

ARTICLE

“Who Shall Return us the Children?” Picturing Home(lessness) and Postcolonial Childhoods in Immigrant Children’s Literature

Leyla SAVSAR*

Abstract

How does literature for children portray homes lost and perhaps found? Does children’s literature liberate or subjugate with these representations? What kinds of perspectives do the written and visual representations in children’s narratives offer? How is the experience of subjugated childhoods represented in these narratives? How is the sense of self and sense of place, namely home, represented in both word and image? The literary representation of children is contingent upon pre-established notions of political formations and identity, namely the dynamics of the subjugated and subjugator. Employing theories from canonical critics in the field of postcolonial study, this paper looks at several children’s narratives to explore the value of children’s stories in representing home(lessness) from the perspective of child immigrants and refugees. It argues for the need to question whether these representations in children’s narratives subjugate or liberate, considering how children’s books can be seen as political acts. It argues that literature for children can be used as a tool of criticism to critique certain ideologies (and the existing social order and postcolonial ties). Considering the relationship between the individual and the state, it concludes by considering children’s narratives as a way of configuring and even overturning the notion of home(lessness) and the significant question of whether a return to the homeland is ever possible.

Keywords

Migration, children literature, transnationalism, postcolonialism, homeland.

* Assistant Professor, İstinye University, Department of English Language and Literature, İstanbul, Turkey. E-mail: leyla.savsar@istinye.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0002-9630-2462.

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Introduction

As neoliberal globalization continues to exacerbate inequality within the developing world, “the harsh measures taken by governments of developing countries against their refugee and migrant populations are likely to increase.”¹ Geographies associated with neoliberal globalization are implicated in conceptions of political belonging. The transnational lens challenges these conceptions, questioning the categorization of literature that explores the relationship between nationhood and children’s texts. What is meant here by ‘children’s texts’ or ‘children’s literature’? In the words of Roger Sale, “everyone knows what children’s literature is until [they are] asked to define it.”² If it is defined as literature read by young people, the categorization might seem too broad, encompassing a wide range of audience. While it is read by children and adults alike, children’s literature comprises texts addressed for children. Yet, “basing a definition on authorial definitions seems problematic.”³ Perry Nodelman contends that “defining children’s literature has been a major activity of children’s literature criticism throughout its history.”⁴ While the narratives explored in this paper address children from primary to middle school, the metaphorical appeal is to childhood and “particularly the centrality of the metaphor of childhood to legitimizing colonialism.”⁵ However, the depiction of this complex adult-child and nation-child relation is meant for the more mature reader. While not produced by children, the texts chosen here attempt to offer the perspective of the colonized child, which might also inadvertently shape the non-colonized child. Perhaps this is where an analysis of the art forms and language is crucial for understanding the agenda behind such narratives. Recent scholarship in children’s literature shows a wide variety of critical interests in exploring children’s narratives with their mixed-media artwork, collages of photographs, paintings and witty texts. Our senses are the core of culture and expression. A multidimensional approach to political belongings provides a starting point for the challenges raised by the claims and experiences of migrants. In that vein, the success or failure of narrating a story condemned to the realm of historical configurations and nostalgia lies in its telling—both visual and textual. Children by default are the subaltern as they cannot have their voices heard unless they are granted a legal platform. Young people’s identities are connected to national and global influences. In that sense, “children remain the most colonized persons on the globe.”⁶ This becomes apparent in the literature targeted for children. Where does the story of subjugated childhoods begin? To which point in history can we trace back

with the purpose of uncovering the nation in children's literature? Will nation or the concept of home be defined in terms of childhood?

A late twentieth century reality, colonialism can be traced back to when the imperial nations of modern Europe established dominion over non-European peoples, thus engaging in the domestication of children. Moreover, the twentieth century imperial connections led to international migration patterns between former colonial powers and conduits of empire. In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said commented that colonizers and the colonized become intertwined as a result of their histories, whereby their cultural geographies overlap.⁷ In Said's terms, "contemporary immigration policy cuts former colonial links and attempts to separate and disaggregate the post-colonial cultural landscape," which makes it difficult for young people who have long-standing postcolonial connections to fully integrate or 'enter' new homelands.⁸ Navigating a world of negative connotations that alienate, marginalize and discriminate, young migrants narrate the feeling of not being wanted, or being excluded from certain hierarchies of society. As such, modern literature contributes significantly to the child's sense of self and becoming in a world where young people's identities are increasingly connected to a plurality of categories that transcend ethnicity. Continuously constructing their identities, young people with immigrant backgrounds are discovering and re-discovering their positions and roles in society. The impact of these changes are not to be underestimated. In examining the relationship between empire and children's literature, it is found that:

literature for children effectively undertakes to make a child, a making that inscribes the particularity of contemporary social relations [...] However, one must recognize that the conception and development of a literature for children is not universal or transcultural, nor certainly transhistorical; it is an idea, an invention, very closely linked with modern Western societies.⁹

It should be taken into account that child and young adult immigrants "cross not only geographical/political borders but also biographical/social ones," given that "they are moving into the host society but also into adulthood," a duality that increases their vulnerability.¹⁰ Taking the examples of migrant narratives explored in this paper, I aim to address the question of borders and identities, as well as the rhetoric of power politics in certain children's narratives. In doing so, I intend to showcase the relation between the literary

representation of children and the postcolonial framework of thinking and discourse.

Transnationalism, Postcolonialism and Children's Literature

While transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, it is uniquely visible in colonial texts, from which power politics such as racial divisions and alterities emerge. The term 'transnational' implies a form of duality. In that

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sense, "transnational identities are formed when individuals and groups negotiate between and across cultures and languages."¹¹

My own experience is somewhat symptomatic of such negotiations.

A Turkish native, I was born in

Saudi Arabia and grew up in Kuwait, moving to the United States in order to take up doctoral studies. As a child, I read English, Turkish and Arabic literature, feeling myself to have more in common with Western characters, oddly. It is no surprise that "geography is a crucial determinant of how transnationalism operates."¹²

Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The Children" (1914) provides a compelling example of imperial relationships intertwined with cultural geographies and overlapping histories:

These were our children who died for our lands: they were
dear in our sight.
We have only the memory left of their home-treasured sayings
and laughter.
The price of our loss shall be paid to our hands, not another's
hereafter.
Neither the Alien nor Priest shall decide on it. That is our right.
But who shall return us the children?
At the hour the Barbarian chose to disclose his pretences,
And raged against Man, they engaged, on the breasts that they
bared for us,
The first felon-stroke of the sword he had long-time prepared
for us—
Their bodies were all our defence while we wrought our
defences.

[...]

Nor was their agony brief, or once only imposed on them.

The wounded, the war-spent, the sick received no exemption:

Being cured they returned and endured and achieved our redemption,

Hopeless themselves of relief, till Death, marveling, closed on them. *But who shall return us our children?*"¹³

Given that Kipling observed army life firsthand as a child in the Bombay of the British Raj and as a young newspaper man, the poem speaks for all parents of children bereaved by war, severed links and post-colonial ties. Given the charges of racism and imperialism levied against him, it is only befitting to explore Kipling's poem from a postcolonial perspective. A unique war poem packed with rhythm and images of mutilation and decay, "The Children" paints a portrait of innocence tainted in the hands of 'Barbarians' evident in the discourse and use of words that ascribe the privileged place of the wagers of wars over the 'corrupted cleanness' of children 'senselessly tossed and re-tossed'. Portrayed as a shield of defense, the body of the child remains dominated by the "unavoidable effects of globalization, de-territorialization, and neo-liberal politics."¹⁴ The discourse of 'we/us' versus 'they/their' emphasizes the dynamics of the helpless and voiceless child figure in contrast to the privileged self and perpetrators of war. Yet, the repetitive use of 'us,' 'we' and 'our' concurrently heightens the sense of collective bereavement.

While there is no impetus of empire in the poem, the decay imposed by World War I can be understood as a subject of the foundation of the modern world built on longstanding ideologies of colonialism and the claiming of borders. Bearing witness to the subjugation of childhoods, whether wounded by war or subjugated under Barbarian 'presentences', the question of the bereaved adult figure remains the same: "Who shall return us our children?" Disregarding a return from the dead and re-contextualizing the poem, perhaps the question begged is, return where, and is this return possible? I overturn this question as follows: Where shall these excluded children of dual vulnerabilities return? To homelands ravaged by war? Or to borders re-named and re-claimed? While not all migrations and subjugations are driven by war, the world is currently facing the worst migration crisis since World War II. A great number "fleeing their home countries are from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, collectively making up more than half of all asylum-seekers around the world in 2015, according to the UN refugee agency."¹⁵

In that vein, subjugated childhoods and children forced to flee their homelands can best be understood in light of migrant discourse. According to Edward Said, migrancy involves a ‘discontinuous state of being’ a form of picking a quarrel with where you come from. Moreover, hybridity entails the transgression of ethnic or national borders in order to challenge existing paradigms of identity. Given that migration involves a movement in which identities are constantly subject to mutation, many theorists consider it crucial to develop a framework of thinking in which the migrant figure is depicted as a subject with agency. The immigrant must be central, not marginal, to the historic processes, free to assemble, remember, speak and rewrite his or her story—acts that are essential to the possibility of resistance in the face of colonial subjugation or neocolonial exploitation. In other words, it is essential to look at where migrants are situated in their own narratives. In order to conceptualize the possibility of resistance against the power politics from which terrible consequences such as displacement and human dispossessions emerge, we have to consider the narratives that portray the voiceless child figure in a different light.

Child protagonists illustrate that agency is particularly challenging to interpret in texts that are highly mediated by adults and adult institutions. I emphasize the importance of the study of children’s narratives to help conceptualize and shed light on how migrant child protagonists imagine nations and construct identities within particular cultural contexts and geographies of power, namely the deconstruction of the possibility of home and refuge in a world of homogenized spaces of globalization. As they navigate the transnational spaces of biculturalism, the child migrants in these literary texts are able to see both sides and explore new sites of identity. Contradicting preconceived, adult-dominated notions of the subservient and dependent child protagonist,

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I argue that when subjected to the disruptive and cataclysmic experience of migration, representations of displaced children who are forced to balance multiple identities can act as counter-hegemonic subjects who

do not easily or readily conform to power-political paradigms. Instead, they play the significant role of inventors of culture rather than mere appropriators or learners. Despite the undoubted importance of these perspectives, to date there has been remarkably little research on diasporic children in children’s

literature. This is mainly due to the fact that, within discussions of diasporic communities children are generally over-looked or little consideration is given to their role(s). This lack of consideration calls for research that challenges the dominant views of adult-centric research and literature.

Situated in the epoch of modern warfare, where the ambitions of totalitarian leaders result in the cultural fragmentation, exploitation, and commodification of subjugated groups, literary representations of colonized childhoods can be used to naturalize subservience and deny agency. It is therefore critical, in our current age of mass immigration and displacement, to consider alternate depictions of displaced persons and challenge conventional portrayals, which is what this paper aims to address. Counter-hegemonic portrayals in children's literature can challenge the biased portrayals of subjugated childhoods. This analysis considers the role of home and homelessness in children's narratives. It showcases how, once granted an awareness of the notion of home and the homeland, child migrants can perhaps configure their own conceptualizations and question the imposed ideologies that translate into their everyday lives. Such a claim may seemingly idealize visions of home or the homeland through the child's eyes, but it is this conceptualization that considers the realities of the human condition through a transnational reading. The narratives explored include Fran Leeper Buss's *Journey of the Sparrows* (1991), Ibtisam Barakat's *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (2007) and Katherine Applegate's *Home of the Brave* (2007) among other children's (illustrated) narratives, which are set against the contextual backgrounds of Latino, Middle Eastern and Asian heritage, respectively. The narratives chosen here are yoked together by the very diversity of the perspectives that they offer.

What makes these narratives comparable is their association with geographies implicating mixed migration flows of irregular migrants. I suggest that narratives set in these geographies of irregular migration flows and new conceptions of political belonging may provide some clues as to how identities are formed in these frontiers that challenge and are challenged by complex histories. These literary and visual (illustrated) representations portray the child as an allegory for the colonized nation dependent on the parental figure(s)—a metaphor for the colonizing power(s). These narratives foreground the struggles of the child protagonists as they journey from repression toward forms of self-knowledge and active citizenship that, in the words of Chambers, echoing Benjamin "depend upon the recalling and re-telling of earlier fragments and traces that flare up and flash in [their] present 'moment of danger' as they come

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to live on in new constellations.”¹⁶ However, the road to such new constellations is a bumpy one, as it requires the displaced children of migrant families to inhabit two (or more) worlds simultaneously, traverse a complex history and learn how to navigate multiple

identities on both a national and an individual level under the dominion of authority figures. While these narratives are culturally and historically variable, they converge in representing subjugated childhoods and severed links with homeland(s). These narratives provide realistic portrayals of how young people navigate boundaries and interrogate the motives and consequences of migration in order to be heard and seen. An intermix of illustrated narratives is included to offer perspective on the growing importance of the visual in the child’s subject formation.

I consider the visual representations aside from the textual as central to examining in what ways art forms assert the celebration of human worth and how these texts enunciate powerful modes of resistance to the subjectivities in globalization. I claim that understanding these constructions as central to the construction of children in the context of transnationalism and changing global paradigms motivates the affiliation between studies in children’s literature and postcolonial discourse. This study aims to situate children’s narratives amidst transnational discourse to help conceptualize existing and shifting paradigms of the displaced individual’s notion of home. More specifically, the study focuses on the following research question: How are notions of home and homelessness depicted in narratives written for children? In presenting a literary analysis of the chosen narratives through a transnational lens, this paper aims to address the following questions: How does literature for children portray homes lost and perhaps found? What kinds of perspectives of home do the written and visual representations in children’s narratives offer?

Going Home

Written by Eve Bunting and illustrated by David Diaz, *Going Home* (1996) addresses the interconnections of home and memory, foregrounding the following question: can home be a place you do not really remember? The protagonist Carlos and his family drive South across the border to Mexico, a place that does not seem like home to Carlos, even though he and his sisters

were born there. The villages they pass by all look alike to Carlos. Confused by his mother's claims, "home is here, but it is there, too," Carlos and his sisters are not so sure, stating, "Mexico is not our home, though we were born there."¹⁷ The anxiety of border crossings is apparent as Carlos questions, "are you sure they will let us back, Papa?" Trying to ease their worries, Papa claims in broken English that they have nothing to worry about as they have their legal papers. "Now we are in Mexico. I see no difference, but Mama does,"¹⁸ claims Carlos. Severed links and border crossings paint the portrait of a child estranged from the supposed homeland, their village, La Perla, in Mexico although this is not reflected in the wide-eyed, almost comical illustrations of the characters.

Children's narratives written by adult authors raise the question of whether adults 'colonize' young readers. While the argument can be made that the literature that children read may participate in a 'colonizing enterprise', the illustrations in this text, which seem to counteract the cultural anxiety, draw the readers into a world not as adults construct it but as children see it. Carlos questions why his parents left the village of La Perla if it was so 'pretty'. The lack of ideal conditions and the exploited labor of the immigrant is evident in the adult's search for opportunity beyond the borders of rural life. The child narrator, who also works on weekends and school vacations, is aware of how "hard the work is" with its tough working conditions such as the "the heat in the strawberry fields," the sun and the flies. Oblivious to the potential 'opportunities' that the adults seek, the landscapes through which they drive all look the same to the children.

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While the tone of the narrative is grim, the illustrations contradict this, providing insight into the child's jumbled world of buzzing energy, perpetual movement and lively color. Absent from these illustrations are any explicit historical undercurrents, which the text implicitly delivers. The faces are

expressionless for the most part, and the villages are portrayed beautifully, complementing the use of warm colors that exude a sense of homeliness tinged with the undeniable presence of nostalgia. The portrait of home is ideally represented as communion and family reunion, which the reader realizes through Carlos's eyes: "Grandfather and Aunt Ana hug us. They don't feel like strangers." Reunited with family members, Carlos envisions a utopic scenario, where his parents dance with no music, forgetting their worries and bodily aches and pains of labor. While the visuals depict a state of euphoria, the truth is exposed in the written word through the child narrator's realization and grand reveal: "There is a terrible ache in my chest. They love it here because it's home. They left home for us." These words denote a subtle yet certain transition from childhood to adulthood, a vulnerability portrayed in the juxtaposition of text and illustration. Picturing his parents dancing in the streets of La Perla under the shining moon, Carlos comes to terms with the idealized notion that home can be anywhere if it is kept alive in the hearts of the people who love him. Inexperienced and innocent, the child figure is thus tied to nature and the environment metaphorically the same way the colonized is visualized in the eyes of the colonizer. The attempt of postcolonial reading and criticism, then, is not necessarily to decolonize the children but to show that "although children and their literature are not inevitably outside a Eurocentric vision of things, they do represent a challenge to the traditions of mainstream culture."¹⁹ A term so widely contested, 'postcolonialism' in children's literature, then, "serves to mean many things to many people."²⁰ What is of central importance here is how children's literature manifests Eurocentric biases and portrays victims of imperialism, particularly children that may grow out of their colonial practices and attitudes.

Journey of the Sparrows

Given the variegated nature of movements in Mexico, most analysts characterize this flow as mixed migration. In October 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted a rapid survey of a group of Salvadoran migrants who made the journey north. It found that "nearly 52% cited economic opportunity as their motive for leaving the region, 18% cited violence and insecurity, 2% cited family reunification, and 28% cited a combination of those factors."²¹ Buss's *Journey of the Sparrows* spotlights the plight of Central American child refugees as they arrive in the United States from El Salvador jammed together inside a nailed-up crate. While this narrative does not provide illustrations, the rich use of language and diction inscribe place and the sense of home(lessness). By depicting a corrupt state

bureaucracy under which those directly affected by displacement are estranged and de-familiarized, the narrative lays bare how power operates to exclude and discriminate against certain groups, especially colonized children, who are doubly marginalized, disempowered, excluded and forced to flee their war-torn homelands. The recipient of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, this novel, published in 1991, relies heavily on symbolism and imagery as it paints a binary portrait of the hardships that merge with the hopes and dreams of the displaced Latin American child. It provides a grim look into the life of fifteen-year-old María; her older sister, Julia; their little brother, Oscar; and a boy named Tomás, all of whom must endure a torturous and terrifying journey across the U.S. border, fleeing violence and poverty to face an uncertain future as illegal immigrants. The events unfold from María's vantage point. The novel opens with a vivid description of the dreary and brutal conditions in which the siblings are smuggled into the United States before traveling north to Chicago:

My sister, brother, and I were pressed together in the dark crate... "Immigration, *la migra*. Be still!" warned the man who was smuggling us north... [Another man's] voice sounded cruel, like the voices of the government soldiers, the Guardias who had come to our house before... I tried to think of my home... We'd been so poor at home. Just flowers and hunger... I jerked my head...back and forth in the crate, trying not to remember... Finally I no longer moved or thought but lay silently against the other bodies.²²

Interspersed throughout the novel and framed with significant symbols and metaphors are accounts of traumatic remembrances such as this one, which reflect María's yearning for her homeland despite its poverty and oppression. Embedded in this traumatic longing is the need to archive the irreversible order of the events that constitute her identity. While María tries to suppress her memories, she does not bypass nostalgia because the sentiment of displacement itself is at the very core of this affective dimension, which she must navigate via the compass of memory in order to begin the healing process. Because María lacks historical consciousness, in place of overtly historical and political representations of El Salvador's struggle with conquests and corruption the narrative substitutes vivid, almost mythical portrayals of her homeland as she imagines and remembers it. It is worth quoting an extended passage to convey the intended somatic effect:

I squeezed my eyes shut, despite the darkness in the crate, and tried to see the colors. The piercing blue of the sky, always with me, seemed to pull me upward, and I felt it touch my cheeks and calm my face, like my mother's hand on me when I was younger. Then I saw our land during the rainy season. The world was green, and immense white clouds shared with me their secret faces of the saints. Flocks of green and yellow parakeets soared over our heads, and in October, light pink coffee blossoms whispered their sweet smell into the clear air. Our brown-and-white rooster crowed at dawn each day, and in the evenings, sunsets wove the clothes of the Indians from Papá's stories, using yarns of red, gold, violet, and blue. Inside the church, the blue robes, yellow flowers, and the holy faces of the Virgin and the saints gave us courage.²³

While this slow rhythm of reflected time and the idealized pastoral scene might confuse the actual home and the imaginary one, María's dream refigures her past as a safe space in which she can comfort and fortify herself. Although this confusion is recognized as a danger of nostalgia—in extreme cases one could be driven to kill for a phantom homeland—it does not necessarily emerge as a threat or opposition to progress in the child protagonist's mind, but rather as an empowered rebellion, or as Boym puts it, “refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.”²⁴ Defined by Boym as “a sentiment of loss and displacement,”²⁵ María's nostalgia is also “a romance with one's own fantasy”—in this case a fantasy of returning not to the homeland but to a childhood that was never embodied or rightfully lived. Such disillusionment creates a barrier that divides the past from the present. Drawing from the memories of her homeland, which are laced with both historical and imagined accounts, María seeks refuge by painting rosy, romanticized narratives of an almost mythical El Salvador for her younger brother Oscar:

The little boy's family lived in a home made of sticks... but the men burned the family's house. In the light of the fire, the children saw the colors from their village melt, then turn to gray... And so the family began their journey... “Don't be afraid,” the sparrow said to the children... I thought about the pink, yellow, and blue buildings in the village at home, remembered the hot, burning sun, and pictured the sparrow

from my story. In my mind, it perched on my shoulder and lit up all the gray buildings with color.²⁶

Living at the intersection of historicity and memory, where both are fragmented, María creates her own perception of the national past by painting it over with her own designated choice of colors, replacing the gray tint of oppression with the promise of a rosy future. The future that she imagines and envisions reflects Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as "an imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."²⁷ María thus conceptualizes her own cultural-historical version of the homeland that comes into being from an essentially mythic framework of time, where imagination and reality are inextricably entangled. These nostalgic representations portray the child's rebellion against a warped history by imagining vibrant communities and homelands in the midst of shattered ones, where notions of captivity and violence are swept away by the majestically beautiful quetzals and the strong, free-spirited sparrows.

Having internalized her position as an illegal migrant in the national hierarchy and as the meek darker sibling in the family, María migrates independently this time to prove herself capable and visible in the face of the laws that have exploited her labor. She makes it past the immigration checkpoint before realizing that "saving Teresa wouldn't bring Papá back or always keep Oscar strong. It would have nothing to do with determining when [they would] be together with Mamá."²⁸ María awakens to the realization that the migrant's journey, depicted as an unending, circular narrative of loss and sorrow, serves as a vehicle for tracing the trajectory of a life spent seeking freedom from a forgotten past and a future with no new constellations.²⁹

Home of the Brave

Bestselling author Katherine Applegate's *Home of the Brave* (2008), voted Best Children's Book of the Year, is a middle grade novel written in poetic prose about a young immigrant's journey from hardship to hope. The novel's protagonist, Kek, comes from Africa to America where he experiences many firsts, like seeing snow for the first time, which, although seemingly endearing at first, deem the terms of his inclusion in a new culture more difficult. Having survived the civil war in Africa where his mother has gone missing, Kek tries to make a home in Minnesota's harsh winter by finding strength in his memories as he awaits word of his mother's fate. The events of the narrative unfold before Kek's eyes as the reader takes the journey vicariously

through the child protagonist's experiences: "When the flying boat returns to earth at last, I open my eyes and gaze out the round window. What is all the white, I whisper. Where is all the world?"³⁰ Applegate's diction and use of phrases like 'flying boat' capture the protagonist's child-like sense of wonder, curiosity, and fear in the face of a world so vastly different from the narrator's homeland. Stumbling over new English words he was taught in the refugee camp, which he compares to a song out of tune, Kek claims that "this America is hard work."³¹ Struggling to adapt to the ways of the modern world, Kek draws comparisons between his simple, primitive life in Africa, where his father had many cattle and his people were herders, and the 'modern' one in America where he is unfamiliar with appliances like dish washers, faucets, watches, and heaters: "In my old home, my real home, we were a family and our laughter kept us warm. We didn't need a magic switch on a wall... In the camp, I say, they called America heaven on earth," which he soon comes to realize is not really the case.³²

When forced on someone who is not Western, concepts of universality imply that the dominant culture should be the standard basis for measurement. Recalling the traumatic moments of war, Kek has nightmares of the raiding 'men with guns', blistered feet and dresses stained with blood, all visual depictions of the residues of imperial warfare and diasporic voices. Looking at himself in the mirror, Kek wonders if he looks like an American boy, unsure of whether that would be a "good thing or a not-good thing."³³ A sense of belonging and self-positioning emerges here as examples of the immigrant

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figure's inclusion/exclusion in society. Befriending a cow on a ranch run by an American woman he later befriends, Kek finds comfort and solace in this little piece of home he has

discovered. The classroom is where he acknowledges the diverse "colors of the earth—brown and pink and yellow and white and black"—all united to learn the same things, a tendency of postcolonial texts that bring difference into the foreground, "reminding us of the unnatural division of humans into hierarchical groups."³⁴ Kek's cousin Ganwar reminds him that he will never really feel like an American because "they won't let you,"³⁵ which once again corroborates how the outcast immigrant cannot cross the threshold of duality and truly arrive home or assimilate. On the other hand, America is presented as the 'great' country (land of the free and home of the brave as the title

connotes) where "a woman can do anything a man can do."³⁶ Discovering new tastes like chocolate and chocolate milk, Kek questions where he belongs, to which his cousin responds, "We don't belong here. This isn't our country. It never will be."³⁷ Ganwar, the young adult figure, grasps the true limits and boundaries of America, unwelcoming to poor and illegal immigrants. Still hopeful, Kek believes that perhaps someday they can go home again, where "the war is older than our fathers were [where] the war is forever."³⁸ Bullied and outcast, Kek retorts that America is place of pain, "an ugly land" that "needs endless horizons and emptiness," where "too many buildings block the sky [and] you can't even watch the sun."³⁹ Picturing the times "before the pain," he conjures up visions of his home in the moonlight, listens to his father sing, and yearns for his mother. The childhood's end is marked when Kek claims that he can no longer find the sun when the sky is dark like he used to be able to easily do as a child. He wonders if finding the sun is one way to be a man, a mark of masculinity he aspires to fulfill. Themes of hope and fear are juxtaposed in Kek's poetic words: "Hope is a thing made only for people, a scrap to hold onto in darkness and in light. But hope is hard work. When I was a child I hoped to fly. That was a silly, easy wish. Now my wishes are bigger, the hopes of a man."⁴⁰ Finally reunited with his long-lost mother, Kek, at a loss for words, welcomes her to his new 'home:' "I can't find words, there are no words, not in my old language, not in my new one. We walk together like one person."⁴¹ Belonging and identity is derived from blood ties here, where once a place of pain, America becomes home for Kek with the arrival of his mother. In that vein, postcolonialism becomes a manifestation for the desire of acceptance and understanding of otherness, where "the desire is always to become the other."⁴²

My Name is Yoon

Written by Helen Recorvits and illustrated by Gabi Swiatkowska, *My Name is Yoon* is a narrative about a Korean girl finding her place in a new country. Form meets content in this narrative, as the surreal illustrations provide an embodied and immersive experience of environment, working to etch into memory the aesthetic markers of a child's dream-like state of experiencing life in a new state of being. The pictorial symbols have a representational function, which are acknowledged through cultural differences similar to the ones Yoon identifies. Do children lack meta-knowledge of pictures or beliefs, or both? The answer to this is contingent on (cultural) exposure just like the process of language acquisition itself, which is a central theme in

this narrative and narratives of belonging. Learning to print her name in English, Yoon does not like the way her name looks ‘alone’ in English: “In Korean, my name means shining wisdom. I like the Korean way better... I did not want to learn the new way. I wanted to go back to Korea. I did not like America. Everything was different here.”⁴³ On her first day at school, Yoon learns the corresponding letters for the word ‘cat’, which she prefers over Yoon: “I wanted to be CAT. I wanted to hide in a corner.” Exposed to new English words, Yoon begins to draw and identify with each, expressing her desire to return home in familiar illustrations represented by unfamiliar letters: “I wanted to be BIRD. I wanted to fly back to Korea. I wanted to be CUPCAKE.” While children generally lack an understanding of the representational function of pictures, studies show that “the ability to appreciate the shared representational convention of pictorial symbols is founded on understanding the shared nature of communicative intentions” and that “cultural supports are necessary for the acquisition of symbolic systems,”⁴⁴ which in this case is embodied by the uncanny illustrations parallel to the acquiring of English, a foreign language for Yoon. In that sense, examples of belonging and ‘self-positioning’ here emerge visually in the integration of language and visual representation. The social referencing of symbolic functions suggest representational knowledge and referential understanding, which is achieved when children can begin to use language to communicate goals.⁴⁵

The desire to become the other is once again manifested here as Yoon joins the English-speaking world or, as she imagines it, the community of drawings. She is gradually convinced by adult figures that “maybe America will be a good home” and that “maybe different is good too.” She claims, “yes, I am Yoon,” writing her name in English after having resisted; she realizes her name still means shining wisdom despite the different form. Form and content overlap in this narrative to foreground the postcolonial theme of language as the preserver of identity.

Tasting the Sky

Ibtisam Barakat’s *Tasting the Sky* (2007) similarly situates the child migrant in the spatial dimensions of exclusion and a shattered homeland. What distinguishes this bildungsroman from the preceding narratives is the use of flashbacks and memories characteristic of autobiography. Set against the background of the Palestinian city of Ramallah during the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, *Tasting*

the Sky captures the harshness of life as a refugee in the Middle East. Forced to flee their home in the formerly Jordanian-held West Bank, the Barakat family migrate into Jordan and remain there as refugees for more than four months. Ibtisam's perspective provides a sympathetic glimpse into the realities of war, particularly the hardships of fleeing the shattered homeland, separation from family, and passionate connection to words, inasmuch as the discovery of Alef (the first letter of the Arabic language) becomes her refuge and the language with which she pieces together the fragments of her story and her country. Divided into three parts, the novel reflects Ibtisam's memory as she reminisces about the stages of childhood and growing up in the midst of war. Situated literally and figuratively in between fluid yet impenetrable boundaries, Ibtisam mediates between binaries, the visible and the invisible, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the colonizer and the colonized. Empowered by the written word and her imagination, she writes,

I have my freedom. It is hidden in Post Office Box 34...
Having this box is like having a country, the size of a tiny square, all to myself...Paper and ink, poems and my postbox are medicines that heal the wounds of a life without freedom...But when they ask me about my childhood, suddenly I have nothing to say. It's like a curtain comes down and hides my memories.⁴⁶

Uprooted in a war-torn homeland where she is told to forget everything, Ibtisam hesitates to remember her childhood and reconnect with her country's past. Convinced that "mothers and soldiers are enemies of freedom" and that she is "doubly occupied,"⁴⁷ she defies her mother's orders and reflects on her childhood after crossing the checkpoint, a metaphor for the crossing of all boundaries, including that of time. Hence the child living in an occupied territory is confined within an ambivalent space, where, in Susan Stewart's phrase, "nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetitions and denies the repetition's capacity to define identity."⁴⁸ When observed from the perspective of a child migrant, desolate Palestine is presented not as a land shattered by war but as a landscape of distant towns, "each with a minaret that pointed to the sky like a pencil pointing to a page."⁴⁹ Ibtisam repaints destruction with innocence and hope, characteristics that children can ideally unearth at times of crisis. The older Ibtisam recalls how, driven by her childlike curiosity, she "watched [the Israeli soldiers], imitated them, puzzled over

their actions, and talked about them all the time” until they become “the source of [both her] anxiety and [her] entertainment.”⁵⁰ In watching the other so closely for the first time, Ibtisam deems herself visible in the eyes of her oppressor, thereby removing herself from the margins. Traversing occupied territory, Ibtisam, like the other migrant protagonists, is alienated from her own land. Socially excluded and existing in a state of suspension, she finds a way to re-integrate herself into her homeland, although these terms of inclusion have consequences for her sense of self. In any case, she manages to assert herself as a ‘potential active citizen’ by returning the gaze of the Israeli soldiers. *Tasting the Sky* thus provides a great depiction of how the child figure constructs identity in the face of exclusion and a shattered homeland.

Conclusion

As the narratives explored in this article illustrate, children’s literature can employ the indispensable perspectives of child migrants in order to portray them not as minorities but as potentially active citizens capable of replacing apathy with empathy. In choosing child narrators, these authors advocate for exploring issues beyond the repetitive, repressive aspects in children’s literature. In doing so, they depict the child’s intimate and self-assertive nature as a

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means to analyze representations of childhood and youth to help us overturn notions of power. Questions of belonging, agency, identity, and immigration are especially nuanced when discussed against the backdrop of children’s narratives. In presenting a literary analysis situated in transnational discourse, I have explored how these narratives utilize depictions of home(lessness), the child’s sense of self and nostalgia as instruments that subvert the representations of children as

‘passive, needy and indifferent’, replacing vulnerable duality with a sense of identity and home that does not have a fixed meaning. The disparate points of view are reconciled in these narratives, which assert that while nostalgia

tempts us, these children's narratives repeat the unrepeatable in the face of what Boym calls a "fear of untamable longing" and make us more empathetic toward the challenges raised by the claims and experiences of immigrants. I claim that while it is places that define our local definition of sites and spatial boundaries, the child's empathetic perspective in these narratives sheds light on how the 'immigrant' is a nuanced and political concept that does not have fixed or neutral meaning, but rather harbors various meanings depending on the context and point of departure. I conclude by suggesting that a multidimensional, transnational approach is necessary for the analysis of new conceptions of political belonging and the homeland. The 'transnational turn', which has offered literary critics new perspectives on texts by decentering ideas of nationhood, explores how texts are constructed through cultural exchanges across national boundaries. Is it possible, then, to return the children to us, to their homelands? Or is homelessness an inevitable byproduct of mobility and the crossing of borders? A stanza from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Children's Song" offers insight from the child's perspective, addressing the adults:

Teach us to rule ourselves always,
Controlled and cleanly night and day;
That we may bring, if need arise,
No maimed or worthless sacrifice.⁵¹

This paper has attempted to show how children's narratives of different geographies and contextual backgrounds employ both affective images and the power of metaphorical language and imagery to portray the predicament of the child migrant who can never truly return home for the ones left behind or wait for the ones who cannot get out. Moreover, they showcase how literature for children portrays postcolonial discourse through the textual and visual from the imagined perspective of children, embodied subjects and historical agents. While mostly fictional accounts, the base structure of these narratives are neither fantasy nor fabrication. These narratives can serve as the sites where children come to terms with the complex concepts of immigration, belonging, and home, which reflect the universal along with the socio-economic and historic context for each country. In other words, adult figures can introduce children to works of literature as counter-examples that represent the range of cultural experiences and histories that make up the national and international communities that touch all of us. This is one aspect of postcolonial studies: breaking the hold of the great traditions that have

dominated the study of English literatures since the rise of English studies during the heyday of British imperialism.⁵² And break that hold we must, for in doing so, perhaps we can return 'home' to the children if not the other way around.

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