (Nail 222) where the exclusion and social fragmentation are aggravated. Mbembe contends that "frontierization" (Mbembe, 2020) has become the medium of capitalist violence and the border control of migratory influx. Mbembe believes that the contemporary borders have become the processes of "capturing, identifying, dividing, sorting, selecting and classifying" (Mbembe, 2020) the locations. According to him, "the world is falling apart and globalization reaches its limits", where "this zero point of non-relation and of the very denial of a shared humanity" (Mbembe, 2020).

## 2. *When Stars are Scattered* – A space for Refugeehood:

The graphic memoir *When Stars are Scattered* written by Victoria Jamison and Omar Mohamed published in 2020 depicts the traumatic experience of Somali refugee Mohamed in the Dadaab refugee camp. The memoir captures the lives of Omar and his younger brother Hassan, who are separated from their parents while fleeing the escalating war and persecution. Omar as the first-person narrator, the graphic memoir

highlights the lived realities of dislocation, caregiving responsibilities, interrupted education, institutional neglect and uncertainty during the waiting period.

The article establishes 'triple marginalization' as conceptual framework through which the graphic memoir *When Stars are Scattered* is investigated as a space of intersecting liminal conditions: non-normative adolescence passage, refugeehood and disability. Additionally, the graphic narrative intensifies such intersecting dimension by illustrating refugeehood and liminality through facial expressions, panel layout, and spatial composition. The repetitive symbols and imageries such as tents, food coupons, queues and lifestyles represent non-belongingness and temporality more powerfully than verbal depiction. Similarly, Hassan's silence due to impairment is visually evocative through facial reactions, gestures, interaction and posture, as it challenges the belief that verbal narrative constitutes agency.

## 3. Intersection of Refugeehood: Liminality, Adolescence Passage and Disability

### 3.1. Refugee-ness through Liminality:

The novel repeatedly imposes refugee camps is not just a temporary shelter but a liminal domain where the individuals experience a void space of anonymity, where their identity and belongingness are suspended. The Dadaab refugee camp becomes a paradoxical space that provides temporary shelter while it denies rootedness, belongingness and citizenship. Therefore, the refugee camp becomes a space where the individuals' identity is negotiated between past and future, liminality and immobility, and memory and imagination. The article takes the theoretical underpinnings of Auge's Non-Place, Tuner's Liminality and Relph's Placelessness, where the memoir critiques refugeehood as an existential and spatial suspension.

Within the transit zone, the sense of non-place leads to the lack of relational, historical and individuals' qualities associated with place. While the physical spaces promote belonging, memory

and social relationships, non-places are characterized by uprootedness, anonymity and temporariness. Though the novel records Dadaab refugee camp exists for decades and accommodates hundreds of displaced populations, it still continues to function as temporary settlement. Such contradictory circumstances transform the camp into a site of liminal non-place, what Mitchell asserts as “a new form of limbo where the persons may be detained indefinitely in a situation that is *de jure* “temporary” but *de facto* “permanent”” (Mitchell, 2012). Therefore, the camp functions as a paradox of prolonged temporariness, where the individuals navigate through precarity, non-belongingness and liminality.

Similarly, the graphic narrative addresses due to prolonged waiting period to get asylum, Dadaab becomes a permanent destination for many refugees rather than a temporal spatiality, “Life in the camp was not easy... but Hassan and I were together. We had Fatuma. I was learning new things. And as soon as the war ended in Somalia, we could go back home. Back home, we’d be safe. No one would bother Hassan. And we would find my mother.” (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). This illustrates how Omar believes camp is formed for anticipation rather than permanent space, where Dadaab is conceived as the intermediate site to bridge dislocation and repatriation. The repetition of ‘home’ shows that Omar’s psyche is emotionally anchored in his native land Somalia in spite of his prolonged stay in Kenya. Therefore, the displaced populations’ identity relies not only on their stay in camp, but also on their emotional attachment towards their homeland as it interstices between memory and imagination.

Edward Relph further deepens such interpretation through the concept of ‘placelessness’, where the individual’s identity relies on the particular place, where they belong either inside or outside in those spaces. When such particularity of the space is disrupted, individuals experience loss of relational identity to that place, which results in placelessness. Due to the disjuncture between the native and the host culture, refugees and migrant communities

experience a sense of identity disruption, and non-belongingness. Similarly, in the graphic narrative, though Dadaab gradually foregrounds for friendships, education and childhood memories, it has never gained to be a ‘home’ for Omar. The camp has always provided survival rather than comfort and belongingness, where Omar’s sense of placelessness is not merely geographical and physical, but psychological. The novel reveals such ruptured experience through Omar, “Huge crowds, thousands of people. Maybe you’ll see someone in the crowd you recognize, and you didn’t even realize they were here.” (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). While Dadaab is overly populated, the social structure remains fragmented and unstable due to pre-migratory trauma and family dysfunction.

Both Omar and Hassan experience a suspension between childhood and adulthood, homeland and asylum country, uprootedness and statelessness. The camp itself becomes a temporal landscape, neither functions as home nor as transit zone, instead, reinforces precarity and uncertainty under socio-political parameters. Such suspension is expressed through Omar: “Every day in a refugee camp is the same... except when it’s not. Sometimes your life can change in an instant, but you can never be sure if it’s a good change or a bad change.” (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). This captures the monotony of waiting period, with uncertainty, illness, repatriation and loss. Therefore, such cramped circumstances reinforce Turner’s concept of Liminality as a site where the temporal structures are suspended, where the individuals cannot anticipate stable futures. The Dadaab camp becomes a state of preparatory rather than living: “In a refugee camp, it felt like all you ever did was wait. Wait to see if your brother gets well again. Wait for water. Wait for food. Wait to hear from the United Nations. Wait for your life to start.” (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). The visual language through colour panel represents such theoretical insights through crowded tents, long queues for food and water, and unstructured school environment, as they reinforce their suspended life.

### 3.2. Non-Normative Adolescence Passage:

The novel picturizes adolescence passage as non-normative and disrupted developmental phase influenced by pre-migratory persecution, liminal transit, and prolonged asylum constraints. While the normative developmental passage is dominated by emotional independence, new social roles and identity exploration, Omar's interrupted passage is characterized by identity erosion, and parental responsibility. As a caregiver for his disabled younger brother Hasan, Omar takes multiple roles, guardian, brother and provider, by blurring the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Omar continues to prioritize his brother's health condition than his personal development, "I know, Fatuma. Everything will be OK." (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Omar's premature attitude reflects, "But I'm not a child anymore. I know maybe everything won't be OK. But we have to keep going anyway, and make the most with what we've got." (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020), emerges through the recognition of uncertainty.

Omar's developmental task is characterized by obligation rather than exploration and experimentation. New roles, education and friendships remain secondary to the needs of caregiving, show how the refugee status transforms adolescence into a state of survival than self-experiment and self-discovery. Such emotional burden becomes visible in the climax, "I slid deeper and deeper into a dark hole. Not only that, but I felt like I had a darkness growing inside me too. It made me feel angry and mean, and I took it out on the people I loved most." (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Omar's metaphor about 'dark hole' highlights unresolved grief, stress and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, adolescent refugees function as adults without social recognition, autonomy and resources linked to adults. The graphic further strengthens the Omar's disrupted adolescence passage and emotional transitions, not only through verbal dialogue, but also through gestures, facial expressions, visual silences and pacing. Emotional and isolation are depicted through the subdued visual and expansive panels, as it allows

to understand uncertainty as a distressing condition.

### 3.3. From Impairment to Exclusion:

The portrayal of Hassan's character intersects refugeehood and disability, to depict how status of being refugee intensifies marginalization and exclusion. Instead of depicting impairment as a physical condition, this graphic narrative establishes Hassan's seizure and communicative disability with the structural realities of displaced condition. Moreover, the graphic novel advocates that his state of exclusion is not solely a consequence of his impairment but as a result of immigration constraints, family dysfunction and social patterns that posits disability as ailment. The novel highlights that Hassan's stay in refugee camp reveals the additional layers of marginality when it intersects with refugeehood. He represents triple marginalization: forced migration, non-normative childhood and with bodily disability within the liminal entity. By incorporating Turner's theory on liminality, Hassan belongs to a threshold between inclusion and exclusion, invisibility and hypervisibility, dependency and autonomy, silence and communication. He becomes a liminal subject, "betwixt and between" (Turner), where his social identity becomes uncertain and ambiguous. His stay in Dadaab intensifies such liminal state as he belongs to a non-normative expectation of adolescent transition. Hassan's impairment further deprived from education, like how Omar and other abled-body refugee boys received basic education. Therefore, Hassan's liminal zone is multifaceted: disrupted childhood and non-normative adolescence, and between dependency and autonomy due to his disability.

However, the graphic novel depicts Hassan's disability through seizures and non-verbal communication, it imposes that conversation goes beyond verbal narration. For instance, though Hassan has spoken one word "Hooyo" – mother, throughout the novel, Omar has never failed to understand Hassan through facial expressions and gestures. This shows that Hassan's silence does not reflect communicative inability, but people's inability to understand the

different modes of expression. The visual strategies in the graphic novel necessitates that Hassan as an active member of the narrative rather than a dependent recipient of aid. The graphic panels itself promote inclusivity, as it allows the readers to visualize Hassan's psyche by distorting conventional verbal narration.

Due to the lack of educational opportunity and inadequate healthcare, Omar believes that Hassan's life should be under constant surveillance. Omar's affection towards Hassan emerges from the lack of institutional support and healthcare for disabled migrant population. Omar prioritizes to take care Hassan than attending middle school due to Hassan's dependency: "It was so hard to leave Hassan. I tried to shove my fears deep inside me. But even with my brother crying as I walked away, even with fear gnawing at my insides... a tiny part of me felt... happy. What was wrong with me?" (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Thus, refugeehood has converted Omar's adolescence passage into parental role, where he has to negotiate his roles as refugee, guardian and student. Unlike normative transition, Omar and Hassan's developmental challenges are conditioned by disability and liminality.

Furthermore, the novel depicts the marginalization stemmed from disability through Omar's friend Jeri. Jeri condemns Omar's constant protection on Hassan: "It's just... you kind of baby him sometimes, just like people baby me. And Hassan isn't a baby. He takes care of animals, and he helps your neighbors." (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Jeri's comparison with Hassan on their physical disability and cognitive impairment shows that hypervigilance and constant protection is also a state of exclusion. The novel critiques vulnerable state of being a disabled refugee: "But life is still going to be hard for him. Don't you ever get mad? Don't you ever think that your life would be easier if you didn't have a disability?" (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Jeri denies to differentiate impairment from refugeehood, instead he considers both the conditions inflicted by circumstances than individual control, "Sometimes. Look... I didn't ask for limp. But I didn't ask to live in a refugee

camp either. But here we are, right? I guess you just have to try to appreciate the good parts and make the most out of what you've got." (Jamieson & Mohamed, 2020). Gradually, Omar acknowledges Hassan's ability to survive without dependency, "I thought I knew everything there was to know about my brother. I thought I was helping him and keeping him safe by shielding him from new people. But I think Jeri was right. Maybe I don't know everything about Hassan after all." When Omar allows Hassan to navigate independently without constant surveillance, Hassan develops agency, autonomy and potential for social participation. By the portrayal Hassan's characterization, the novel establishes that refugee camps are not just a physical confinement, but also where the disability is intensified due to prolonged waiting and institutional neglect. Meanwhile, the graphic narrative also reaffirms Hassan's agency, and emotional strength.

#### 4. Conclusion:

The graphic memoir goes beyond the conventional representation of refugee narratives by representing the intersectionality of disrupted adolescence passage, dislocation and disability. Instead of portraying refugeehood as the product of humanitarian crisis, the article establishes that non-belongingness and marginalization are shaped through disrupted political, social and cultural roles. By highlighting the traumatic experience faced by Omar and Hassan during their stay in Dadaab refugee camp, the article addresses the triple marginalization: refugee status, non-normative adolescence passage and disability within the liminal domains. This article challenges the traditional representation of refugees as homogenous community, instead shaped by the differentiated exposure of vulnerability by bodily difference, age, and prolonged waiting period. Furthermore, the article has shed light on the visual representation in the graphic narrative intensifies their marginalized status: the repetitive illustration of fences, tents, landscapes, and queues reinforces spatial and temporal suspension, meanwhile, facial expression, gestures and panel sequencing

communicate emotional complexity equally to verbal narration.

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## 6. Author Contributions

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