

# Make English Sweet Again!

## *Refugee Tales*, or How Politics Comes Back to Literature

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The UK is likely to leave the European Union as the only (ex-)member state that practices the indefinite detention of non-nationals, i.e. immigrants. What is impossible even in Hungary or Slovakia is indeed daily routine in the land that boasts of having given the world *habeas corpus*: in Britain, and only in Britain, is it possible to lock away refugees, migrants and asylum seekers without time limit, sometimes for periods of years, with no indication of when they will be released or when their case will be decided. More often than not, detainees are held in centres profitably operated not by the state, but by multinational corporations, with little transparency or meaningful accountability. The Brook House “immigration removal centre” at Gatwick Airport, for instance, is operated by the multinational G4S corporation on behalf of the Home Office, while Yarl’s Wood, arguably the most notorious of Britain’s ten detention centres, is run by the Serco Group who have recurrently

had to face charges of sexual abuse, unlawful detention of minors and children, and numerous cases of suicide.

Since indefinite detention is a gross violation of international laws, including human rights laws, it should not come as a surprise that the Tory government have repeatedly been obligated and pressed to justify their policy – which they habitually do by outrightly denying that indefinite detention is taking place in Britain at all. Thus when called on by the United Nations in 2016 to ensure that cases of indefinite detention be avoided in future, the Home Office responded by seemingly accepting the recommendation on the basis that indefinite detention doesn’t happen anyway in the country:

although there is no fixed time limit on immigration detention under UK law or policy it operates in line with the established principle that it must not be unduly prolonged and must last for no longer than

is reasonably necessary for the purpose for which it was authorised. (Ben 2015)

Suggesting an ostensible consensus of what is a ‘reasonably necessary’ time period for ‘the purpose’, these conspicuously imprecise wishy-washy formulations deviate widely from the internationally standardised practice of limiting detention without trial to a maximum of 28 days. By contrast, the British regulations enable and indeed encourage authorities to keep individuals in suspension indefinitely under the pretence of ‘necessity’. And while this practice on one hand tends to render asylum seekers invisible (detention and/or removal centres are highly securitized enclosures far removed from urban or even rural centres), it is as such a highly visible component part of the ‘hostile environment’ policy that then home secretary Theresa May programmatically implemented in 2012 - a policy whose most recent outcrop, at the time of writing, was the Windrush scandal culminating in the resignation of Tory Home Secretary Amber Rudd in April 2018. Needless to state, the ‘hostile environment’ programme and especially the practice of indefinite detention have been exposed, criticized and combatted by the parliamentary Left as well as by a wide spectrum of civil society organizations and pressure groups, including the major religious institutions of the country, numerous NGOs and

immigrant/refugee self-help groups.

It has also triggered the Refugee Tales project – a remarkable initiative that aims to raise awareness and combat the practice of indefinite detention with the means of literature, thereby re-asserting the time-honoured but also threadbare claim of literature’s immediate political impact. Refugee Tales offers a forum to rethink and practice literature as active intervention: not just by way of producing politically committed texts but by making the mode and process of the text’s production itself a political statement. In that sense, it could be argued that Refugee Tales marks a veritable return of politics to the field of literature as a social practice.

### **A Politics of Walking (and Talking)**

The Refugee Tales project is the extension of an outreach event annually organized by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group since 2012, namely a three-days group walk intended to publicly express solidarity with migrants and refugees, those who either are involuntarily living a life en route, or worse, incarcerated in the limbo of indefinite detention. It is not for nothing that the organized annual walks habitually take place in the neighbourhood of the infamous Gatwick Detention Centre. In close collaboration with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help

initiative, literary critic-cum-poet David Herd and activist Anna Pincus developed the idea of the public solidarity walk further and added a literary dimension to the walking manifestation. Modelled on the mythical founding text of EngLit – Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* – the newfangled event combines walking with storytelling and is meant to thereby re-enact and re-appropriate Chaucer’s poem for the immediate present; and perhaps more fundamentally, to reclaim literature as such as an act of sharing and conviviality. In the words of Ali Smith, patron of Refugee Tales:

the telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form

that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world. Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal. (Smith 2018)

Setting out from Southwark in a series of walks to Canterbury, a group of participants including asylum seekers, pressure-group activists, writers and sympathisers from all walks of life rehearse the pilgrims’ progress as laid down in Chaucer’s poem. By the mere act of walking, they produce a public and political performance in its own



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right, “crossing part of the country that is integral to a certain sense of English cultural identity, and that is also now the first sight of the UK for those who arrive via the road, rail and ferry routes between Calais and Dover” (White 2017). Clearly the idea is to not just raise awareness about the outrage of indefinite detention but to symbolically and performatively instantiate a solidary and hospitable Britain ‘to come’ as an alternative to Theresa May’s vision of a ‘hostile environment’: “As the project walked [recalls David Herd] it reclaimed the landscape of South England for the language of welcome and everywhere it stopped it was greeted with hospitality and enthusiasm” (“About Refugee Tales” 2018).

The general principle of the project consists of a tandem structure in which the “walk in solidarity” is two things at once: first, a publicly visible manifestation of a community underway not just towards Canterbury but a more welcoming Britain, towards “a better imagined” one as the slogan of the project has it (Refugee Tales 2018); and secondly the occasion to tell and listen to tales en route. It thus is both ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’:

real as the walk is, and acutely real as are the experiences presented in the tales, there is a significant sense in which Refugee Tales is also symbolic. What it aims to do, as it crosses the landscape, is to open up a space: a space in which the stories of people who have been detained

can be told and heard in a respectful manner. It is out of such a space, as the project imagines, that new forms of language and solidarity can emerge. (Herd & Pincus 2017, 115)

It is important to point out that these ‘stories of people who have been detained’ are presented not by these experts-by-experience themselves but by established writers, many of them leading figures on Britain’s literary scene. Therefore it would be misleading to call any of these literary celebrities the authors of these stories; for these stories are not theirs at all. They have instead been told to them beforehand in extensive dialogue by a person immediately affected by or involved in the issue of refuge and detention in Britain: former detainees, asylum seekers, immigrants, lawyers, clergymen, support workers, etc. The tales are in that sense the outcome of a close collaboration between the person whose story it is, and the writer they are working with and who gives that story a specific shape.

### *Walking in Solidarity*

En route, lunch breaks and evening meetings are devoted to events reaching out to the respective local public. These include presentations by experts, concerts by committed sympathisers, scenic readings, or performance lectures, but it is the refugee tales themselves that take centre stage here: modelled on Chaucer’s pre-text (without the

competitive idea inveigled by the host in the *Canterbury Tales*), at each stop during the solidarity walk a tale will be told. True to the etymological derivation of the noun ‘tale’ from the verb ‘to tell’, these stories take place and shape as orature long before they reappear as literature in the conventional sense of that term, i.e. as a fixed written text that can circulate beyond the here and now of the situation of its performance.

**I**n this latter shape, a sample of 25 refugee tales have been collected and published so far in two anthologies (*Refugee Tales* [2016] and *Refugee Tales II* [2017], both edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus for Comma Press). In these volumes, the writer will ideally step back as a mere scribe who records the story told to them by some anonymous but ‘typical’ informant. Hence, *Refugee Tales* comprise stories with such Chaucerian titles as “The Barrister’s Tale”, “The Appellant’s Tale”, “The Deportee’s Tale”, or “The Lorry Driver’s Tale”. While the informants’ individual identities thus dissolve into some generic generality (or protective anonymity), the names of the authors/scribes remain all the more visible: each story’s title is complemented with the identification of the person who processed it into literature: thus, e.g., “The Witness’ Tale as told to Alex Preston”, or “The Unaccompanied Minor’s Tale as told to Inua Ellams”. The list of contributing scribes reads

like a who is who of contemporary progressive British writing in the age of transnational postcolonial globality, including, among others, such leading literary figures as Ali Smith, Jackie Kay, Bernardine Evaristo, or Kamila Shamsie, along with bestseller authors like Helen Macdonald, Chris Cleave or Marina Lewycka, high-profile newcomers like Patience Agbabi and Neel Mukherjee as well as such grey eminences as Marina Warner or Abdulrazak Gurnah. A regular presence is Iain Sinclair, who has so far on each of the solidarity walks acted as on-site guide luring the ‘pilgrims’ into the psychogeography of some eerie sub/urban unknown. In addition, a wide range of writers, artists, actors, musicians and journalists – from Bidisha to Billy Bragg, Jeremy Irons to Ben Okri – have in one way or other contributed to the solidarity walks as moderators, hosts or entertainers and enlarged the impressive (to some: overwhelming, if not forbidding) list of participants archived on the project homepage.

**I**s the Refugee Tales project, then, an occasion for literary and artsy celebrity to indulge in and promote their own do-gooding? Why else, it could be asked, should the author/scribe become so prominent while the informant tends to disappear in the generic anonymity of ‘the refugee’, ‘the deportee’, ‘the abandoned person’ etc. One obvious reason is certainly the specific vulnerability and

precariousness of many of the informants who present their experience. As David Herd puts it in a recent BBC interview:

right from the beginning, the issue that we faced was that a person who has experienced indefinite detention very much wants that story to be got out and told, but in a good number of cases it's not straightforward for them to be the person to stand up and tell that tale because they are worried about what that might mean in their home countries, and frankly they are worried about what that might mean in relation to the Home Office.

This, to be sure, goes a long way to explain why it is important that the protagonists of the tales should remain anonymous; it does not, however, actually give a reason as to why the writers of the tales should be so highly visible. Is it not an act of appropriation when an author like, say, Jackie Kay not only tells the story of an unnamed 'smuggled person' but figures as the author of that story? It should not be forgotten that for many the author remains the original creative source from which the text at hand has sprung. And is not the slightly antiquated title-subtitle combination, "The Smuggled Person's Tale, as told to Jackie Kay", a most convenient disclaimer to that individualised author's responsibility?

After all, Ms Kay (like any other of the writers involved in the project) only has to stand up to the obligation to faithfully record and process a narrative for whose accuracy and veracity she is in no way whatsoever accountable. I would wish to twist this suspicious and diffident projection against itself and ascertain that, on the contrary, the naming of the scribe has at least three important



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dimensions that are indispensable for the entire project's productivity, especially for the underlying aspiration to repoliticize literature as such:

First, by signposting their names, the contributing writers make themselves accountable not for the empirical veracity of the story told but for the accuracy of the *telling* of the story. This responsibility, to be sure, is of a tiny scale when compared to the task of the person whose testimony the writer processes. And yet, by doing so the writer makes herself

vulnerable to precisely those kinds of accusations that I have anticipated above.

Second, the visibility of the writer's name may be read as an act of speaking in somebody else's stead when that other person is structurally barred from the act of speaking. In this context, the author's name would function in a similar way to that of a guarantor who declares: "By letting this narrative circulate under my name I assume responsibility for it". This is not to be confused with



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the complacency of 'speaking for' that feminists, racially othered, working-class subjects or other marginalized groups have forcefully derided as patronizing; it is exactly in order to prevent such paternalism that the author has to take the risk, however tiny, of exposing herself and her text to personalised scrutiny.

Third, the visible author becomes an identifying device for the average reader. The presence of the author

is in most cases not restricted to the paratextual function institutionalised in the author's name: given the first two layers of this discussion, the scribes of the refugee tales are prone to appear in these stories themselves as the narrators' interlocutors. This does not happen in all the texts but there is a strong tendency towards this kind of dialogism, in which not only the testimony but also its telling and its effect on the listener/scribe gets thematic. Thus, the "Student's Tale as told to Helen Macdonald" is crucially about

the horrific ride as a stowaway in the back of freezer truck; but it is also to some extent an account of the strong inhibitions with which the author/scribe encountered that young refugee. Likewise, the "Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith", is both about the outrageous, arbitrary detention-release, re-detention-re-release first-hand experience the storyteller recounts *and* the baffled author's dwindling faith in

the common-sense mantra that "it can't be that bad". In other words, the brief interview is *also* a lesson: "I am an idiot. But I'm learning. A mere hour or two with you in a room and I am about to find out that what I've been being taught is something world-size" ("Detainee", RT1, 55). "Something world-size" is something so big that it can't be learned even when it is taught; something that all the same urges to be learned lest we

remain ensnared in the provinciality and insularity of those simplistic – victimizing or demonizing – narratives that produce “easy pigeonholes to fit people who have been forced to take wing” (“Student”, *RT2*, 8). In such passages, I argue, the self-exposed author acts as surrogate reader, unpacking the multifarious tissues of complexity into which the problematic of refuge and asylum appear to be enfolded.

### *Making English Sweet Again*

Such reflexivity and self-absorption, however, is only half of the story. The collection also includes tales about the immediate pragmatics of refugee support work. Among these stories, “The Lorry Driver’s Tale as told to Chris Cleave” takes pride of place as a text that simulates the worldview and diction of a hard-nosed trucker with a UKIP flag on the back wall of his cab, and a taciturn co-driver who claims: “I am a racist, I hate illegals because I love the UK” (29). The tale begins when a liberal journalist (no doubt the identification figure for the average reader) joins the two drivers in their cab a hundred kilometres away from Calais. The journalist’s idea is to collect first-hand material for a feature on the experience of those who navigate the highly policed border to the UK and the crowds of refugees stranded on the Channel coast, to whom the narrator invariably refers as ‘zombies’ to be fended off. Yet in the course of the story

it turns out that the self-declared racist colleague in the pillion seat is in fact a Syrian refugee, and that our ostensibly xenophobic narrator regularly smuggles refugees into the country. These acts of border crossing service, we further learn, are strictly non-profit, ubiquitous and unspectacular. When asked by the journalist about his motivation, the lorry driver gives a surprising explanation: “It’s the kick, isn’t it? To be different inside. Last freedom we’ve got” (34). Helping refugees to cross the border, then, is an act not of charity but of solidarity: not only a support of the imperilled fellow human but also an act of defiant self-assertion and even self-emancipation in a resilient fidelity to ‘the last freedom we’ve got’. A particular strength of this story lies in the way in which its diction itself enacts the kind of trajectory that is its subject matter: it is a move from the language of racism and stereotype to the discovery of the matter-of-fact simplicity of a rhetoric of solidarity and irreducible kindness: “You realise if they [the refugees] have to carry all that, maybe you can take some of the load. You might as well help – life’s over so fast” (“Lorry Driver”, *RT1*, 34). In the same go it is a progress from the degrading representation of the narrator as a dumb chav to his rehabilitation as the political working class subject he actually is – ‘different inside’. In this sense, “The Lorry Driver’s Tale” is tied in very neatly with the programmatic claim of the Refugee

Tales project at large as announced in David Herd's mission statement poem, "The Prologue", that opens volume one of the series. According to this statement, it is the aim of the project shared by all its participants to reclaim a language that has been "rendered hostile by acts of law | So that even friendship is barely possible" to express in it (RT1, ix): "And what we call for | Is an end | To this inhuman discourse" (RT1, x). What is required, instead, is "a whole new language | Of travel and assembly and curiosity | And welcome" (viii). In a shrewd appropriation of that passage from the "Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*, where Chaucer introduces the Friar as a speaker who knows how "to make his English sweet upon his tongue", this new language would be an English no longer distorted into the medium of hostile environment propaganda but "made sweet again" (viii) in the act of walking and talking in solidarity.

*Action*. <<https://detentionaction.org.uk/indefinite-detention-we-are-in-the-world-of-kafka>>

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