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Retrieving Agency Beyond Bare Life

Narratives of Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and
Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*

Supervisor
Prof. Lucio De Capitani

Assistant supervisor
Prof. Shaul Bassi

Graduand
Anna Artale
Matriculation Number 807251

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Introduction

There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard (Roy 2004, 1).

The subject of this dissertation is an investigation of different ways refugees and irregular migrants can exercise agency and strive for a dignified life through the analysis of the novels *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh and *A Life Apart* by Neel Mukherjee. This literary investigation takes place within a philosophical framework based on Giorgio Agamben's work on the concept of bare life, in an attempt to give an insightful view of the agency within the migratory experience.

The aim of this research is to give voice and agency to the weakest and most silenced segments of the mobile population through a multifaceted account of ways to act and exercise their will, with the hope of opening new insights into the migrants' experience in its attempt to endure and circumvent oppressive powers. This narrative distances itself from the hegemonic one that wants to silence migrants' stories in favour of a power-determined and utilitarian narrative within political schemes.

The literary analysis of the two novels integrates a perspective widely used in critical migration studies, which identifies the most vulnerable segments of the migrant population with bare life, i.e. life deprived of rights over which power is exercised. My interest in exploring the concept of bare life stems from having noticed its widespread use in migration studies. Although this philosophical concept is generally used to highlight the injustices and brutality of power, identifying migrants with bare life ends up consolidating the fallacious and hegemonic view that relegates migrants to a passive, muted and flattening realm, typical of the power that such approach claims to criticise. Because it confines migrants to a realm of inaction where their stories and their various ways of exercising agency are overlooked, this identification has been criticised in several studies as needing to be further developed in order to narrate the complexity and dynamism of the migration experience.

This simplistic perspective is countered by a literary analysis that investigates some collective and individual experiences where migrants, both collectively and individually, act in situations of vulnerability to claim the right to a dignified life and they construct actively their own reality. While it is true that the government uses migrants for its political agenda and relegates them to a realm

where the rights that are the prerogative of citizens do not apply, nevertheless, within this disenfranchised position, they manage to act, organise themselves, build multiple realities to achieve a better life.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is the theoretical basis on which the in-depth analyses of the two novels are then developed. The concept of bare life is discussed and then criticised in the context of biopolitics through a critical philosophical literature. Bare life proves to be instrumental in unveiling the mechanisms of power, which in turn use it to consolidate itself and build its political agenda. It however erases the agency and stories of migrants, ending up consolidating an incomplete vision of the migration experience, not far from the hegemonic one perpetrated by governments and the media. These generally project an image of migrants either as anonymous masses of destabilisers of Western values or as passive victims in need of humanitarian aid. In both cases, migrants' stories are narrated by power, never directly by them and, consequently, public opinion is shaped on the basis of hegemonic discourse, rarely based on real and direct experiences. The subsequent analysis of migrants' forms of cooperation, resilience and solidarity brings to light a collective and individual agentic world rarely narrated by the mainstream narrative, demonstrating modes of action that can manifest even in situations where state rights and protection do not apply. The last section of the chapter analyses the concept of citizenship as a discriminatory and racist control mechanism.

The second chapter is dedicated to Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and, in particular, to the unknown massacre of Morichjhãpi refugees that took place in West Bengal in 1979. The structure of the book alternates between the past narrating the massacre and the present, connecting the stories of the refugees to those of cosmopolitan elites.

My analysis, relying on both the novel and historical sources, follows the refugees before the massacre investigating their experience in the camps where they practise extreme and collective protest tactics. This is followed by an analysis of their occupation of the inhospitable island of Morichjhãpi where they build a dynamic community based on cooperation and solidarity and try to resist the brutal attacks of power to evict them.

The narration of the refugees' resistance to a power that treat them unjustly from all angles, and their ability to organise and cooperate by standing up to its brutality, succeeds in creating an image of them that is far removed from the dominant one that sees refugees as victims of abuses of power or land occupiers. Their story reverberates and affects the main characters living in the present, who, by understanding and empathising with the stories of the most disadvantaged sections of the

population, open themselves up to new visions of reality.

The third chapter is focused on Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*. It discusses the migratory experience of Ritwik, an Indian student in Oxford who decides to overstay his student visa and work without documents in London, entering the realm of undocumented migrants. As he navigates the various scenarios of this world, from exhausting and exploitative work on farms to prostitution, he offers a multifaceted and dynamic panorama of the various ways in which an undocumented migrant can try to build a dignified life for himself, albeit in a precarious situation. Ritwik is a stark departure from the dominant representation of the illegal migrant victim of traffickers, or of masculine, quasi-animal figure who disrupts the values of normalcy. His conscious decision to shift from the realm of legality to that of illegality, as well as his being a well-read and sensitive queer person who decides to prostitute himself by choice, make him a character capable of overturning the dominant representation, enriching it with nuances rarely portrayed.

I hope that the in-depth analysis of these literary texts can trigger a reflection on the scarcely narrated ways in which the most vulnerable sections of society can exercise agency and build a meaningful life for themselves, giving voice to stories that do not deserve to be silenced.

1. Bare Life and its Shortcomings

1.1. Bare Life and the Zones of Exception

Before moving on to the analysis of refugees' and irregular migrants' agency portrayed in the novels *The Hungry Tide* and *A Life Apart*, the theoretical chapter aims to discuss the limits of the concept of bare life within the migratory experience. In order to do so, it is necessary to start from the meaning of the Agambian concept and that of the zones of exception, where bare life is contained. The notion of bare life is read by Agamben in the context of biopolitics and biopower. Biopolitics is a suitable field from which to start and investigation on the figure of illegal migrants and refugees as it explores the ways migration policies affect their lives (Wiertz 2021, 1376). Within the migration context, biopolitics is used to investigate the ways in which power categorises populations, establishes their value, governs migration flows and how this is reflected in governmental practices and techniques within places such as camps and borders (ibid.).

Biopolitics is the style of government that regulates the population through biopower; Michel Foucault coined both terms in the late 1970s. The philosopher argues that before the 17th century:

> The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the "power of life and death" was in reality the right to take life or let live. Its symbol, after all, was the sword […] Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it (Foucault 1978, 136).

From the 17th century onwards, power structures have experienced a major transformation: power is no longer focused on subduing and destroying forces but instead aims to make them grow and develop through an apparatus that orders and classifies them (ibid.). Biopower operates through discipline-based methodologies and techniques (legal, social, moral) that monitor, control and fashion the bodies of individuals (Tyler 2010, 61). According to Foucault the new sovereignty has the power to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault 1978, 138). The government's concern to foster the life of the population results in a disciplined society where any means can be justified for the protection and preservation of the population – like eradicating groups perceived

as a threat to the life of a population. The regularised freedom of bio-political governmental societies never exists without security mechanisms or constructions of the abnormal and deviant (Lorey 2006, 5) that keep normalized society cohesive and uniform. The modern era seems unthinkable without a perceived culture of danger that permanently threats normality and without imaginary invasions of constant and widespread threats (ibid.).

Foucault thinks that biopower is the dominant of modern governments and has played a dominant role in the development of the West: it is therefore a historically contingent phenomenon. Giorgio Agamben tries to correct, or rather, complete (Agamben 1998, 9) Foucault's thesis by arguing that biopower has always been implicated in sovereign power: “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben 1998, 6). To argue his thesis, Agamben resorts to the analysis and development of a figure that is the basis for the exploration of the migratory experiences within this thesis, the figure of Homo Sacer.

Agamben defines his concept of biopolitics differentiating between “politically qualified life” and “bare life” (Cimino 2022, 184). He starts by interpreting Aristotelian notions of bios and zoe: in ancient Greece bios corresponds to political life, the life in society, “the way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 1998, 1). Zoe, on the other hand, is natural, animal life: it “expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings” (ibid.) Citizens in Greece had both type of lives: one determined by the fact of living within a society, the other defined by the fact of being animals with bodily needs. Women, children and the elderly were considered always zoe as they did not have any roles within society and they were confined to the domestic sphere (Agamben 1998, 2).

Homo Sacer indicated an individual in ancient Roman law, who by reason of having committed a certain kind of crime was expelled from society and was stripped of all rights as a citizen; thus he/she could be killed by anybody with impunity (Maphosa 2021, 874) and could not be sacrificed with a ritual. Homo Sacer is, therefore, forcibly reduced to bare life, one which “has a biological existence without any political significance and agency” (Maphosa 2021, 874). On the one hand Homines Sacri could not be sacrificed according to ritual because they were outside divine law: in the eyes of the gods, their lives were worth nothing (Gregory 2006, 406). On the other, they could be killed with impunity because they were outside juridical law hence their lives were of no value to their contemporaries (ibid.). Homines Sacri are stripped of all their rights, hence they are no longer citizens. It is the society who creates a Homo Sacer within it: even if excluded, it is still a part of it in

what Agamben calls a state of exception. This state where the rules are suspended is not exterior to the political and juridical order:

> The act of suspension itself create a relation between the rule and its exception, declaring what lies outside the rule to be an exception and thus, and only thus, giving the rule a coherence and validity. The exception proves, or rather constitutes, the rule (Hussain, Ptacek 2000, 501).

The state of exception is constituted when the sovereign acts beyond the law: this capacity of deciding on the exception is an "essential and definitional feature of sovereign power" (Hussain, Ptacek 2000, 501). The history of power has implied from its beginning the drawing of a line that divides bios, the political life, from bare life, life outside the political sphere: this line of demarcation functions as an enabling device for its own transgression that always indicates a colonisable territory that can be politicised (Schütz 2000, 121-122).

> The space declared improper for politics is singled out and indicated as the space of politics properly speaking. Political history presents itself in two parallel strings, as a history of actual declarations and one of actual performances. Bare life, declared outside, is by the same token factually singled out as the object, the inside, the territory par excellence of political action (ibid.).

Zones of exceptions not only seek to make an undisciplined movement more governable and controllable but are also used within the discourse of politics to reinforce the power of the nation-state and create an evident separation between an Us and a Them. The figure that has been stripped of all his rights in the zones of exception even if it is seemingly kept out of the laws of the state, it is nevertheless crucial in forming the state from which it is banned (Rajaram, Grundy-Warr 2004, 33).

Modern nation-states make nativity or birth the foundation of their own sovereignty (Agamben 2000, 20). Agamben argues that the implicit fiction here is that birth comes into being immediately as nation (ibid.). When you are born, you are automatically granted rights by the nation-state in which you are born: you are a citizen entitled to these rights only as a result of being born there. In the modern nation-states the subject is life with political rights, rights that come directly with being part of a nation, nation that defines itself by its population rather than territory. Within its territory, in fact, citizens can be stripped of their rights simply based on the fact that they are not born there. To define a citizen there must be a non-citizen: importantly for the argument discussed in this thesis, the embodiment of the non-citizen is precisely the refugee.

Agamben sees the refugee as the biopolitical subject by default, as a subject outside a normal political/legal context that disrupts the link between natality and citizenship on which the nation-state is based.

> If the refugee represents such a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state, this is so primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis. Single exceptions to such a principle, of course, have always existed. What is new in our time is that growing sections of humankind are no longer representable inside the nation-state-and this novelty threatens the very foundations of the latter. Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history (Agamben 2000, 31-32).

According to the philosopher the refugees can be governed in a perpetual state of exception and the physical place par excellence where they live outside a normal legal context are the camps, spaces that are at the same time inside and outside the juridical order. In the camps everything is possible precisely because they represent a space of exception – a space in which the law is completely removed. In order to understand the incredible and horrific events that occur within a camp, it is necessary to understand the political-legal structure of the camp and its function as a permanent instrument of creation of the exception (Agamben 2000, 39). The people who are in the camp move through a zone of indistinction between the outside and the inside, the exception and the rule, the permitted and the illegitimate, where any legal protection disappear (ibid.). Because of the fact that its inhabitants are stripped of all political status and completely reduced to bare life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realised, a space in which power confronts nothing but "pure biological life without any mediation" (Agamben 2000, 40).

If the camp represents the materialisation of the state of exception, where man is stripped of all his rights and on which any kind of violence can potentially be exercised, we can admit that we are presented with a camp “virtually every time that such a structure is created, regardless of the nature of the crimes committed in it and regardless of the denomination and specific topography it might have” (Agamben 2000, 40-41). Illegal migrants and refugees are very often trapped in states of exceptions where the law does not apply. In *The Hungry Tide* these zones of exception are represented first by the camps and then by the occupied territory of Morichjhãpi on which power does not spare itself from revealing its most brutal and illegitimate side. In *A Life Apart*, it is the

world of irregular migrants itself that is the zone of exception, a place that is excluded from ordinary norms but on which the crushing mechanisms of power nevertheless apply.

The ban is what renders the biopolitical abandonment of Homo Sacer possible. Agamben states that:

> The ban is essentially […] the power of maintaining itself in relation to something presupposed as nonrelational. What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it – at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured [...] The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception, bare life and power, homo sacer and the sovereign (Agamben 1998, 109-110).

By banning people, the sovereign power place them outside the law, in an ambivalent situation where "the one who is abandoned is both utterly exposed to the law and cast outside of its jurisdiction" (Davitti 2018, 1182).

A case in point is the interception of the Libyan coast guard, which, with EU funds, is supposed to intercept migrants at sea and bring them to safety, but instead takes them to Libyan detention centres where migrants are subjected to inhuman and degrading treatments. They are held in the centres for indefinite periods of time "during which their detention is not reviewed by competent judicial authority" (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016, 13). Many migrants have described "their time in Libya as hell. They have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture – including rape and sexual violence – and other ill treatment, unlawful killings, and forced labour" (ibid. 14). This continues to happen despite "International human rights law prohibits arbitrary detention" (ibid. 17-18).

The ban and the state of exception are useful to understand the way in which juridical inclusion/exclusion and violence manifest in various contemporary context (Davitti 2018, 1183). According to Agamben states do not intervene to prevent catastrophes, but rather let them happen or, sometimes, make them happen, and then intervene to restore order and security in a way that is considered right, to steer them in a direction beneficial to the sovereign (Agamben, Raulff 2004, 611). For instance, ETM (Emergency Transit Mechanism) in Niger facilitates "targeted resettlement for individual cases, small groups, families and persons of concern to UNHCR" (UNHCR, Flash Update Libya, 16 November 2017) from Lybia and other states. Humanitarian intentions are used when in reality not only is the Libyan tragedy created by the very people who profess to want to solve it, but

more significantly, through the transfer to transit camps in Niger, migrants are diverted away from Europe and towards the Sahel, the whole process becoming a profitable intervention (Davitti 2018, 1183).

> If the state is what "binds", it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, unbinds, releases, expels, banishes. If it does the latter, it is not always through emancipatory means, i.e. through "letting go" or "setting free"; it expels precisely through an exercise of power that depends upon barriers and prisons and, so, in the mode of a certain containment. We are not outside of politics when we are dispossessed in such ways […] This is not bare life, but a particular formation of power and coercion that is designed to produce and maintain the condition, the state, of the dispossessed (Butler, Spivak 2007, 5).

People that are cast out of the realm of law in the zones of exceptions are at the same time "steeped in power" (Butler, Spivak 2007, 9) as they are still contained in places under the control of the state, even if without any legal protection. Their situation significantly remind us that power is not equivalent to the law (ibid.).

According to Agamben, as long as we are immersed in the paradigm that discriminates between politically qualified life and bare life, the camps – understood as spaces where the law is suspended – represent the true ordering nomos of our political coexistence (Agamben 1998, 166). The creation of these spaces of exception is typically produced through the declaration of a state of emergency that becomes the ground through which sovereign power constitutes and extends itself. Three days after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 George W. Bush declares National Emergency: the emergency was renewed in each subsequent year with the result that emergency seemed to become the rule and exceptional measures, a protracted government's technique (Gregory 2006, 407).

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, after the 11/09 attack in America there was a shift in the politics of war from the concept of defence to that of security, which was promoted as a crucial element in the war on terror that followed the attacks (Hardt and Negri 2004, 20). This change can be read as a shift from a conservative and reactive way of governing to an active and productive one (ibid.). War inside and outside one's borders becomes an integral part of state governance with the excuse that attacks on security must be prevented because waiting for threats to become a reaction would be too great a risk (ibid.). In this view, a perpetual state of war in which

anything can happen becomes the norm, activating a mechanism that continuously creates and reinforces the present global order (Hardt and Negri 2004, 421).

As stated by Agamben, the *locus par excellence* of this new state of exception is the US Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, where from January 2002 men and boys captured during the US invasion of Afghanistan have been imprisoned (Gregory 2006, 406). The philosopher argues that the prisoners in Guantanamo have no juridical status and this places them in the same position as the prisoners in Auschwitz (Agamben, Raulff 2004, 610): in fact, the latter were entirely denationalised and stripped of all residual citizenship following Nuremberg (ibid.). Both deprived of legal existence, they are subordinate only to brute power.

The state in Guantanamo exercises a new state of sovereignty which not only operates outside the law, but also through the development of specifically created administrative structures in which officials have the decisive word about who will or will not be prosecuted and who will or will not be detained indefinitely (Butler 2004, 51). Butler argues that indefinite incarceration is one of the most obvious situations in which the mechanisms pertaining to the zone of exception are manifested. Such an extreme and illegitimate way of exercising power becomes a normalcy in zones of exception, establishing itself as an acceptable and standard practice in American politics.

> Indefinite detention is an illegitimate exercise of power but it is, significantly, part of the broader tactic to neutralize the rule of law in the name of security. Indefinite detention does not represent an exceptional circumstance, but it is rather the means by which the exceptional becomes absorbed into the norm to the point of becoming a norm itself. It becomes the occasion and the means by which this exceptional state exercise is justified indefinitely, establishing itself as a potentially constant feature of US political life (Butler 2004, 67).

Overall, as this overview of Agamben, Butler and other critics tackling this issue has shown, the refugee – as well as the concept of bare life and that of the state of exception – are crucial concepts that expose how biopower works. However, the vision it offers present some crucial problems. In fact, although the subjects relegated to states of exception are individuals, Agamben urges us not to see them as persons but as a symbol, a conceptual tool for understanding the mechanisms on which power operates. The refugee should be regarded for what it is, "namely, nothing less than a limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed" (Agamben 2000, 21-22). As Tyler argues the refugee becomes a "sentimental trope" (Tyler 2006, 197), a figure through which "the

very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries" (Agamben 1998, 11).

The reduction of individuals relegated to states of exception to mere symbols functional to reveal power dynamics obliterates the individuality, humanity and stories of migrants. This approach not only consolidates a flat and uniform view of migrants, in line with that of the power that Agamben states he wishes to oppose, but it is also unrepresentative of the stratified and active reality that they live, exerting agency and creating their own realities, even within the states of exception.

The next section explores how the concept of bare life creates this kind of limited and incomplete vision.

1.2. Resisting Bare Life

The idea of bare life is fitting in a context where migrants are abandoned at sea, treated inhumanely in detention centres or exploited in many parts of the world (Taraborrelli 2020, 267). Identifying migrants with bare life, however, tends to deny or fail to recognise the subjectivity and political agency of individual migrants (or groups of migrants), disregarding their specific histories and the concrete social circumstances of modern states of exception (Svirsky, Bignall 2012, 3).

Angela Taraborrelli argues that Agamben over-identifies the refugee – who is not only the refugee as such, but also represents other groups living in the zones of exception – with bare life (Taraborrelli 2020, 267). From this consideration we do not draw any indication of the social, political, economic, or environmental causes of migration: once the most original cause of the production/reduction of human beings into refugees has been identified, namely sovereign power, the search for these causes is meaningless (ibid.). Migrants become functional in unravelling the structure of sovereign power, and in this process lose their individuality, their history and their ability to resist and act. In Agamben's perspective intersectional and transnational approaches that provide important tools for articulating complex and multidimensional migration experiences (Mountz and Mohan 2022, 61) become therefore superfluous (Taraborrelli 2020, 626). These approaches in fact allow migrants to be considered not only with respect to what they share, but also with respect to what differentiates them (gender, race, religion, class) since it is these characteristics that crucially condition the journey and outcome of the migration (ibid.). Furthermore, by reducing all the migrants to bare life, Agamben renders the distinction between

different types of migrants (political refugees, economic migrants, refugees, stateless persons, displaced persons) and their stories, obsolete (Taraborrelli 2020, 626).

Agamben does not provide any insights regarding how bare life could be mobilised through emancipatory movements, nor does this seem to be of any relevance given that, by virtue of his concept of bio-politics, resistance cannot be limited to the simple contestation of the law or power structures (Taraborrelli 2020, 627). If the cause of the reduction/production to/of refugees is sovereign power, and if under the light of sovereign power everyone is reduced to bare life, the meaning of any struggle for emancipation or claim to rights is lost, because this would not challenge the institutional and legal framework on which the nation state is based. On the contrary, open or more porous borders and the solutions applied to political refugees according to the current legislation based on the Geneva Convention – i.e. repatriation, integration into the society of arrival or accommodation in a third state – only reaffirm and/or reinforce the classic state/nation/territory trinity with its related ideas of citizenship and rights (Taraborrelli 2020, 628).
Talking about the phenomenon of illegal immigration Agamben declares that:

> What industrialized countries face today is a permanently resident mass of noncitizens who do not want to be and cannot be either naturalized or repatriated. These noncitizens often have nationalities of origin, but, inasmuch as they prefer not to benefit from their own states' protection, they find themselves, as refugees, in a condition of de facto statelessness. Tomas Hammar has created the neologism of "denizens" for these noncitizen residents, a neologism that has the merit of showing how the concept of "citizen" is no longer adequate for describing the social-political reality of modern states. On the other hand, the citizens of advanced industrial states (in the United States as well as Europe) demonstrate, through an increasing desertion of the codified instances of political participation, an evident propensity to turn into denizens, into noncitizen permanent residents, so that citizens and denizens –at least in certain social strata– are entering an area of potential indistinction" (Agamben 2000, 22).

According to Agamben modern citizens are subjected to a process of reduction to bare life that renders them increasingly indistinguishable from Homo Sacer. Through this reflection he renders meaningless the distinction between migrants and non-migrants, between citizens and non-citizens, with the related distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity (Taraborrelli 2020, 627). Thus, not only does Agambian reflection obliterate differences within the migratory world, but it also blurs the

difference between citizens and illegal migrants, in favour of a narrative that seems to have no correspondence in reality.

Agamben states that we should never associate the concept of refugee with that of human rights and the right of asylum because both categories are compromised with sovereign power (Agamben 2000, 21). In order to challenge power he does not propose that we all become citizens of a state or of the world, but that we all become refugees: "only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable" (Agamben 2000, 25). Agamben imagines Europe as an a-territorial space, in which all residents of European states, citizens and non-citizens alike, should find themselves in a position of exodus or refuge (Agamben 2000, 23-24). In this context, being European would mean the being-in-exodus of the citizen which creates a new space where space no longer coincides with the homogeneous national territory (Agamben 2000, 24). Therefore being a citizen would no longer have anything to do with birth and nationhood.

> The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization. (Agamben 2000, 87)

In this critical perspective, forms of struggle are examined and accepted on the basis of their potential to modify the very structure of sovereign power (Taraborrelli 2020, 628). Traditional struggles for the recognition of rights and for citizenship are considered anachronistic above all because this kind of struggle would be functional to the strengthening of sovereign power, which is instead the enemy to be fought, and the real cause of the production/reduction of individuals to refugees and bare life (ibid.). This approach, precisely by virtue of its radicalism, prevents us from recognising and taking into consideration the concrete needs and aspirations of refugees who might wish to be included in the states they arrive in, precisely because they have the potential to guarantee rights that are not protected, and to offer conditions that are absent or unsatisfactory, in their countries of origin (Taraborrelli 2020, 628).

According to Agamben what disturbs the sovereign power, which the state cannot tolerate and which represents its main enemy, are the singularities that make community without claiming identity, humans that "co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (Agamben

1993, 85) rejecting all identities. In his reflection it seemingly remains unspecified how this conflict between state and non-state can be translated into concrete political action, how the manifestation of their common being by any singularities can produce a short-term improvement in the living conditions of migrants (Taraborrelli 2020, 630). His work appears to lack an account of the Homo Sacer's ability to resist and exert agency.

> What is of concern here about the logic of this theoretical argument is the way in which the figure of the refugee is harnessed for their (political) signifying force, and then performed as an 'unspeakable truth' (we are all refugees) in ways that abstract and disembody 'the figure of the other' from any embodied referent (actual refugees) (Tyler 2006, 197).

In Agamben's thinking, all differences of the migratory experiences are concealed, allowing the many forms of displacement to be grouped together in the fixity of a name (Tyler 2006, 197). This approach may contribute to further exacerbating the invisibility of migrants and disregarding their capacity to exercise agency, seemingly losing sight of the very referents of bare life, i.e. those living on the margins of society (Tyler 2006, 198).

Ironically, Agamben's thinking feeds into a widespread representation of migrants and refugees as powerless. Regrettably, the majority of citizens do not attribute agency to those who live at the margins and their lives tend to be relegated to a zone of invisibility, sharply separated from the rest of the population. The next section examines how, in modern society, the media play a crucial role in creating this kind of divisive approach.

1.3. Producing Invisibility

The media mirror the view of hegemonic power, which seeks to make migrants invisible through hypervisibility. In fact, the media vigorously and frequently circulate images of migrants that "induce moral panic that feeds back into the political decision-making process" (Tyler 2006, 193). The hypervisibility that migrants have in the media actually works to keep them outside the community, in a condition of perpetual othering and exclusion. It also plays a key role in constructing the two most frequent perspectives on migrants, those that regard them as victims or threats (Polychroniou 2021, 253).

Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic analysed newspaper headlines images in five European countries in order to create a "typology of refugees visibilities" (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1163).

> On the one hand, the refugee emerges as a victim of geo-political conflict in need of protection, yet, on the other, she/he appears as a threat to the nation-based order and is to be excluded from 'our' community. This symbolic instability of the refugee, swiftly shifting between speechless victim and evil-doing terrorist, lies at the heart of critical scholarship on refugee imagery (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1164).

The representation of the refugee as victim is given either by images of massification, where refugees are a multitude of indistinguishable individuals, often herded into camps, or by portraits of bodies in need of food, care and shelter (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017, 1164): this imagery easily evokes the bare life of Homo Sacer. In both cases, a dehumanisation of the subjects represented is taking place. If one hand "clustering refugees into one single undifferentiated mass deprives them of their biographical specificity as historical beings"(ibid.), on the other "defining them in terms of their corporeal vulnerability alone degrades them to the status of "sub-citizens" – their physical destitution lacks the legitimacy to articulate political will or rational argument" (ibid.)

Victimisation triggers feelings of empathy, indignation and awareness in the Western world, which leads to an increase in philanthropic initiatives, donations and volunteer actions (Polychroniou 2021, 254). However, this portrayal presents the refugee as a non-autonomous, passive figure, dependent on humanitarian aid (ibid.). The illustrative victimisation of refugees perpetrated by the media leaves no room for a representation that takes into account their claims, experiences, longings and necessities. Relegating refugees to a condition of passivity and dependence it creates a deeply "unequal and quasi/colonial moral relation" (ibid.) between the culturally superior and generous Western protector and the vulnerable refugee bodies (ibid.). Humanitarian actors invite people to put themselves in the migrants' shoes, using their agency to speak in their place, in a way that they believe opposes the inhuman portrayal put forward by the government and the media (Tyler 2006, 194). In speaking in the migrants' place, the humanitarian subject actually takes the place of the migrants, once again silencing their voice (Tyler 2006, 195).

The construction of the imagery of the refugee as a threat is accomplished, on the other hand, with images that show dark-skinned men in their prime trying to cross our borders, showing the refugees as active and powerful individual that invade "our" space rather than battered and fragile bodies (Chouliaraki and Stolic 1164). Policies of territorial defences, with consequent and often

violent push backs, are justified and indeed welcomed. This agentive representation also deprive refugees of their own humanity as "it shows them in control of their destinies, ignoring the historical circumstances that go beyond their control" (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1165). In addition, it unites them all into a category of strangers without faces or names ready to invade us with their being other than us, stimulating feelings of fear as they could be all potential terrorists (ibid.). In the western mentality, these imaginaries are interchangeable: depending on the representation projected by the media, feelings of empathy and solidarity can quickly turn into fear and hostility (ibid.).

In *The Hungry Tide*, for instance, the hegemonic narrative about refugees in Morichjhãpi fabricates a representation that does not reflect reality, portraying them as uncivilised squatters who spoil the environment, and only serves to create pretexts to evict them. Also in *A Life Apart*, media are depicted as complicit in creating a reality that discriminates against migrants on the basis of fallacious narratives and foments intolerance and racism.

The one thing all media narratives have in common is that the migrants' stories are always told from the perspective of power, making them permanently mute and unable to recount a different version of the facts. Rafal Zaborowski and Myria Georgiou highlight how refugees and illegal migrants have no voice in any media as news workers, security authorities and politicians speak about them or in their behalf (Zaborowski and Georgiou 2019, 100). The core narrative that emerges from the visuals is the figure of the refugee as an entity to be handled, not welcomed. The humanity of refugees is called into question, not only because of their voicelessness, but also because of the way their relationships with non-refugee players are presented. Except for a few infrequent examples of images portraying citizens' solidarity with the refugee cause, refugees are portrayed as being led or carried, managed and organised, halted or hastened (Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019, 104). As subjects seemingly without a will of their own, they become the ultimate Other, and their inhuman and non-assertive position justifies the intensifying security policies and border checks (ibid.).

In this light, it may be difficult to imagine the figures of the migrant as heterogeneous agents and resisters, with different stories, paths and desires. The next section provides examples of both collective and individual situations in which migrants exert agency, resist, and elude the authorities, proving they are capable of organising to counter the power that wants to relegate them to a passive and manipulable bare life.

1.4. Forms of Agency and Resistance

The general perception of migrants and the media portrayal of their stories overwhelmingly obliterate all collective acts of empowerment and solidarity, and the individual experiences of the modern Homo Sacer (Polychroniou 2021, 259). The concept of bare life appears to reflect this kind of non-agentic view of migrants. As Butler and Spivak point out:

> We need more complex ways of understanding the multivalence and tactics of power to understand forms of resistance, agency, and counter mobilization that elude or stall state power. I think we must describe destitution and, indeed, we ought to, but if the language by which we describe that destitution presumes, time and again, that the key terms are sovereignty and bare life,we deprive ourselves of the lexicon we need to understand the other networks of power to which it belongs, or new power is recast in that place or even saturated in that place. It seems to me that we've actually subscribed to a heuristic that only lets us make the same description time and again, which ends up taking on the perspective of sovereignty and reiterating its terms and, frankly, I think nothing could be worse (Butler and Spivak 2007, 42-43).

Butler argues that vulnerable lives maintain the capacity to politically act, resist and wish: even if they are "short of protection" (Butler 2015, 186) they don't automatically become bare life "but rather a concrete form of political exposure and potential struggle, at once concretely vulnerable, even breakable, and potentially and actively defiant, even revolutionary" (ibid.).

Having no infrastructural support, migrants nevertheless manage to create new realities that help them in their mobility: they manage to find forms of resilience even when their agency seems to be blocked on all sides. Talking about the migrants crammed along the borders Butler argues that they should not be thought of as bare life, although the image could be quite fitting (Butler 2020, chap 4). That is, we should not acknowledge their suffering by further depriving them of any capacity. Migrants live in a terrible situation, but within it, they often manage to improvise forms of sociality and communication, discuss steps to take, draw maps and try to learn languages (ibid.).

An important example of resistance occurred after the suicide of Mohammed Rahsepar an, an Iranian asylum seeker in a centre in Germany. After his death several demonstrations arose, drawing public attention to the conditions of refugees in Germany. A group of young Iranian refugees started a hunger strike, but also employed a more radical method to express their dissent: they sewed their lips shut. What they wanted to silently communicate is that if their protests do not receive a political

response, the refugees remain voiceless because a voice that is not willing to be heard and noted cannot be political and bring about change (Butler 2020, chap. 4). The image of the stitched lips "displays its voicelessness in a visual image in order to make a point about the political limits imposed on audibility" (ibid.). Following this protest, a group of fifty refugees set off on foot to Berlin, where, after a month of walking, they set up a camp at Orianienplatz: the protest created a collective space where people could voice shared political demands (Ataç et al. 2015, 4).

With the O-Platz protest camp, refugees successfully created a community space where their voices could be heard. Through their public and activist campaigns, they have been able to make cross-border mobility and its control, as well as state mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, part of a broad and controversial public discourse (Ataç et al. 2015, 4). As Butler argues in *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistence*, "in such practices of non-violent resistance, we can come to understand bodily vulnerability as something that is actually marshaled or mobilized for the purposes of resistance" (Butler 2014, 17). Something very similar happened, according to historical sources, in the camps where the refugees resided before settling in Morichjhãpi: they went on a hunger strike that lasted 13 days to protest the conditions in which they live. This is a perfect example of protest practices in which the vulnerability of the body is mobilised and is analysed in detail in the chapter dedicated to *The Hungry Tide*. Vulnerability has not to be intended as the opposite of agency, they are entwined. Refugees and illegal migrants are in a vulnerable condition as they are deprived of the multi-layered supportive system that sustains and preserve life, nonetheless they found a way to be heard and bring about some changes. Thanks to the Vienna protest, for example, there was a positive change in the perception of refugees within the population and some of the activists were given residence permits (Ataç et al. 2015, 5).

Another relevant example that describes collective resistance to bare life and offers an important insight into the mechanisms of biopower is the situation of migrants in the so-called Calais "jungle", the best known makeshift camp in Europe, formed in 2015. In 2016, the French Logistic Solutions company installed 125 white shipping containers in a bulldozed area inside the jungle and surrounded them with a fence (Katz 2017, 3). To obtain permission to live in these containers, migrants had to register with the prefecture and have their hands biometrically scanned, which were then used to gain access to the fenced-in camp (ibid.). The migrants were not identified by their name but by the biological pattern of fingerprints and were then stored in the tiny space of a bunk bed in an anonymous container (Katz 2017, 4). In this dynamic, one can witness biopower in its essence: migrants are simply biological bodies without identities, histories, needs other than

biological ones (ibid.). Many migrants compared the containers to a prison and preferred to remain in the jungle, partly because the demand for fingerprints obliges them to seek asylum in France, which many did not want ("Calais 'Jungle' Migrants Resist Container Move," BBC News, January 15, 2016).

The camp with the containers was a sterile, monotonous environment, as anonymous as its inhabitants, which stood in stark contrast to the liveliness and bustle that reigned in the makeshift camp.

> While the container camp was created by the French government to at once support and control the migrants' biological life, the makeshift camp, by contrast, was formed and developed on the basis of the everyday material, social, cultural, and economic needs, and political expressions of its dwellers (Katz 2017, 5).

The camp was divided into neighbourhoods formed according to the places of origin of the inhabitants. There was no shortage of places for social interaction and leisure, often showing an attention to detail – for example in the construction of flowerbeds and lounge areas – that seemed unthinkable in an environment with such scant resources (Katz 2017, 6). Places were customised with murals, writing, symbols referring to nationalities of origin and desired nationalities "creating a unique iconography of pride, protest and hope" (ibid.). All these creative gestures by migrants, which included ironic and playful writing, demonstrated a way of participating anonymously but collectively in a political discourse from which they were excluded. In addition to all this, the jungle teemed with small shops that catered to the needs of everyday life, such as grocery stores and barbershops, and communal institutions, such as the mosque (Katz 2017, 6-7).

The chaotic, lively environment of the jungle stood out against the cold and gloomy containers, becoming a place of cooperation, resistance, solidarity and humanity and "creating a sense of community and belonging, while also empowering its residents who created the camp themselves" (Katz 2017, 9). The Calais jungle is an example where "The power *of* life resists the power *over* life" (Katz 2017, 14). The situation in the makeshift camp in Calais has parallels with the one created in Morichjhãpi where refugees manage to establish an organised, operational reality out of scratch, a sort of utopian village built on the pillars of cooperation and exchange.

This description of Calais is not aimed at romanticising the predicament of the migrant: in fact, it can hardly be denied that migrants are in an extremely vulnerable condition since they are deprived

of the multilevel system that normally supports and preserves life. It seems, however, that once a group of people falls into the category of vulnerable, they are regarded as in need of support and humanitarian aid from the population and institutions, as well as incapable of acting and resisting on their own volition (Butler 2014, 15). This view tends to underestimate the power of all the ways of resistance that can arise in so-called vulnerable populations (ibid.). When migrants demand that their rights be respected, when they ask to be admitted to a place or request documents, they are showing their vulnerability and, at the same time, demonstrating with it (Butler 2020, chap 4).

Migrants may also decide to become invisible in order to advance their actions of resistance and survival. Sometimes, in order to exert agency, the only alternative is to remain on the move, evading a regime of containment that makes them recordable and thus deportable (Sanyal 2017, 20). In the Calais jungle, migrants used the technique of erasing their fingerprints by self-mutilation of their fingertips with razors, fire or acid. This is a way of trying to evade Eurodac, the European Union fingerprints database that identify irregular border crossers and asylum seekers within the Eurozone. "Their practices or techniques, exercised to transform their own bodies into unreadable hieroglyphs, offer the fleeting glimpse of an affirmative biopolitics in which the power over life wielded by border controls cedes to the power of life to evade them" (Sanyal 2017, 18). Through the removal of fingerprints, a body cannot be associated with a name and cannot therefore be registered: with this action, the migrant expresses the will to no longer belong to the domain of rights that should characterise men (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 4). Another way to make themselves invisible is to refuse to cooperate with the authorities in their identification. Joanne Van der Leun's research show how the Dutch detention system deals with irregular migrants who do not want to cooperate in their identification status:

> It costs them six to nine months, but then they are free. Some of the Moroccans are prepared to sit it out. I wonder what's wrong with them, it is seven months of your life but maybe they have nothing left in their own country. The underlying idea is to stay here. And those that are released […] they are out in the streets again and disappear into illegality again so that they can manage a few more years (Leun 2003, 108).

Many migrants are willing to endure detention and then move on with their lives, creating a paradox where those whom the state want so strongly to expel become the most immune to deportation (ibid.). While in detention, migrants may not cooperate with the authorities by withholding

information about their identity; this poses a challenge to the authorities who have to work harder to get what they require. This action is the last glimmer of resistance to avoid deportation but also "an act of self-preservation that counters the inhumanity of bare life. Even in the state of exception, then, there is some scope for autonomous action by the individual" (Ellermann 2019, 22).

The determination of becoming invisible to the eyes of power is articulated by Hardt and Negri in *Declaration*. The philosophers argue that the most significant way to reject the security regime under which we live is to escape. Through rendering oneself unseen, one can evade the security system that only works through making oneself visible (Hardt and Negri 2012, chap. 2).

> Those living under the weight of a security regime tend to think of themselves as powerless, dwarfed by against its overarching might. Those in a prison society think of themselves as living in the belly of a Leviathan, consumed by its power. How can we possibly match its firepower, how can we escape its all-seeing eyes and its all-knowing information systems? To find a way out all you have to do is remember the basic recognition of the nature of power explained by Foucault and, before him, Niccolo Machiavelli: power is not a thing but a relation. No matter how mighty and arrogant seems that power standing above you, know that it depends on you, feeds on your fear, and survives only because of your willingness to participate in the relationship. Look for an escape door. (Hardt and Negri 2012, chap. 2)

By resisting in this manner, migrants become a challenge for the power structures that would like their bodies manageable. Through the suppression of their identity by self-mutilation, migrants reclaim a piece of their humanity and in their attempt to circumvent the mechanisms of control, they create networks and collective strategies that work below the dimension where the strategies of control lie. Once in this dimension, migrants know that in order to continue to evade scrutiny, they will have to be constantly evolving and changing. Transformation is the intrinsic drive of migration (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 216). They do not connect with each other by representing and communicating their true individual identity and they do not need translations to communicate (ibid.). Mediation is not necessary because migrants organically connect with each other through becoming, through the slow and attentive, sometimes painful, transformation of their existing corporeal constitution (ibid.). They are able to accomplish their wishes by changing their physical features and personal details (ibid.). Through their changes they try to make themselves imperceptible so they can't be distinguished from the rest of the population because "you must be everyone in order to be everywhere" (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 217).

This resonates with what happens in *A Life Apart*, whose protagonist, Ritwik, becomes imperceptible in the vast world of irregular migrants, mixing in ordinary realities and trying to live a "normal" life, blending into the big metropolis.

To control its citizens, the state needs to identify and register them in the territory (Wyss 2022, 136). Remaining undetected, refusing to state one's identity, using the identity of others are all small acts of everyday resistance (ibid.). In the case of migrants facing deportation, for instance, little expedients, such as wearing a certain type of clothing, may be enough to avoid attracting attention and evading the gaze of power (ibid.). However, these acts resistance do not take away from the fact that the unidentified migrant lives in a situation of constant precariousness and with the knowledge that his life can be turned upside down at any moment.

One could argue that obtaining citizenship and the rights attached to it is the event that really empowers and gives migrants the ability to exert agency, but having the right papers does not necessarily correspond to an improvement in the migrants' lives. The next section investigates the concept of citizenship as a form of biopower based on the exclusion and discrimination of certain sections of the population.

1.5. A Failing Citizenship

Often the visibility that obtaining citizenship guarantee does not equate to fair treatment. Even in countries where migrants manage to obtain labour and political rights, they have to contend with the pervasive racism of the host countries and with an egalitarianism that is only real on paper. Modern national sovereignty is indeed "simultaneously, both the organizing agency which grants rights and secures access to symbolic power, as well as its antithesis, a power which systematically nullifies rights and restricts representation" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 8).

Imogen Tyler, in her research on the biopolitics of British citizenship, argues that it is "designed to fail specific groups and populations" (Tyler 2010, 61). Despite the governmental narrative of a cohesive, participatory and inclusive citizenship, the reality is that since the 1980s, English citizenship has been taking away the liberties of a section of the population, concentrating power in the hands of social and political elites (Tyler 2010, 62). In 1981, the Nationality Act was designed with the intention of removing citizenship rights from English nationals in the Commonwealth, i.e. the former colonies. In this way, as Britain was transforming into a neoliberal nation-state, the

Immigration Act creates a biopolitics of categorisation where the category “Commonwealth Citizenship” appears to remove the rights of British nationals in Hong Kong and the colonies to reside in England (ibid.).

In order to be British, one had to trace a line of descent from an ancestor born on the island: in this way, the law linked citizenship to the concept of race and left no room available for the new creation of national identity. This was a remarkable moment in the history of British race relations as “through citizenship, racism was implicitly incorporated within the judicial body of the state becoming an active component part of its operational system of ‘legal justice’” (Tyler 2010, 63). If the nation were to express a relationship with its past, the law suggested, then that past was the past of biology, not history (Baucom 1999, 195).

The act provoked great dissent that culminated in the protests in Brixton, a London borough with a large black community. The demonstrators felt that in creating second-class citizens “a new form of imperial racism was driving the citizenship agenda” (Tyler 2010, 63). The riots can be seen as the expression of a migrant politics claiming individual repositioning within a national community of belonging, which does not have race but being part of the same territory as a prerequisite (Baucom 1999, 196).

To develop her theory, Tyler uses Foucault's concept of racism which is seen as a core feature of population management enacted by biopower. According to Foucault, racism is the means by which the state categorises, separates and opposes peoples because of their origins (Tyler 2010, 63). In the realm of biopower certain races are described as inferior with the aim of creating a division between those who must die and those who must not (Foucault 2003, 254). Racism also has another function that is encapsulated perfectly in the philosopher's words: “the very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more” (Foucault 2003, 255). This is a relationship typical of warfare prior to the realm of biopower, where, in order to live, you must first destroy your enemies (ibid.). In this case, however, the relationship is not one of confrontation, as in traditional wars, but is a biological relationship based on the belief that if you make more inferior races die, you make die individuals who do not adhere to the norm (Foucault 2003, 255). The fewer degenerates there are, the less the risk of the species as a whole being undermined and, consequently, the superior species can live longer and even stronger and more powerful (ibid.). The death of the inferior therefore not only guarantees my safety but also a healthier and purer life (Foucault 2003, 255).

Racism began to develop more capillary in the colonial era where evolutionist justifications were used to justify the killing and subjugation of entire populations and civilisations (Foucault 2003, 257).

In the system of biopolitics, killing means eliminating a biological threat that may hinder the development of the superior species: thus, in the biopower state, racism is more than an adequate excuse to justify the state's murderous policies and strategies (Foucault 2003, 256). In addressing killing, Foucault is not only referring to murder, but to all forms of indirect murder such as deportation, revocation of rights and increasing the risk of death for some peoples (ibid). Denied citizenship deprives some undesirable sections of the population of rights, becoming a mechanism of indirect murder that exposes individuals to exclusionary treatment, such as deportation. Citizenship is in fact always an instrument of exclusion that creates the possibility of inclusion only for certain groups (Papadopoulos, Tsianos 2013, 184). Those who want to remain in a country that excludes them in the hope of creating a better life for themselves must do so by living in a world outside the norm, a world that exists and evolves in all its multifaceted and dynamic realities, regardless of "the proper papers". Mobile populations have strategies to circumvent the sphere of power, thus creating new situations that allow for a new social existence (Papadopoulos, Tsianos 2013, 186). Ritwik in *A Life Apart* voluntarily decides to enter the world of illegality because his "papers" guarantee only a limited amount of time on British soil. When they expire, from one day to the next, Ritwik becomes an unwelcome inhabitant of a place that does not accept him. Despite the difficulties, he manages to find his way in the arduous yet dynamic world of the undocumented, striving to create a decent life and remain true to himself.

It is also a fact that part of the resistance of migrants, like in Ritwik's case, is more individualised than collective, oriented towards short-term change rather than an expectation of systemic structural change: it is a resistance fought in a way that challenges power indirectly rather than directly. If individuals have all their rights and privileges intact, they are unlikely to be willing to themselves in a position of resistance to power, for the fear of possibly losing what they have. The fact that a migrant has already lost all his claims to the state, that he has lost his citizenship or his right to stay in one place, the fact, in short, that he does not have much to lose, puts her/him in a position to resist without the fear of losing what she/he has already lost (Ellermann 2009, 22-23).
On the one hand the "the monitoring, controlling, disciplining, and administering of our lives by apparatuses of power" (Kishik 2012, 101) seems overwhelming, especially for migrants living outside the world of the rights entitled to citizens. On the other, however, migrants are able to "fight these powers by imagining, producing, practicing, and presenting new ways to share […] lives with one another (ibid.).

The stories discussed in this thesis are a glimpse into radical ways of building resistance to power, both collectively and individually, in a way that echoes the various moments and modes of resistance described in this chapter and contrast the vision that power would like to propose about them. They depict a variety of typologies of migrants that abandon the realm of bare life to enter that of agency, however precarious, demonstrating that they can take their lives into their own hands and rebel against a power that tries in every way to crush them. In both of the novels analysed in the next chapters, migrants construct realities that are profound acts of resilience and dignity as to remind us that "no matter how awesome the powers of the state, the law, the sovereign, the government, the police, or the army are, they can contain the explosive power of our forms of life with only limited success" (Kishik 2012, 102).

2. The Hungry Tide

2.1. A Historical Framework

In his books, Amitav Ghosh tells stories of fractured and evolving individual and collective identities. The result is dense narratives where history reflects on the present and the vicissitudes of individuals merge with those of the collective, transporting the reader into worlds that evolve precisely through this continuous exchange between seemingly distant spaces.

In *The Hungry Tide,* the author transports the reader to one of the largest mangrove forest areas in the world: the Sundarbans. This inhospitable area is located in the Bay of Bengal where the rivers Padma, Brahmaputra and Meghna converge. Here, the stories of several characters meet. Piya is an Indian cetologist raised in America and Kanai is a wealthy translator based in New Dehli; they represent the cosmopolitan elite that slowly witnesses the crumbling of its system of values. On the other hand we find Kusum and Fokir, mother and son, poor locals with an intimate knowledge of and connection to the Sundarbans and its territory where "river channels are scattered across the land like a fine-meshed net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always shifting, always unpredictable" (Ghosh 2005, 7). Nirmal, Kanai's uncle and an old left-wing intellectual with revolutionary ambitions but very little practical spirit, is the link between past and present: through his notebook, Kanai and Piya learn the story of one of the most unknown slaughter in India following the Partition, the 1979 Morichjhãpi massacre, where Kusum also lost her life.

In order to understand the situation leading to the events described in the book, it is necessary to discuss the colonial period and the traumatic Partition of India in 1947. Following the Second World War, the British no longer had the capacity to control India: the improvised, chaotic and approximate Partition that took place in 1947 was to cause one of the biggest bloodbaths in history. Establishing a border between India and Pakistan triggered a mass migration for religious reasons because the country was divided between a predominantly Hindu India and a predominantly Muslim Pakistan (comprising West Pakistan and East Pakistan, today Bangladesh). This meant that a huge section of the Indian population lived in areas that were suddenly designated to a different religion. Thus began a mass migration that saw Hindus and Sikhs moving towards India and Muslims towards Pakistan. This movement led to the displacement of 10 to 20 million people and was marked by

widespread violence and massacres, especially on the borders of the regions. Before the Partition, the British reinforced specific measures, such as the formation of a separate electorate for Muslims in 1909, which contributed to the evolution of rigid religious identities and fomented conflict within a population that divided could be better governed. When the colonisers left in haste, they left behind a situation that was inevitably bound to explode; religion became the basis of the Partition and the cause of all the bloodshed (Saxena 2014, 1253).

In *Reflections on Exile,* Said argues that "to have been colonized was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved" (Said 2002, 295). The colonised on the one hand free themselves but on the other remain victims of their past (ibid.). This is because the colonies are a "model of radical exclusion" (Sousa Santos 2007, 53) that prevails today as in the past, governed by mechanisms of appropriation and violence (Sousa Santos 2007, 46) that persist even after independence. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos western thinking is an abyssal thinking (Sousa Santos, 2007, 45) that is based on a visible part and an invisible part, the latter being the basis of the former. The invisible part is made up of neglected experiences, inhabited by individuals without agency and without a fixed territory (Sousa Santos 2007, 48): this is the colonial zone, where the state of nature reigns and institutions do not operate. This state co-exists with civil society but between them stands the abyssal line that places the dominant eye in civil society (Sousa Santos 2007, 50). This concept has strong analogies with Agamben's state of exception, which would seem a fitting framework for an analysis of the colonial and post-colonial literature. The philosopher never mentions colonialism in his work. Postcolonial and anti-colonialist writers and activists often suffer experiences of exclusion and abandonment typical of Homo Sacer; nevertheless, their difficult situations do not prevent them from exercising agency and many of them are part of or recount stories of resistance against the exclusive policies of Europe (Svirsky and Bignall 2012, 3). However, Agamben's methods of analysis offer an important context for thinking critically about the conditions of political and social exclusion typical of colonial situations (ibid.).

Achille Mbembe draws on the figure of the Homo Sacer to describe the situation of particular terror within the colonies whose main characteristic is a "concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege" (Mbembe 2003, 22) and where "the first syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that embodiment of Western rationality" (ibid.) develop. States of exception have defined post-colonies much more than Western nation-states and have often become a means of governing widespread outside the Global North (Spengler 2021, 132). As Mbembe points out: "in modern philosophical thought and European political practice and

imaginary, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law" (Mbembe 2003, 23). It therefore becomes important to consider the colonies as a place where modern biopower continues to act, creating states of exception and producing Homines Sacri (Spengler et al. 2021, 132). In a world "characterised by an intensive and extensive proliferation of borders" (Spengler et al. 2021, 133) migrants have been compelled to pursue new tactics of resistance and attempts at revolt (ibid.). Extending Agamben's conceptual framework can therefore help to better understand the possibility of the development of new forms of agency by those relegated to exclusion zones (ibid.). As Bignall and Svirsky perfectly point out:

> Attending to the struggles waged by colonial peoples in response to imperially orchestrated 'states of exception' makes visible an active subjectivity that can operate as an alternative to the abandoned and hopeless figure of the Muselmann [slang term in Nazi camps to describe prisoners reduced to living corpses], that most extreme embodiment of the form of (de)subjectification defined by Agamben as Homo Sacer (Bignall and Svirsky 2012, 3).

The ways in which biopower continues to act, creating Homines Sacri whose lives are expendable and groups of people who are privileged, is well evident in the historical events following the Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 that led to the secession of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. The first wave of Hindus refugees that sought refuge in West Bengal after 1947, especially in the area of Kolkata, was mainly constituted of the upper caste elite and urban middle classes. The almost total departure of the most privileged section of the population led to an onslaught against the untouchable Hindus who had remained in the territory of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), formed by a predominant majority of Bengali Muslims. A movement of refugees from the lower classes followed and reached its peak after the Bangladesh Liberation War. These refugees did not have the means or connections to be independent from government decisions: most of them belonged to the low Hindu caste of Namasudra, one of the most powerful and politically active movements of untouchables, who, in alliance with the Muslims, kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition since 1920 (Mallick 1999, 105). They had to accept the government's decision to be dispersed to other states, with the excuse that there was not enough land available in West Bengal to accommodate them. By scattering them in different camps outside Bengal, the government succeeded in dramatically undermining the movement, thus reinforcing the traditional Bengali three-caste elite power, composed by Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas (ibid.).

Moreover, this unjust displacement happened while the upper caste refugees obtained legalisation of their colonies and provision of services. Sousa Santos calls this type of relationship contractual fascism: the weaker party, having no other alternatives, is forced to accept the conditions imposed by the stronger party, even if the conditions are inhuman (Sousa Santos 2007, 59).

Ghosh masterfully narrates the story of these refugees in *The Hungry Tide*. The next section analyses the situation of the refugees within the camps, from their protests to their decision to leave the camps and settle in West Bengal. The story chronicled in the book is complemented by further discussions on the history of the refugees – only hinted at or not dealt with in the novel – narrated by various scholars, including Annu Jalais, the anthropologist who accompanied Ghosh in the Sundarbans when he was collecting material for the novel.

2.2. Before the Siege

> *Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited, ones to whom neither the past nor the future belong (Ghosh 2005, 165).*

As a result of the Partition, Bengali Hindus from what had become East Pakistan accessed West Bengal to settle down. Following the 1971 war that gave birth to Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan), there was another surge of refugees trying to enter West Bengal. These people, mainly from the lower Hindu castes, believed they would find sanctuary in the areas of Kolkata, counting on the fact that part of the metropolis itself had been built and occupied by refugees who had arrived in the wake of the bloody events that followed Partition (Mukherjee 2010, 109). They did not find the support they had hoped for and the West Bengal Nationalist Congress decided to accommodate them "to what were effectively prison camps" (ibid.).

The refugees were mainly placed in the arid and inhospitable lands of Dandakaranya where, besides the difficulty in applying their agricultural skills and the terrible conditions they had to endure in the camps, they had to face the hostility of the local people. In the novel, the refugees' plight is described in the words of one of them as she talks to Kusum, the character who "triggers Nirmal's shift in consciousness" (Jaising 2015, 67).

> Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we are tide country people, from the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood […] We couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood (Ghosh 2005, 165).

Kusum decides to leave the mining town where she is and move back with the refugees to the tide country, where she once resided: her sense of belonging is not linked to that town made of iron and rails (Ghosh 2005, 164) but to the mud, to the rivers, to the "storm tossed islands" (ibid.). In the refugees' meeting with Kusum, the land where the camps were located is described as arid and hostile, emphasising the poetic refugees' connection to the tides and water. However it is not only their desire to reconnect with their riverine roots which triggers the refugees' migration on foot, but also the terrible conditions they endured and the abuses the were subjected to while living in the camps. The first person to speak about the condition of the refugees in camps is Nilima, Nirmal's wife and Kanai's aunt. Nilima is a character present in both past and present events. She is a practical, hard-working woman who in a few years founds a Women's Union and the Babadon Trust that offers important services to the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. Nirmal does not recognise the importance of her work as, in order to receive government funds, Nilima often has to make moral compromises. This is how Nilima describes the camps:

> "They called it 'resettlement' […] but people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down" (Ghosh 2005, 118).

When the refugees pass in front of Kusum they are described as "ghosts, covered in dust, strung in a line, shuffling beside the railtracks" (Ghosh 2005, 164). This description is reminiscent of the imagery related to the zombie, a term used by Zaborowski & Georgiou to describe refugees, as it emphasises both massification and dehumanisation (Zaborowski & Georgiou 2019, 95).

> The zombie, whose undead body and unconscious mind display difference, evokes fears that highlight both the presence and the absence of power. The zombie is powerful in that it defies death, spreads infection, and transfers its enslavement to a host, all of which give rise to fears of the Other's agency.

> Simultaneously, the zombie is powerless to rid itself of "zombification," transferring and spreading its affliction without the possibility of redemption (Zaborowski & Georgiou 2019, 96).

The displaced people are often portrayed as a mass of faceless individuals who move slowly on foot, who have no identity and who must be fought or driven away; even more disturbing is the fact that they have characteristics similar to our own. The zombies, like the refugees, must be controlled to prevent them from spreading and infecting, occupying spaces to which they have no entitlement as they are not wholly human.

However, Kusum's attitude is not one of withdrawal but rather of curiosity and genuine care: she decides to help a lady in difficulty to give her food and water, and to her surprise discovers that she also speaks Bangla, her own language: "I listened to them talk and hope blossomed in my heart; these were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones" (Ghosh 2005, 165). Kusum immediately decides to move with them to the tide country, ushering in the beginning of an inclusive and successful community process that would characterise the occupation of Morichjhãpi.

Before embarking on this journey to settle and reclaim the island of Morichjhãpi, the refugees have participated in collective acts of extreme resistance in the camps. Although these events are not chronicled in Ghosh's book, I think it is crucial to narrate them in order to give full visibility to the moments of resistance of individuals who are relegated to zones where any act of resistance seems impossible. Even as they lived dispersed in the camps, the refugees managed to organise themselves in the resettlement colonies. They founded an organisation, the UUS, which sided with the lower administration within the camps to counter the abuses of the higher-ranking officers. They also fought tirelessly for increased rations, the right to work outside the camps and to be consulted before being moved to other camps (Mallick 1999, 106). Their protests culminated in a collective hunger strike that lasted 13 days. As James Jasper says, bodies become central in this form of protest: "bodies provide reasons for action, the means of action, as well as being the site where action occurs" (Jasper 2016, 9). In a situation where refugees are kept in conditions of near-slavery within the camps, their bodies become politicised with this action, no more merely an instrument of work or a bed place occupant (Clark-Hargreaves 2019, 4) but rather an instrument of fight, within a struggle that has no other means but its own naked physicality. In a condition of semi-detention, where refugees are isolated from the rest of their community and therefore have no opportunity to participate in any other group action, the hunger strike remains the only form of collective action

they can take (Waismel-Manor 2014, 288). In a power dynamic where they are invisible, this method of resistance undermines this invisibility: by making themselves visible, refugees expose the dynamics of a power that must remain unseen in order to function at its best. Reduced to bare life, refugees can use the hunger strike to resist the state of exception: in this way, they challenge a mere reduction to biological bodies deprived of everything else by reasserting the subjective political capacity of the participants (Clark-Hargreaves 2019, 17).

Ewa Ziarek claims that hunger strikes "mobilises bare life for emancipatory struggle" (Ziarek 2008, 98). This extreme violence on the body "acts by refusing to act" (Ziarek 2008, 100): while usurping the sovereign power of bare life it mimics the state's violence on bare bodies at the very moment it exposes it (ibid.). At the same time hunger strikes are a calculated choice, the last resort of the army of the dispossessed, claiming the political agency of self-harm and the power of the body as a site of resistance (Ziarek 2008, 101). As Butler points out: "vulnerability can emerge within resistance movements and direct democracy precisely as a deliberate mobilization of bodily exposure" (Butler 2014, 18). The refugee bodies, in all their weakness, mobilize for the unifying purpose of resistance claiming existence and agency through vulnerability (Butler 2014, 17) and opposing a system that thinks it has reduced them to bodies with no capacity to act in any way.

In addition, the hunger strike is such an extraordinary event that it is very easy for it to be covered by the media (Waismel-Manor 2014, 286): there is therefore a chance that the plight of the refugees breaks out of the limits to which they are confined, raising a wave of indignation that will lead the authorities to implement changes. This hunger strike led to a short-term improvement in the lives of migrants, that is, an increase in dole: despite this they were, however, still denied the possibility of resettling in different areas (Mallick 1999, 106).

The sources also report that following a second attempt of uprising inside the camps, policemen started shooting at the refugees. At this point the UUS decided to launch a national movement to occupy the area of the Sundarbans in West Bengal. When some of the refugees began to move, however, they were arrested by the police and their leaders were imprisoned for a year: once they were released, the Left Front, which had always taken the side of the powerless and the poor, had taken power in West Bengal. The Left Front ministers visited the camps and encouraged the refugees to settle in the Sundarbans, assuring them that they would be protected. The refugees, prompted by the party's incentive, sold everything they had and left Dandakaranya's inhospitable lands. However, they soon discovered that the Left Front's policies, once in power, had changed drastically and they could not be provided with a piece of land. Many of the refugees on their way

to the Sundarbans were arrested and returned to the camps, but others managed to escape the police cordons and began to settle in the Sundarbans.

It is difficult to establish one definite factor behind the policy change towards the refugees (Mukherjee 2010, 110). Definitely the Left Front, that so proclaimed to be the advocate of the poor, remained under the influence of the Hindu caste and Bengal's upper-class political elite: “as the Left Front now represented the government, and hence the state, the refugees now became a liability for them and the resettlement issue became a political concern” (Chowdhury 2011, 667). The left opposition knew that it could play on this discontent and take up the complaints of the refugees to enlarge its electoral pool: once in power, however, the refugees were no longer needed. It is also true that various trees that could be profited from had been planted by the government, such as the tamarind and coconut trees, but the refugees were not a threat to those trees; on the contrary, in a short time they enriched the island with potential and value (Mukherjee 2010, 110). As soon as they settle in the Sundarbans, the refugees, “by their own efforts they established a viable fishing industry, salt pans, a health center, and schools over the following year” (Mallick 1999, 107). Despite the government's renewed attempts to deny them any rights and further confine them to a situation of inactive and inoffensive bare life, they responded by opposing authority with the strength of their cooperation, resourcefulness and their determination to live a respectable life. The Left Front deceived them and used them to enhance its own power. It did not, however, foresee the refugees' attempt to forge a reputable and dignified identity for themselves and their reclaiming of land for the marginalised sections of society.

In the book, the development of the organised and dynamic society of Morichjhãpi is described through the incredulous eyes of Nirmal. Nirmal learns about the refugees’ exodus to the island from other professors with whom he is visiting a school on an island nearby. On the way home he is caught in a storm and, together with Horen, the boatman who accompanies him, asks for shelter at a small shack in Morichjhãpi. To his enormous surprise he is welcomed by Kusum, whom Nilima's Women Union took care of when she was a teenager. Nirmal is forced by the storm to stay there for the night. Upon awaking he immediately notices the efficient way in which the refugees have built in the area, using only the material found in the tide countries.

> What had I expected? A mere jumble, perhaps, untidy heaps of people, piled high upon each other? […] but what I saw was quite different from the picture in my mind’s eye. Paths had been laid; the badh – the guarantor of island life- had been augmented: little plots of land had been enclosed

> with fences; fishing nets had been hung up to dry … Such industry! Such diligence! Yet it was only a few weeks since they had come […] suddenly it dawned on me that I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen (Ghosh 2005, 171).

Nirmal realises the bias in his mentality: refugees tend to be seen as this messy mass incapable of creating something so ingenious and well organised. Even more impressive is that everything they build they have done in a situation of mobility and precariousness, challenging the strong societal bias that tends to associate development with conditions of sedentariness and stability (Bakewell 2008, 1342). By working together, the refugees manage to create a functional world that challenges the mentality of the "normal" and stable citizen by simply existing.

While witnessing this wonder of cooperation and efficiency, Nirmal thinks of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a wealthy Scottish businessperson that initially settled the tidal lands. He bought ten thousand acres of land and people came in large numbers to work on it: the only requirement for working there was that all the workers' "petty little divisions and differences" (Ghosh 2005, 51) were left behind: there would be no caste divisions, only a dimension where everyone worked together. To Nirmal, Sir Daniel represents the utopian socialist dreamer as his desire was to build a place "where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening" (Ghosh 2005, 53). Nirmal thus bases his vision on an act of benevolent imperialism, where the action is carried out by the individual, the enlightened coloniser who dismisses the differences found within a culture as "petty" and who forges the destinies of the unfortunate. This humanitarian approach creates an unbalanced relationship where the disadvantaged individuals are dependent on the privileged benefactor to construct something. Nirmal, witnessing the reality in Morichjhãpi, reconsiders his position and admits that what the refugees have created is not "one's man vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real" (Ghosh 2005, 171). Nirmal thus manages to capture the glimmer of a universality that "accommodates rather than obliterates differences" (Mukherjee 2006, 153). He is constantly amazed to see the care with which organisations and institutions are built:

> They have set up their own government and taken a census [...]. The island had been divided in five zones and each family of settlers had been given five acres of land. Yet, they had also recognised […] that their enterprise could not succeed if they didn't have the support of their neighbours on the surrounding islands. With this in mind, they had reserved one quarter of the island for people from other parts of the tide county. Hundreds of families had come flocking in (Ghosh 2005, 172).

Annu Jalais, the anthropologist who accompanied Ghosh in the Sundarbans when he was gathering material for the novel, reported accounts of people living on the islands surrounding Morichjhãpi. The inhabitants often pointed out through their memories how there was a strong sense of brotherhood between the refugees and them and how the refugee leaders became their point of reference: compared to the privileged caste leaders on their islands, the Dalit leaders seemed like perfect representatives of their people and their marginalisation (Jalais 2005, 1759).

> Stories abounded about the spirit of bonhomie and solidarity between refugees and islanders whose similar experiences of marginalisation brought them together to bond over a common cause which was to fight for a niche for themselves; this would become a metaphor for the reclamation of 'voice' in the new West Bengal. The villagers explained the refugees' bid to stay on in Morichjhãpi as a dignified attempt to forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the poorest and most marginalised (ibid.).

The strong bond and efficient cooperation between refugees and islanders finds parallels in Hardt and Negri's description of the concept of multitude. The two philosophers differentiated the concept of people from that of multitude: while the former is a homogeneous group with a shared identity, the latter is not mediated by national identity imposed from the top but by the desire for democracy that is neither centralised nor territorial (Lewis 2007, 690). The contrast between identity and difference, inside and outside, is replaced by the complementary pair of commonality and singularity (Lewis 2007, 690). Protests, uprisings and forms of resistance generally follow two models: in the first there is a strong unity of purpose in the main objective and is characterised by a central leadership, such as the party (Hardt and Negri 2004, 217). The second model, on the other hand, is based on the right of each group to express its differences and to conduct its struggle autonomously: these struggles are generally based on race and gender (Hardt and Negri 2004, 217-218). These two modes pose a "clear choice: either united struggle under the central identity or separate struggles that affirm our differences" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 217).

The multitude gives these concepts new life as it represents an open network where all its nodes are interconnected and can express themselves freely (Hardt and Negri 2004, 218). Nothing is taken away from the singularities of the participants, who are still bound to their local situations and conditions, but at the same time all individualities are immersed in a common network: material co-operation is flanked by various forms of immaterial work that produce non-material goods such as

knowledge, communication, affections (Lewis 2007, 691). “The common is the incarnation, the production and the liberation of the multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 303). The production of social and affective relations and the sharing of knowledge expand the realm of the common, establishing a new realm within and against power (Hardt and Negri 2004, 114). The multitude is characterised by a swarm intelligence, which stands for a collective and equally distributed intelligence within a network of relationships that have no centre: the organisation is not dependent on authority, not decided from above, by normative discipline, but by the immanent desire of the multitude for democracy (Lewis 2007, 691).

Co-operation between refugees and islanders creates a realm of knowledge sharing and empowerment, an organised and co-operative multitude with the tools to make claims. Jalais reported that the islanders shared their knowledge about the place and provide the refugees with the material tools to be a functioning community such as lending them boats and dinghies and helping them trade their fish and crabs. The refugees for their part helped the islanders in the creation of services that were lacking in their islands and provided intellectual tools to carry on their struggles, giving them moral courage to face the ruling class in Kolkata with their concerns (Jalais 2015, 1759).

Refugees and islanders recall the figure of the Homohomo, which was coined by Hardt and Negri as opposed to the Agambian figure of Homo Sacer, the latter representing the negative side of biopower (Lewis 2007, 692). Homohomo, on the other hand, is representative of inventive and constructive power that contrasts with normative and conservative force and is “enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 204). If Agamben therefore uses Homo Sacer with reference to the negative limits of humanity and man's passivity, Hardt and Negri restore agency to bare life, emphasising the power of the productive cooperation of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2000, 366).

The strength, practical sense and intelligence of the community are also manifested when Nirmal offers his help, convinced that he can lend crucial support to the cause: unwittingly he manifests a humanitarian and pietistic outlook in which it is taken for granted that the refugees need help – and they even should be grateful for it. However, the leader of the ward where Kusum lives – the island is divided in two wards – dismisses his offer and its paternalistic implications: unless he has contacts with politicians and the press who can give visibility to the project they are carrying out and mobilise public opinion in their favour, Nirmal is of no assistance to them (Ghosh 2005, 172).

> What's most important to us at this time is to mobilize public opinion, to bring pressure on the government, to get them to leave us alone. They're putting it out that we're destroying this place; they want people to think we're gangsters who've occupied this place by force. We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here. We have to tell the world about all we've done and all we've achieved (Ghosh 2005, 172).

Nirmal is admired at such a firm and practical approach, in stark contrast to his own dreamy and impractical one. He, then, offers to teach the children, to which the leader responds by once again letting a practical spirit prevail: the children have no time to waste, having to help hunt for food with the family (Ghosh 2005, 173). But after thinking about it for a moment, his tones change and he opens up to cooperation and, above all, to a far-sighted vision that emphasises the ability not to impose one's own thinking but to let the community follow its aspirations and desires, developing not only collectively but also individually: "if you can find pupils who're willing, then why should I prevent you? It's up to you: teach all you want" (Ghosh 2005, 173).

Nirmal thus embarks on a journey where he is drawn into the vivid oral culture of refugees, made up of songs, stories, ancient beliefs and myths. Confronting new perspectives on the world and casting aside his pre-existing beliefs, he starts moving away from his rationalist perspective of progress, and embraces a new, more empathetic and inclusive view of reality, restoring dignity to the knowledge and agency of the refugees. An important moment when this change begins to manifest in Nirmal is when he decides to read Horen, the poor boatman that always accompanies him around, a story from his copy of Francois Bernier's Travels, one of the first records of the encounter between a European and the Bay of Bengal. Nirmal's attitude sounds paternalistic, as of a person who is more knowledgeable and wants to enlighten the more uneducated individual about the history of places, read through the eyes of a European. Horen, however, continually interrupts him, interweaving his stories into Nirmal's narrative.

> "Oh!" cried Horen. "I know where this happened: they must have been at Gerafitola."
> "Rubbish, Horen" I said. "How could you know such a thing? This happened over three hundred years ago."
> "But I've seen it too," Horen protested, "and it's exactly as you describe – a creek, just off a big river. That's the only place where you can see the moon's rainbow – it happens when there's a full moon and a fog (Ghosh 2005, 146).

Nirmal, initially sceptical and irritated at the constant interruptions, begins to perceive that Horen's knowledge is different but as valuable as or more than his own: it is simply based on other modes of cultural transmission and on a different, intimate and communal feeling that establishes a continuum between time and space (Mukherjee 2006, 153).

Nirmal becomes extremely involved in the world of Morichjhãpi, to the point of deciding to stick with the refugees during the eviction process that leads to one of the least narrated massacres in history. The next section analyses the refugees' resistance to the brutal eviction led by the authorities.

2.3. The Siege

> *Some mute animal, raising its calm eyes and seeing through us, and through us (Ghosh 2005, 235).*

Nirmal, an "outsider amongst outsiders" (Pilia 2020, 119), becomes a witness and participant in the events that lead to one of the least narrated massacres in history, that reaches its most dramatic peak in January 1979. Through the decision to record the story of the massacre in a diary, he fulfils the mission that the leader would have liked to propose to him: to be a messenger, capable of reaching out to the world outside Morichjhãpi in order to tell the true story of the massacre.

In order to drive the refugees out of there, the government takes advantage of the Tiger Project, a plan launched by Indira Ghandi to protect the endangered Bengal tiger by creating wildlife reserves where humans could not establish themselves (Jones 2018, 639). Morichjhãpi is declared part of these reserves and thus the refugees have to be evacuated as they are violating the Forest Act. Sources report that the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) sponsored the Tiger Project and promoted fundraising especially in Europe: westerners were praised for raising funds while it was the settled peoples of the Sundarbans who paid the heaviest price. The WWF began to portray the occupying peoples as "environmentally unfriendly" (Biswas and Channarayapatna 2022, 169) and as direct threats to the survival of wildlife. In this way, eviction was justified and the rich founding elites could continue to believe that they were acting in the most correct and sensitive way, for the benefit of

nature, which had to be rescued from the onslaught of populations that did not know how to care for it.

In environmentalist literature, poor or indigenous peoples are often portrayed as allies of the environmentalist cause, an allied force in opposing megaprojects (Mallick 1999, 118). They are, however, often depicted as such if they are useful within hegemonic power strategies; the environmental consciousness of the indigenous people is generally not authentic, but the result of a technical obligation necessitated by their poverty (Mallick 1999, 118). When populations do not fit into this normative definition of allies of power for the environment, they are no longer valued and their lives become expendable for the greater good.

The WWF escaped any association with the eviction but found itself subject to international attention when it supported the Kenyan and Zimbabwean authorities in acquiring helicopters and weapons to help the police evict poachers. These types of actions would certainly not be accepted in Western society, but the fact that they are perpetrated in the developing world seems to make them acceptable (Mallick 1999, 117). The fact that violence is perpetrated in faraway places where there is no public attention and little opportunity to find news makes sure that Western elites maintain the image of magnanimous benefactors, and that their humanitarian endeavours are lauded by the general public. Violence in liberal settings seems to operate through its concealment or legalisation: in order to see themselves as just and benevolent, liberal societies must somehow conceal, displaced or make violence seem just (Isakjee et al. 2020, 1755).

Structural and cultural violence are the basis of acts of violence as such; they are the processes through which violence is sustained and violence can only be sustained if it can be hidden, displaced or denied (Isakjee et al. 2020, 1755). The phenomenon of violence can be compared to an iceberg, as the visible part is much smaller than the invisible part (Rodriguez et al. 2014, 360). Galtung proposes a concept of a triangle of violence where direct, cultural and structural violence are related: if direct violence is visible and corresponds to the physical act, cultural and structural violence are not as visible but are the foreshadowing of direct violence (Galtung 1969, 173). Structural violence is not carried out by single individuals but by structures that do not help or prohibit access to the specific needs to a group or population: resources therefore are much more accessible to a certain group than to others (Galtung 1969, 171). Cultural violence, on the other hand, is the framework that legitimises the perpetration of structural and direct violence and "shows itself in attitudes" (Rodríguez et al. 2014, 360). The WWF and the state, before resorting to outright violence, appeal to cultural violence by portraying refugees as inferior individuals who do

not have the ability to care for the environment and indeed pose a threat to nature and its inhabitants. This creates a perfect framework within which to perpetrate structural and direct violence without being accused of being evil or unjust: if the refugees cause harm to the environment, magnanimous Europe and the state will work together to ensure that they are halted; the means by which the agenda is carried out become secondary.

Western development affects the weaker sections of society the hardest, maintaining its connection to colonialism and violating the human rights of those who always remain outside the centralised governmental machine (Huggan and Tiffin 2009, 52). In this relationship, those who are totally outside the system of power are at the same time at the mercy of it, steeped in it. Arundhati Roy offers a poignant reflection on the concept of human rights, which are so frequently invoked when talking about the most impoverished sections of society:

> The assault on vulnerable, fragile sections of society is at once so complete, so cruel and so clever – all encompassing and yet specifically targeted, blatantly brutal and yet unbelievably insidious – that its sheer audacity has eroded our definition of justice. It has forced us to lower our sights, and curtail our expectations. Even among the well-intentioned, the expansive, magnificent concept of justice is gradually being substituted with the reduced, far more fragile discourse of 'human rights' (Roy 2004, 2).

The WWF, as well as all bearers of Western development, begin to associate justice as something concerning the rich, while human rights are concerned purely with the poor (Roy 2004, 2): "justice for the Indian upper castes, human rights for Dalits and Adivasis (*if that*)" (ibid.).

> It is becoming more than clear that violating human rights is an inherent and necessary part of the process of implementing a coercive and unjust political and economic structure on the world. Without the violation of human rights on an enormous scale, the neo-liberal project would remain in the dreamy realm of policy. But increasingly human rights violations are being portrayed as the unfortunate, almost accidental fallout of an otherwise acceptable political and economic system (Roy 2004, 2).

According to this logic, it is unfortunate that refugees have to pay, but necessary to advance a legitimate goal driven by and benefiting only the elites. Western development is contrasted with

the non-development of refugees, unable to develop as inferior: the truth, however, is that "underdevelopment is not an original condition of backwardness but an inflicted condition" (Nixon 2011, 165).

The WWF acts by reproducing a distinctively colonial thinking in which refugees are seen as savages: since they are not organised like states they have not created a human world but a world where disorder and brutality reign and where the violence of the state is justified as the bearer of civilisation (Mbembe 2003, 24). The savage for the conqueror is simply another form of animal life, something alien that eludes human understanding (ibid.). In the case of Morichjhãpi's refugees, this concept is taken to the extreme in that their condition is considered to be far inferior to that of the animals themselves in whose defence they can be sacrificed. This view is presented in all its tragedy when Kusum, once the siege has already begun, talks to Nirmal about the treatment they are enduring, exposing all the injustice and inhumanity they are suffering. The unnatural and brutal behaviour of the state is based on the separation between what is considered to be human and what is not. Invoking the children, mothers and fathers of the invaders, Kusum appeals to a sense of commonality and empathy and claims the point of view of men who have always lived in contact with the land and nature, indirectly suggesting that those who do not respect and crush this authentic way of livelihood are the true beasts.

> The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its tree, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seems to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live like human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil (Gosh 2005, 261-262).

According to Hannah Arendt, the reason why the savages were so different from humans was not so much the colour of their skin, but the fact that because they had not created a truly human

reality, they belonged to the chaotic world of nature; they were "human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them somehow they were not aware that they had committed murder" (Arendt 1962, 192).

Refugees are portrayed as barbarians, animalistic brutes incapable of benefiting nature but only of destroying it: this projects the idea that it is almost right to sacrifice them for the sake of the environment and the animal world and nature are the ones that really deserve protection. The truth, however, is that animals and nature are here only used as an excuse to legitimise the massacre. Our society acts on the basis of an instrumental point of view that assumes that men are the only actors in a world they control (Berkman 2020, 329). Animals are the background for a purely human drama and therefore are instrumentalised: they can be used and manipulated for any human purpose (ibid.). Modern man approaches nature with a scientific eye, making it a manipulable object, adopting a gaze that Foucault calls clinical: this gaze governs, decides, and is therefore typical of those in positions of power (Foucault 2003, 89). The Bengal tiger is used as an excuse to hunt refugees, who in turn are regarded as animals, "tiger food" (Jalais 2005, 1757) and used as pawns of no value in the schemes of power designed to annihilate them.

Nilima, who somehow represents the voice of the enlightened and concrete elite and who claims to have nothing against refugees, but is also not affected by their fate, refers to them as "squatters" and "land-grabbers" (Ghosh 2005, 190), an assailant language that reflects the hegemonic view of the refugees as encroachers and indirectly justifies the government's plans to evict them. The WWF, the Indian state, and ordinary people themselves, such as Nilima, all contribute to the creation of the image of refugees as "undeserving others" (Wyss 2022, 54). The production of such types of individuals is to be understood in the tradition of colonial othering, which created racialized images of non-Europeans and then used them to legitimise the inequalities of power (ibid.). Deservingness is indeed "a core and long-used tool of governmentality" (Patel 2015, 11). Refugees are portrayed as not deserving to be there, as savages who do not care about the environment, mere squatters who have wrongfully and aggressively appropriated a territory that was not theirs to claim. In reality, refugees simply demand to have a piece of wet land: "they just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end" (Ghosh 2005, 119). As Frantz Fanon points out, "for a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 1963, 44). Rob Nixon argues that Dalits have always "been treated as expendable because they're widely viewed as culturally contemptible and marginal

to the core Hindu nationalist parameters of Indian civilization" (Nixon 2011, 164). The refugees can be displaced as they represent a "cultural backwater" (ibid.) and not the "national mainstream" (ibid.) that promotes an effective development.

As much as fighting against such a pervasive machinery of power that employs means that the refugees do not possess appears to be a losing enterprise, they use the very few resources at their disposal to attempt to project an image of themselves outside Morichjhãpi that does not correspond to the inhumane one dictated by State propaganda. They organise a feast to show a different image of themselves and to tell journalists, intellectuals and writers what they are doing on the island. Their best defence is to "enlist the support of public opinion" (Ghosh 2005, 189) and show the media their reality. The situation before Nirmal's eyes exceeds all expectations and all his enthusiasm, astonishment and admiration for the titanic work accomplished by a community of very poor people in such a hostile area shines through in this passage:

> There was much to show – even in the short while I had been away, there had been many additions, many improvements. Saltpans have been created, tubewells have been planted, water had been dammed for the farming of fish, a bakery had started up, boat-builders had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith's shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crablines; little maketplaces, where all kinds of goods were being sold, had sprung up. All this in the space of a few months! It was an astonishing spectacle – as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud (Ghosh 2005, 191).

Most impressive is the delicious food the refugees serve their guests, and Nirmal, knowing how hungry the settlers are, wonders how they could have arranged such a "show of plenty" (Ghosh 2005, 191). Everything served comes from the rivers, all the settlers have been fishing together for a day, including the children; what better way to win the hearts of the townsfolk than by serving them fresh fish? (Ghosh 2005, 191). The refugees not only show that they know how to organise within their community, but that they are also capable of using democratic mechanisms and processes such as the press and negotiating tactics to help their mobilisation (Singh 2011, 247). Moreover, through such a bounteous banquet, they show all their generous humanity and desire for redemption. The guests are so impressed that it is agreed that:

> The significance of Morichjhãpi extended far beyond the island itself. Was it possible that in had Morichjhãpi been planted the seeds of what might become, if not a Dalit nation, than at least a safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed? (Ghosh 2005, 191).

Ghosh seems to suggest that this emergence of a Dalit nation was assuming a dimension too far-reaching to be ignored and that its impact was likely to go beyond the confines of Morichjhãpi, thus becoming a problem for the very integrity of the Indian state (Singh 2011, 245).

The refugees know that they are still considered a big threat to power and they are aware that they need help. Kusum goes to talk to Nilima to ask for practical help in building medicals facilities, again demonstrating the refugees' strong practical sense, and yet Nilima denies her help. When Nirmal asks her why she refuses, she appeals to the logic of the State arguing that refugees are squatters and have no right to take what is not theirs. Nirmal retorts that Sir Daniel Hamilton had done the same but, for him, Nilima feels admiration: are then "the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich shaheb and they were impoverished refugees?" (Ghosh 2005, 213). Nirmal unmasks the logic of Nilima, showing how she is endorsing a power that creates imaginary emergency situations in order to justify its brutality.

> "But Nirmal [...] imagine what would become of this whole area if everybody started doing the same thing today. The whole forest would disappear"
> "Look, Nilima […] That island, Morichjhãpi, wasn't really forest, even before the settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government, for plantations and so on. What's been said about the danger to the environment is just a sham, in order to evict these people, who have nowhere else to go (Ghosh 2005, 213-214).

Despite the success of the banquet and the support of many activists, writers and journalists, the refugees find themselves isolated not only by all parties but also by central government institutions such as the commission of schedules castes and tribes that should have taken sides but, instead, ignores the problem (Mallick 1999, 110). More and more pressure is put on the refugees to leave but they do not consent to move. Then the threats begin where "no one knew what was going to happen next" (Ghosh 2005, 223). This state of insecurity is detrimental. The violence that characterises this condition does not manifest in blatant actions but it is inflicted over a prolonged period in which refugees experience a limbo-like condition, an uncertainty that precludes stability

and immobilises, preventing the making of any plans for the future and creating a climate of tension and fear (Wyss 2022, 161).

Over the course of months, the government begins the siege: it surrounds the territory with predominantly Muslim gangs, so that the possibility of expressions of empathy towards the refugees is drastically reduced (Mallick 1999, 110). It then begins to sink the boats that brought food to the refugees and teargas the population and there are reports of numerous arbitrary killings. A settler manages to escape the police cordon and reaches Kolkata where he warns the press of what is happening in the deafening silence of the whole world; following this incredible gesture of resistance, popular opinion is outraged, countless petitions are signed and the High Court rules that it was not legal to barricade the occupiers and that the siege had to stop: “the settlers, it seems, had won a notable victory” (Ghosh 2005, 260).

Nevertheless, the siege leaves a terrible legacy behind it: many refugees starve to death and various epidemics spread. Kusum is described by Nirmal as having “her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat” (Ghosh 2005, 261). Furthermore, the siege continues despite the order of the High Court: on 27 January 1979, the government bans all movement in and out of Morichjhãpi, using the Forest Act as an excuse and completely sealing off the area; it also enacts Section 144 of the Criminal Criminal Code, which made it illegal for more than five people to be together at any one time. The killings, rapes and abuses continue.

Butler questions the violence that is exerted on groups of people considered unreal: the lives of refugees count for nothing within governmental regulatory apparatuses, they have no citizenship, they are not admitted into the spaces occupied by real lives, by citizens. They are lives already denied, non-existent lives that violence cannot further diminish.

> If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the "Other" means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral (Butler 2004, 33-34).

Although by now reduced to spectres by abuse and lack of food, the refugees continue to stay and reclaim their land. An incredible act of resistance is witnessed by Nirmal when he tries to return to Morichjhãpi with a group of schoolmasters. Arriving by water near a village, they notice a boat being loaded with people and provisions. For Nirmal, they are almost certainly people trying to reunite with their families and comrades in Morichjhãpi, willing to cram many of them into a fragile little boat, filled not only with people but also with many provisions "to bring relief to their fellow islanders"(Ghosh 2005, 253). The feeling of resistance and solidarity that bonds the refugees is encapsulated in this image of an unstable little boat, laden with human and practical aid that defies the tides and armed police, in a challenge lost at the start but which must be undertaken. They are spotted by the police, whose speedboat surrounds them and starts circling the islanders' boat, ordering them to turn back and shooting in the air. But the settlers refuse to turn back and start shouting in unison: "Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed" (Ghosh 2005, 254). The words resonate in Nirmal's soul.

> It seemed at that moment, not to be a shout of defiance, but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who indeed are we? Where do we belong? […] Morichjhãpi chharbona. We'll not leave Morichjhãpi, do what you may' (Ghosh 2005, 254).

Nirmal is "struck by the beauty of this" and he wonders "where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave" (ibid.). He feels so connected and supportive that he joins "his feeble voice" to the one of the refugees.

The police then hit the boat at full speed in the middle, wrecking it and causing all the people to fall into the hostile water of the river. The police and the gangsters are here the means the government uses to exert its will: the law is no longer produced by a legislative body but is self-produced in a context of extra-legality. According to Erlenbusch "both governmentality and sovereignty are in the last instance extra-legal; the former because of its use of law as tactics, the latter because of its being ungrounded in law" (Erlenbusch 2013, 55). Power delegates sovereignty to external bodies such as the police who can exercise their power arbitrarily, resorting to the most brutal techniques: in fact, their actions are not subject to the control of any higher judicial authority (Butler 2004, 62). As Butler states, in a clear reference to Agamben:

> The state reveals its extra-legal status when it designates a state of exception to the rule of law and thereby withdraws the law selectively from its application. The result is a production of a paralegal universe that goes by the name of law (Butler 2004, 61).

While being aware of the rampant use of illegal means during eviction and the inability to beat them, the refugees and islanders defy power with the only things they have left, their bodies in all their vulnerability and their strong fraternal bond. Hearing the dignified proclamation of their status as dispossessed and outcasts, Nirmal feels as if the deepest "uncertainties of his heart" (Ghosh 2005, 254) were spoken to the rivers and tides: "Who was I? Where did I belong? In Calcutta or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?" (ibid.). Empathy and solidarity leave no ground for fear, only a strong sense of community.

Fear, always normalised and operational in power strategies towards migrants, creates a thick barrier between what we are and what we are not: refugees and migrants represent this "other" that legal citizens reject for fear that the outsider might threaten the character of a nation or the welfare of a state's population. Even in humanitarian and supposedly open-minded discourses rights and citizenship are never questioned and there are no real practical movements to make the political community more inclusive. It also seems that by continuing to name refugees and migrants, they are always associated with a fixed category with immutable characteristics: identity categories in fact "are never merely descriptive, but always narrative and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1992, 16). While society remains entangled in categorisations imposed by the power machinery, it forgets that the disturbing and frightening Other is only "on the other side of the border" (Young 1990, 144). Nirmal realises this in the moment that the questions and claims of the refugees resonate in him as if they were his own, despite their objectively different situations. Seeing himself as them prompts him to act for them and with them, taking sides and helping them to deal with the situation. Ghosh is suggesting that in order to unite and share the struggles and resistance of migrants, one must first be able to activate an empathy that is not promoted by normative discourses: "Who indeed are we, where do we belong?" (Ghosh 2005, 254). Sharing and being present and empathetic to the struggle of the dispossessed is the key to breaking down the wall between us and the other, a wall that remains high if all political discourses, humanitarian and not, continue to promote a distorted view of migration realities through pietistic or fearful outlooks.

The refugees stand their vulnerable bodies against power knowing that they do not have the adequate weapons to defeat it, but with this courageous bodily proximity, they seem to

communicate that they are on the same level as the police and are not afraid. Their stance resonates with Frantz Fanon's description of the colonised claiming their humanity.

> The native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. All the new, revolutionary assurance of the native stems from it. For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone (Fanon 1963, 45).

2.4. After the Siege, Building a New Humanity

> ***This*** *is the time for what can be said.*
> ***Here*** *is its country. Speak and testify.*
> *(Ghosh 2005, 282, Emphasis in the original)*

Kanai and Piya, the characters representing the cosmopolitan elites, complete a cycle started by Nirmal and the refugees. *The Hungry Tide* not only succeeds in bringing to life a story of resistance but also provides a reflection on how to incorporate the experience of the refugees and the most disadvantaged sections of society within the hegemonic discourse in order for a relevant shift in dominant discourse to occur. While it is true that the relationship between the refugees and the characters who live in the novel's present is not direct, it is nevertheless manifest in consequential ways. The refugees' story in Nirmal's diary passes to Kanai, proving crucial to the change of perspective within him. However the character who unites past and present and undermines the beliefs of both Piya and Kanai, making possible an interpenetration between indigenous knowledge and that of the elites, is Fokir, Kusum's son, who survives the massacre because Kusum rescued him by entrusting him to Horen.

Indigenous knowledge and the point of view of the refugees and those marginalised in society find embodiment in Fokir. It is largely because of him that Piya and Kanai understand how it is necessary to change one's viewpoint and question one's own system of beliefs in order to grasp reality more deeply and embrace the dignity and agency of those who are considered to be lesser. Both of them initially cling to their liberal and progressive views only to find themselves having to question everything. They represent "the archetypal 'new elite' – their cultural status secured by

access to the global archipelagos of wealth" (Mukherjee 2010, 116). Despite their easy access to the most advanced resources, however, they have to rely on indigenous knowledge to navigate and survive the Sundarbans. The words the refugees say to Kusum before she leaves everything to follow them to Morichjhãpi, "rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood", find their embodiment in Fokir, her son. It is in fact Fokir, with his intimate knowledge of the territory, who makes Piya and Kanai challenge the limits of their own vision and trigger the characters' evolution process. From the start, the western technological eye, the clinical gaze, is challenged by the indigenous vision. Despite possessing advanced technology, Piya, without Fokir's knowledge of the waters and animal movements, is trapped in a world she cannot decipher. Without him, she is incapable of finding the objectives of her research, the river dolphins. Kanai, for his part, is indifferent towards Fokir, with an attitude that tends to belittle him rather than acknowledge his value and knowledge. As they discuss Monya, Fokir's wife, Kanai tells Piya how difficult it must be for Monya to be with someone like Fokir: Monya – and Nilima – represent a normalcy and sense of stability that Fokir somehow violates, being in communion only with the becoming of the river and nature (Das 2006, 181).

> "If you consider her circumstances –her caste, her upbringing- it is very remarkable that she's had the forethought to figure out how to get by in today's world. And it isn't just that she wants to get by – she wants to do well; she wants to make a success of her life"
> Piya nodded […] She understood now that for Kanai there was a certain reassurance in meeting a woman like Monya, in such a place like Lusibari: it was as if her very existence were a validation of the choices he had made in his own life. It was important for him to believe that his values were, at bottom, egalitarian, liberal, democratic. It reassured him to be able to think, "What I want for myself is no different from what everybody wants, no matter how rich or poor; everyone who has any drive, any energy, wants to get on in the world – Monya is the proof" (Ghosh 2005, 219-220).

This view perfectly mirrors that of the elite, which takes its value system as superior but does not admit it, thinking that if its values are also shared by non-privileged positions, they must therefore objectively be the "right", normal values. As Lorey argues, "in biopolitical governmental societies, the constitution of the "normal" is always also woven in with the hegemonic. Normality is […] never anything external, for we are the ones who guarantee it" (Lorey 2006, 4). However, the normalised subject is a historical construct dictated by power and its normality is experienced through everyday practices that are considered obvious and unquestionably authentic (ibid.). In this perspective, where a value system is being downgraded as non-conforming to normality, Fokir becomes for Kanai

“a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari” (Ghosh 2005, 220).

Piya's vision also reveals itself entangled in the biases of Western society. When Fokir enthusiastically participates in the capture and killing of a tiger Piya “must accept that nature means very different things to her and Fokir, and this difference is the very different types of capital and labour that they command” (Mukherjee 2010, 118). Piya remains anchored in an idealistic, Euro-centric notion of progress (Mukherjee 2010, 119) that fails to empathise with the villagers' perspective.

> “But what did you expect Piya?” Kanai said. “Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He’s not. He’s a fisherman, he kills animals for living”
> “I understand that” said Piya. “I’m not blaming him; I know this is what he grew up with. It’s just, I thought somehow he’d be different” (Ghosh 2005, 297).

Piya believes Fokir is part of “the horror” (Ghosh 2005, 300) she witnessed. When Kanai contradicts her by pointing out that they are also themselves, – “you and me and people like us” – (ibid.) part of the horror, Piya does not believe her ears, demonstrating the short-sightedness of someone who has always considered her system of values to be the right one.

> “That tiger had killed two people, Piya,” Kanai said. “And that was just in one village. It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it but we choose not to see it. Isn’t that a horror too – that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? […] We are complicit in this Piya […]”
> Piya dissociated herself with a shake of the head “I don’t see how I’m complicit”.
> “Because it was people like you who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me - Indians of my class, that is, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their western patrons. It’s not hard to ignore the people who’re dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor. But just ask yourself whether this would be allowed to happen anywhere else? (Ghosh 2005, 300-301)

Piya's reaction shows that she does not understand the relationship between the villagers and the tiger, and she does not understand Fokir when he states that “when a tiger comes into a

human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (Ghosh 2005, 295). Fokir's explanation is the beginning of Piya's encounter with a different perspective on the post-colonial environment: "in order to try and comprehend this other perspective the elites must first unlearn paradigmatic notions of history, environment and culture" (Mukherjee 2010, 119).

Kanai, too, faces episodes that challenge his worldview, causing him to step into the position of the Other and forcing him to acknowledge his limits. When Fokir leads him into the middle of the dense mangrove maze Kanai immediately notices that Fokir is addressing him differently: "from the respectful *apni* […] he had now switched to the same familiar *tui* Kanai had used in addressing him […] it was as though in stepping onto the island, the authority of their position has been reversed."(Ghosh 2005, 323). This "uncharted terrain" (Ghosh 2005, 353) forces him to face a self in which he was previously unrecognised. When Kanai falls and is entangled in mud, he starts shouting abuses at Fokir, who leaves him at the mercy of the hostile nature. As Kanai looks at Fokir:

> It was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he were seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir s village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal. Inseeing himself in this way, it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him to be dead […] Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged (Ghosh 2005, 327).

Kanai suddenly re-imagines himself as he appears in the eyes of the subaltern (Mukherjee 2010, 117) and perceives himself as the symbol of a particular kind of humanity, a colonising humanity that abuses and oppresses humans, animals and the earth and that prospers on dispossessing others (Nayar 2010, 108). Being judged by the gaze of an underling as part of a group of individuals who use their privileged status to kill and who consider people like Fokir as being worthless, "is what seals Kanai's re-education" (Mukherjee 2006, 155): the moment he admits to be subject to the subaltern gaze(s) he is also giving up "the claims to metropolitan power relations" (Mukherjee 2006, 155). In that moment of awareness, Kanai has the vision of an enormous tiger, "watching him with its tawny, flickering eyes" (Ghosh 2005, 329). The encounter with the ultimate othering in a magical dimension materialises, as if the animal also brings him into its world, crowning the union of opposites. Nature, the indigenous, manifest themselves and guide him on his path to new understandings.

If much of what the natives say to the elites is mistranslated or not understood, they are never dismissed as the novel refuses "to force transparency onto them" (Mukherjee 2006, 117). Very similarly to Nirmal's experience, Kanai begins to recognise and validate the experience of the outsiders when he comes into contact with their rich oral tradition. When Fokir sings a song, Kanai cannot translate it well because it is too difficult: its difficulty lies in containing not only his story but also that of the tide country (Ghosh 2005, 354). Kanai realises that Fokir's song represents a different form of knowledge and aesthetics that encapsulates powerful points of view. In translating it with all its imperfections and admitting his difficulties Kanai makes a gesture of respect towards the cultural and historical integrity of the provincial and often forgotten or abused local (Mukherjee 2010, 130). Not all of Fokir's folk world can be translated by the “translational imperative of the elite” (ibid.).

> Such flaws as there are in my rendition of it I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible (Ghosh 2005, 354).

Opening up to a new inclusive perspective, he abandons the hierarchies that bind him to a divisive worldview and, like Nirmal, understands that everything is interconnected, “the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature” (Ghosh 2005, 282-83).

When Fokir and Piya are caught in a cyclone that blows away many of the islands, all of Piya's gadgets are swept away: “India's postcolonial modernization project which inherits modes of documentation and knowledge-gathering from a European modernity is literally erased by the waters of the Sundarbans” (Nayar 2010, 109). Piya and Fokir tie themselves to a tree to escape the same end. No technological means can help Piya in the storm, it is Fokir who rescues her. While this seems to suggest that in the end the native is destined to be saved by the colonial master or the new Indian elites, it actually demonstrates a triumph of indigenous knowledge and expertise (Nayar 2010, 112). During the storm as Fokir's body shields Piya's, a fusion between the two takes place:

> Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him [...] it was as the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one (Ghosh 2005, 390).

Piya is ready to welcome Fokir into her and transform him into an invaluable resource for the future of her project. She writes a report on her dolphin sightings in the Sundarbans and receives offers of funding from environmental and conservation groups (Ghosh 2005, 397). She decides to move in with Nilima and carry on her project in the Sundarbans. Fokir's data are crucial for Piya's new project as in her monitor, the only instrument that survived the storm, there are all the routes that Fokir showed her: only the route he showed her on the day of the storm contains “decades of work and volumes of knowledge” (Ghosh 2005, 398). Crucially, all of Piya's technological means are destroyed by the power of nature, and the only thing that survives is indigenous knowledge, trapped in the monitor. She is freed from her view for good and prepared to embrace a new one.

Piya's project aims at involving the knowledge of local fishermen as she doesn’t want to do “the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it” (Ghosh 2005, 397). Thanks to Fokir's ghostly presence within the elite technological world, Piya manages to make the Sundarbans home; “in the middle of death she stumbles into life" (Mukherjee 2010, 132). Like the refugees, Piya finds a “sense of place” (ibid.) in a land that is not hers but which she manages to make home by connecting with the nature of the place and its inhabitants. The basis of community functioning in Morichjhãpi is solidarity and cooperation between refugees and islanders just as the basis of Piya's project is cooperation and sharing skills with the locals. The exclusive and destructive vision that has swept away the Morichjhãpi community is replaced by an inclusive vision that welcomes indigenous knowledge as a resource to learn from and have an ongoing exchange with. A brute power that isolates and annihilates is contrasted by the power of mutual support and unity, showing that it is possible to build a dimension of belonging even in the most challenging situation. Thanks to their knowledge of tide country, the refugees made home a hostile place and struggled to have a decent life. Only by opening up to the indigenous world, integrating it in her rational and hi-tech one, does she succeed in making the harsh territory of the Sundarbans home. All the undervalued indigenous knowledge passes from the refugees to Fokir and from Fokir to the seemingly distant world of the cosmopolitan elite, establishing a continuum between the history of the refugees and the present and highlighting the connectedness of the various worldviews, each equally valid.

Kanai decides to write “the story of Nirmal's notebook” (Ghosh 2005, 399) that "would give Morichjhãpi to the world" (Nayar 2010, 113), tracing the path of his uncle who had wanted the story of the refugees to come out of the confines of silence with his diary.

As Rilke's quotations from Nirmal's notebook evolve throughout the book, so do the characters. They learn to inhabit and experience the land through the agency of the poor, by embracing and respecting their vision. The agency and struggles of refugees and marginalised sections of society may seem like "minuscule forms of resistance" (Spengler 2021, 133) with "little potential to change global macrostructures. Yet the grounds of the everyday are precisely where new forms of resistance, belonging and solidarity might be able to take root, and from where they might grow into more large-scale effect" (Spengler 2021, 133). *The Hungry Tide* gives voice to the marginalised and turns them into boatmen who accompany the main characters to a human dimension that embraces the unknown rather than rejecting it, that seeks to understand it rather than silence it. As Mukherjee puts it: "it is only when we can learn to accept the refugee's claim to belong that we can also see ourselves as belonging to an environment and not standing on some imagined ground outside it" (Mukherjee, 2010 132).

3. *A Life Apart*

3.1. The Papers

Imprisoned for life but with infinite freedom
(Mukherjee 2011, 257).

A Life Apart is a journey into the world of illegal migration as witnessed and experienced through Ritwik, an Indian migrant in England. Unwilling to return to his city of origin, Calcutta, Ritwik decides to overstay his student visa in Oxford and continue working as an undocumented migrant in London. This chapter examines his way of navigating the illegal world, from his decision to enter such a precarious state, to the role his body and relationships with others play in his path.

Neel Mukherjee states in an interview:

> The story of exile and alienation has been told so often, and abased, particularly in that dreaded subgenre, 'the immigrant/diaspora novel' […], that I felt a reinvention or a renewal was necessary if it was to be pressed into the service of truth-telling. One way to do this was to strip the story of migration of clichés and sentimentality and all the bad habits it has fallen into and to try and think it anew (Mukherjee, Mirza 2012).

The theme of migration in *A Life Apart* is approached in an original way: whereas the immigrant novels generally focused either on the study immigrant or the economically exploited migrant (Beretta 2017, 32), *A Life Apart* tells the story of a voluntary passage from the former privileged condition to the latter.

Most of the novels about migrants tends to be optimistic, depicting stories of redemption, marked by a strong feeling of nostalgia for the land of origin and by characters who have to seek stability between personal desires and the expectations of community and family; in this novel, on the other hand, there are no mirages of integration or redemption, indeed the sense of non-belonging lingers throughout the book (Beretta 2017, 33). Ritwik is an outsider who does not integrate into the English world but all his choices are conscious and dictated by the desire to have

a better life, however materially impoverished, far away from Calcutta. His hometown is described as:

> A place that had leaped out of the pages of Dante and been transposed east […]Then there was the business of avoiding the bloated, floating carcasses of dogs and cows […] The daily rubbish of human living which elsewhere got thrown in bins[…] Dead rats, rancid food[…] and disease, DISEASE, DISEASE…(Mukherjee 2011, 40).

While the diaspora novel generally speaks of either the skilled migrant or the economic subaltern, in the book both situations coexist in the same individual as Ritwik voluntarily decides to switch from one condition to the other. While generally the worlds of the skilled migrant and the unskilled are divided and incompatible, here they are connected. In the public opinion, the two types of migrants seem to live in parallel and non-communicating universes (Beretta 2017, 32-33). Moreover, there is a general fallacious prejudice that considers undocumented migrants as unskilled and those with documents as skilled (ibid.). *A Life Apart* is innovative because it "dares to explore and challenge the border between different migratory situations" (Beretta 2017, 33).

In order to enter a reality where you are stripped of all the rights to which one is entitled the moment before, one simply has to let a document expire.

> There are no events, only records. To give all this the slip is to drop out of official, recorded life, of validated life. It is to move from life to existence. On the 21st of December, Ritwik Ghosh will do exactly that: he will silently let his leave to remain in England expire and become a virtual prisoner in this new land (Mukherjee 2011, 256).

The life of migrants is described as a succession of bureaucratic steps in which they become signs within a system that catalogues, monitors and stores, a system devoid of events and real life, as neat and organised as it is lifeless.

> There are documents, stamps, official insignia, computer-held records, databases, monitors of exits and entries, date stamps, place stamps, ports of entry, records, papers, hard disks, officers, institutions,

> regulations, limitations, hedge after hedge, wall after wall, moat after moat regulating movements in and out, out and in. Life is calibrated in signs, the swift impress of inked rubber and metal on paper, the brief clatter of keys, a few hits of the return key, information stored in chips. That is all (Mukherjee 2011, 256).

This passage describes the impeccable way in which the "first world modern democratic state" (Mukherjee 2011, 256) holds people like Ritwik in check. To decide to leave this world is to become a "creature with a past but no future" (ibid.): no longer human as stripped of the privilege of being an ordinary citizen, but a creature of the present, "a ghost in limbo" (Mukherjee 2011, 257). The embrace with which the state should encircle people turns into this list of cold and exhausting bureaucratic procedures that seem to suffocate rather than support. The passage also seems to make one reflect on the effortlessness and ease – both on the part of those who decide on the legality or otherwise of an individual and on the part of the individual himself – with which a person can move from the realm of the legal to that of the illegal: "what makes a presence illegal just because another set of keys haven't been touched, another sheaf of papers marked and moved around"? (ibid.).

As Foucault states, the modern citizen identification system puts individuals in a surveillance system and at the same time entangles them in a network of paperwork: in so doing, it engages them in a "whole mass of documents that capture and fix them" (Foucault 1995, 189). Documents are not only related to the individual per se but also to all his movements, economic transactions, medical history and family ties; they are a grid of power in which individuals are processed and in this capacity constitute the subjects of the state (Torpey 1998, 248). Proving our identity, documents enables the state "to establish and enduring embrace of those admitted into their communities and to distinguish them from others" (Torpey 1998, 255). States can therefore regulate the freedom to come and go of ordinary citizens, as well as restrict and identify possible intruders (Torpey 1998, 256). However, this control system shows its weakness in the case of irregular migrants. In the limited space of the borders, it is easier for the state to detect, arrest and expel those who are not welcome within the society. However, once migrants succeeds to enter society they manage to live and sometimes lead a normal life as it is much more difficult for the state to exert control (Oudejans 2019, 448). Linda Bosniak argues that the law constructs *alienage* – the state or condition of not being a citizen of the United States – as a "hybrid legal status category that lies at the nexus of two legal and moral worlds" (Bosniak 2006, 38). On the one hand, it resides in the world of borders,

sovereignty and belonging to a national community. This dimension concerns government decisions about immigration, such as regulating the admission or exclusion of migrants and placing conditions on their entry and permanence. In exercising this kind of power, the government creates aliens, and in this it has unconstrained power (ibid.). Alienage, however, is also part of another world, the world of social relations between individuals in the territory; in this dimension, the government's power is very limited as aliens appear to be indistinguishable from citizens (ibid.). In this latter sphere, irregular migrants build their lives with immense sacrifices.

Some migrants manage to build dignified lives outside the law and sometimes it is they who choose this position for themselves; while not necessarily common, it is a narrative that is hardly ever addressed and which challenges the two main assumptions within the academic debate that sees irregular migrants either as unprotected bare life exposed to the violence of the system, or/and as political subjects calling for equal rights (Oudejans 2019, 449). While the victim perspective highlights the excessive misery and vulnerability of bare life, the second perspective instead rejects the victim perspective and elevates the irregular migrant to the role of a new political subject who actively questions the unequal distribution of rights (Oudejans 2019, 452). What the two narratives have in common is the stress placed on the fact that migrants must be included in the society of rights in order to have worthwhile lives (Oudejans 2019, 453).

James Scott investigates another view, that of voluntary state-evasion. Analysing the inhabitants of the vast inland mountainous region of Southeast Asia he refers to them as descendants of those who escaped from the state-making valleys. Until recently, the hill people were seen as savages who had failed to make the transition to an evolved way of life, having been unable to settle in a larger political community. More recent views prefer instead to see them as victims of a system that has left them behind and push for their reintegration into the economic and cultural life of the nation (Scott 2009, 128). The agricultural practices, governmental structures and social organisation of the hill people “bear strong traces of state-evading or state-distancing practices” (ibid.). It would therefore be more appropriate to see them as a complex of populations that at one time or another have decided to move “outside the easy reach of state power” (ibid.).

The story of Ritwik can be juxtaposed with this scenario, meaning that he is voluntarily living in a state without wanting to be part of its legal order and without standing as a political subject in any way. Avoiding the state is an active choice motivated by wanting “a better, a new life'” (Mukherjee 2011, 257) for oneself. Ritwik expresses his wish not to return to India and overstays his visa when speaking with his university friend Gavin. Gavin asks him whether the decision is due to the stigma

associated with homosexuality in India. Ritwik replies “it is partly that. I can be free here [...] the opportunity to be myself here is something I value immensely” (Mukherjee 2011, 191). This sentiment is expanded on when Ritwik explains to his friend that, regardless of his homosexuality, his willingness to stay in England is simply a matter of wanting to have a better life than he had at home. He feels he has to justify himself as if his motivation for migrating, not being directly linked to situations of high risk to his survival, is not sufficiently valid.

> “Look Gavin, one runs away from a country because of war, famine, torture, repressive regimes, all that sort of thing. Those are very serious things. But isn’t someone justified in turning one’s back on unhappiness, just turning away from the end of the road? I’d like the opportunity to start again, in a new place, with new people. Is that so unthinkable? Everyone aspires to a better life, why can’t I?” (Mukherjee 2011, 191).

Ritwik asserts his right to a better life than the one he lived in India. “He knew he wasn’t going abroad only to study but was also leaving behind one life, permanently, in exchange of another one; unknown but better. This much he knew – it was going to be a better life” (Mukherjee 2011, 189). In his words, there is the vitality and naivety of someone who has not yet come face to face with what it means to be an alien in a country; at the same time, his statement radiates a strong willingness to put himself out there to build a worthwhile life for himself. “Choice and chance” (Mukherjee 2011, 257) determine his course of action. He proactively and consciously chooses to become an irregular migrant, a situation that places him in a no-exit situation. The opportunity is the two-year scholarship to study in England, which is immediately taken as an “escape route, the prison door that has been left miraculously ajar” (Mukherjee 2011, 189). While it is true that society generally tends to think of the existences of irregular migrants as lives lived on the margins and marked by misery and exploitation, it cannot be denied that there are cases where migrants live a dignified and much better life than they did in their country of origin.

Based on 120 interviews with undocumented migrants in Belgium, Van Meeteren, Engbersen and Van San claim that a remarkable proportion have managed to build a decent life away from their country (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, Van San 2009, 896). Although they may not be able to save money, migrants have a much higher standard of living than they had in their country of origin. It also seems that migrants' aspirations are not so much economic as they are related to a notion of

the better life a European country can provide: work is only a means to a decent and peaceful life (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, Van San 2009, 897). The majority of interviewees stress the importance of having the closeness of friends and family: as they are often in economically precarious situations, having social and moral support close by helps them to feel secure and cared for, both humanly and economically (ibid.). Ritwik wants to build a better life for himself, which for him does not equate to a quiet life but a life where he can feel free and follow his urges. He is totally alone, does not know anyone and his family is the last thing he wants to be close to, having always been a toxic and oppressive environment. When he loses his father, the thought that overwhelms him is the realization that "following the ineluctable laws of Bengali hierarchies, he was now in charge of their family of three" (Mukherjee 2011, 9).

> It was this that ate at him more than his father's death, this swift alighting of burdens and responsibilities when he was so unprepared, so green. How was he going to provide for them? On that deceptively small question, everything foundered. Families were based more on subtle ties of provider and receiver than on any intangible emotional bonding (ibid.).

Living on the margins, disengaged from a reality that does not belong to him, is a decision that gives Ritwik a sense of freedom and autonomy. The fact that he, as well as numerous other migrants, manage to live in spaces that should be foreclosed to them by law highlights the latter's limitations in policing its subjects: the migrants' lives are "not annexed by law" and "irreducible to a legal status" (Oudejans 2019, 462). Not having rights does not equate to necessarily being a victim or wanting to be included within the legislative circle from which they are excluded: it rather shows the figure of the undocumented migrant as "the mirror image of a law that is sovereignly capable of its own impotence and that neither includes nor excludes but that lets life be in the interstices between inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, the potentiality of the law opens up to the possibility of a right not to have rights" (ibid.).

Antje Ellermann refers to the "reverse state of exception" (Ellermann, 2009, 1) to describe actions where migrants dispose of their legal identity to evade state control. These forms of evasion are rarely collective but individual and generally concern themselves with immediate and effective results (Scott 1985, 33): they are thus related to the individual's survival in daily life. Ritwik mobilises his knowledge in order to find accommodation and, later on, a job. Each of these steps is directed towards practical and immediate solutions to ensure a liveable existence. Homo Sacer finds himself

in a position where he is deprived of the rights of citizenship and free from the obligations that normally bind the citizen to the state (Ellermann 2009, 5). Ritwik calls himself a “ghost in limbo. Imprisoned forever but with infinite freedom” (Mukherjee 2011, 257). His position is on the outside of the social contract that regulates the relationship between state and citizen. The social contract is based on a reciprocal relationship between state and citizen: the state grants rights on the basis that citizens conform to certain rules and conversely. Odd-Helge Fjeldstad, talking about the enforcement of the taxation system in Tanzania, notes that compliance is based on a relationship of exchange and reciprocity (Fjeldstad 2001, 293). He argues that the government creates the preconditions for obedience to laws by reassuring citizens that the state will be able to give a fair return for the amount of taxes paid (ibid.). Furthermore, the state must coordinate the actions of citizens so that they have the perception that everyone is paying their fair share: in this way the process is seen as equitable by the citizens. Similarly, Margaret Levi's concept of “quasi-voluntary compliance” (Levi 1989, 32) indicates on the one hand an attitude that is formed through the deterrent effect of sanctions and, on the other hand, the belief that the others will comply in the same way (Ellermann 2009, 7). To maintain adherence to laws, the state pursues non-coercive strategies. If citizens perceive that the system is not fair, if they feel “suckers” (Levi 1989, 53), they try not to comply with the rules and not to pay taxes. Favouritism towards a certain group, a failure to return services for taxes paid, unsupported programmes, result in the decline of quasi-voluntary compliance (ibid.). This kind of approach leads to the assumption that an individual living in the state of exception is not willing to voluntarily conform to the laws of the state: in fact, having already taken away all rights and benefits from Homo Sacer, the state can no longer offer positive incentives to ensure his compliance with the laws. Moreover, Homines Sacri are totally outside a community bound by shared norms and therefore have no incentive to follow the rules for the benefit of the community or the respect of its legal order (Ellermann 2009, 8).

In this out-of-community situation, irregular migrants often manage to become part of a dimension governed by other kinds of rules and which becomes a kind of parallel world, outside of society but still functioning and active. A perfect example of this dimension in *A Life Apart is* Chichele Road, called “Job Street” (Mukherjee 2011, 265) where migrants gather and are then picked for physically demanding and underpaid jobs. Ritwik is introduced to this world by Mr Haq, his Pakistani neighbour, owner of a chain of twelve cash and carry stores and very proud of his “rags-to-riches story” (Mukherjee 2011, 245). When he finds out Ritwik's nationality Mr Haq talks about how, before Partition, they were all brothers: “Hindu and Muslim living as brothers [...] we are still

brothers" (Mukherjee 2011, 243). His sense of brotherhood seems to vacillate, however, when Ritwik asks him to do some small jobs for him in one of his shops: "we try to hire people from families we know, you see, other Pakistani families who are in England" (Mukherjee 2011, 247). Having criticised the English colonisers for dividing "the brothers" with the Partition, now that Mr Haq runs a small empire he seems to adopt a typically colonising, divisive and exploitative attitude, reflecting the mentality he was criticising. He does not give him a decent job in his shops but instead entrusts him to one of his "contacts", Saeed, who takes him to Job Street: clearly both Mr Haq and Saeed profit from having Ritwik exploited in debilitating and underpaid jobs.

Ritwik's first impact with this place highlights the animated variety of people, the bustle and furtive glances the bustling variety of people.

> Ritwik noticed disparate groups of people. It wasn't as if the journey here had been through utterly deserted streets, but after their relative emptiness, this seemed positively crowded. Men, mostly, standing in little groups, chatting, smoking, huddled, as if sharing a secret or a shame […]. He didn't have a clue from where these people, standing around disjointedly at this unholy hour of the morning came, or why they were all gathering here. A queue was forming of men who seemed to speak to each other in the same language. Three men stood out […] They smoked and patrolled the street and the people […] There was a tense furtiveness in the way people looked , or refused to look, at each other, an uneasy expectation, a hairline crack of suspicion and something else Ritwik couldn't quite place (Mukherjee 2011, 264-265).

In this parallel and secluded space of the metropolis, irregular migrants look for and go to work every morning. The authorities do not intervene in this space, allowing illegal activities to continue on a daily basis. Hiroshi Motomura argues that the "chronic and intentional under enforcement of immigration law" (Motomura 2008, 2049) is actually a policy of the state. Using Mexican irregular immigration in the US as an example, he argues that there is almost non-existent discretion and control over irregular migrants (Motmura 2008, 2050). Since the beginning of the 20th century, growers clearly preferred Mexican labour to work the fields, especially if it was irregular. Dominant thinking saw Mexican workers as a "subordinate, expendable and non-assimilable labour force" (ibid.) and discretion over irregularity became secondary to the needs of employers. Fluctuations in the economy resulted in a partial tolerance of irregular immigration that continues to this day (Motomura 2008, 2051). The state tries to project a strong and decisive image when making

immigration law enforcement publicly visible (Motomura 2008, 2049), so that the message of its commitment to eradicating illegal immigrants gets through. The reality, however, seems more to reflect judge Brennan words:

> Sheer inability or lax enforcement of laws preventing entry into this country, combined with the inability to establish an effective barrier to the employment of undocumented foreigners, has led to the creation of a substantial 'shadow population' of illegal immigrants - numbering in the millions - within our borders. This situation raises the spectre of a permanent caste of undocumented resident aliens, encouraged by some to stay here as a source of cheap labour, but still denied the benefits that our society makes available to citizens and legal residents. The existence of such an underclass presents very difficult problems for a nation that prides itself on adhering to the principles of equality under the law (Plyer vs Doe, 457 U.S 202, 1982).

This shadow population is usually forced to perform exhausting jobs in dangerous conditions for lack of alternatives. If it is true that precariousness, exploitation and poverty seem to become an intrinsic feature irregular migrants' lives and relegate them to a dimension where they are just bodies to be utilised, at the same time each of them has a different and multi-layered identity and history, which cannot be reduced to an invisible bare life.

Ritwik's co-worker in the strawberry fields, Dusan, is an example of a multifaceted life, characterised by enormous sacrifices, but also by ambitions, dreams and a desire for redemption. He “looked at least twice his age [...]. The hinterlands behind those eyes contained dangerous terrain, a whole map of misery” (Mukherjee 2011, 284). Dusan is in London with his entire family, united and supportive in a single room in the Barnet district: the six men in the household are working and managing to survive. They are waiting to go to the United States because Dusan's mother has an uncle there who will arrange papers and a place for them to stay and “maybe, who knows, even schools for his sisters and himself, because he would like to be a doctor” (Mukherjee 2011, 287). Although the working conditions are extremely rough and the poverty tangible, Dusan in perspective is improving his situation compared to life he led before in Macedonia and then in Albania where “you could die of hunger and thirst and even a dog wouldn't come and piss in your mouth to wet your throat” (Mukherjee 2011, 289). In addition, Dusan has the support and social network of his family which, in such arduous situations, proves to be to be the answer to the needs of the individual, those which the law does not address. Human relationships are not only structured

under the law but also and above all under friendship, solidarity and love: these “might be better safeguards for a dignified life for irregular immigrants than the law itself” (Oudejans 2019, 468). When Ritwik no longer sees Dusan at work with him, he realises that he will probably never see him again but he continues to wonder where he might be and always hope to see him reappear, showing a sincere concern for his life. Dusan, like the other irregular migrants, is part of a moving population, “here today, gone tomorrow” (Mukherjee 2011, 290). Migrants “never appear precisely where they are expected, their arrival can never be predicted exactly, but they always come” (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 212) and, in Dusan’s case, go.

Migrants bring with them their mobility and neo-liberal control thrives on this mobility and tries to use it for its own benefit. The image of migration as unidirectional and purposeful is challenged because migrants never really arrive at a destination but are ceaselessly mobile, continually becoming and it is this becoming that ultimately becomes the law of migration (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 211). An incredible example is the story of Iranian refugee Mehran Karimi Masseri that lived for 20 years in Terminal 1 of Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris after being denied entry to both France and England. When he finally received an UNHCR passport and could travel again, he refused to sign the documents saying that this person no longer existed but his name was instead Sir Alfred Meharn. As Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos comment on this episode:

> Migration […] characterises the continuous shifts and radical re-articulations of singular, individual trajectories. Migration is not the evacuation of one place and the occupation of a different one; it is the making and remaking of one’s own life on the scenery of the world […]. Sir Alfred Mehran represents in the most radical way a non-representable migrant: the person who starts the journey is not the same at the end, the space which one inhabits is not the one intended, your new documents do not refer to who you are or who you were but to whom you become in the journey. Travel becomes the law, becoming becomes the code (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 211).

Migrants adapt, change their appearance, unite different social actors and reshape power by targeting its control and making the borders of the world porous (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 212). In these situations of change and precariousness they manage to assert their will. The assertion of one's will in the context of migration is rarely linked to extreme gestures such as Sir Alfred Mehran's, but rather to small acts, such as Ritwik's, which nevertheless become crucial in determining the course of one's life in the short term. Ritwik claims the right to be able to leave

a work situation that is no longer congenial to him, as he is not bound to any job by any contract. When he tells Saeed that he wants to take a break from the farm jobs, he initially responds cryptically:

> "Your world there are rules, my world there are rules. The two sometimes different. The world of workers in Willesden, all the immigrants, also rules there. Many rules where you go. You see them OK? If you see them, you OK. If you not see the, problems, you unhappy".
> Was this an ominous, circuitous warning that Ritwik could never leave the world he had had a brief glimpse of […]? There didn't seem to be any other signs that this was a threat, apart from the indeterminacies of Saeed's truncated words, but they could equally stand for a kind of consolatory explanation for what Saeed took to be his unhappiness at the shadowy world of refugee workers, Ritwik thought […].
> "You do different work for me?" Saeed asked while shovelling food into his mouth. There was no daintiness about his eating, no acknowledgement of the effete etiquette that governs polite eating together, only a functional, self-enclosed approach to his food, almost animal in its own and immediate needs (Mukherjee 2011, 306 - 307).

The differences between Saeed's and Ritwik's ways of behaving in this passage enhance Ritwik's alienation within the dimension that Saeed manages. While devouring food in an animalistic manner, showing no compliance to any social etiquette, Saeed casually proposes that Ritwik act as a mediator between him and some girls coming to look for work, as he can exploit his excellent knowledge of English. He assumes that Ritwik accepts without knowing what job he is referring to as migrants, due to their status, are expected to accept any kind of work and adapt to the harshness, precariousness and the lack of info about it, without raising any questions . Saeed's English is stunted because, like many migrants, he is rarely confronted with native people. Already in his first meeting with Ritwik, he proudly points out to him an area full of shops "all Arabic" (Mukherjee 2011, 262) and where everyone speaks his language. Saeed has found his comfort zone in London, linked to his home community and, like many migrants, hangs out mainly in his circle. Ritwik, on the other hand, is very formal and well-mannered, "sitting politely and giving quintessentially English answers – 'yes please', 'No, but I'd love to' – (Mukherjee 2011, 263) and his excellent English is referred to as "posh" (Mukherjee 2011, 270) by the English man who takes him to his first farm job. Ritwik is not tied to his community and does not seek out familiar realities but is open to new ones and bases his human

interactions on a feeling that generally brings him closer to those who, like him, feel marginalised. He does not keep quiet and questions Saeed about the type of work; with his dialectic, he manages to buy time but in his head he has already made the decision to leave Saeed's world.

Ritwik decides to withdraw momentarily from this dynamic and informal world that ultimately reproduce discriminating mechanisms. Before leaving Job Street, he observes the situation he was part of until a few days before from the outside.

> Floating groups of people, all trying to edge their way into a better life, get the briefest of toeholds on this dizzying escarpment of what they consider a better world, by becoming ghosts and shadows, the unseen and non-existent workers behind most things which made this ravenous, insatiable monster of a city alive and breath and keep consuming. If he had believed in a loony strain of religion, which asserted that the world was supported by invisible spirits and angels holding everything together in a vast safety net, here was its real objective correlative [...]. Chichele Road had never looked so squalid and seedy as he realized quietly that work was never equal, never levelling; instead, work created the greatest tyrannies (Mukherjee 2011, 303).

This bitter consideration perfectly mirrors the world of irregular migrants, an invisible and exploited world without which the enormous capital-producing machine could not survive. The invisible angels who ensure that people can continue to consume are treated like devils and are rendered visible only in order to discredit them. Ritwik decides to start working in a world that he knows better and is more congenial to him, a realm where he thinks he does not have to submit to certain power dynamics but can manage himself autonomously, giving vent to drives that are part of his most hidden nature: the world of prostitution in Meat Mile.

If his state of illegality and agency has been analysed in the context of his undocumented status, the next section analyses the place through which Ritwik's struggle to build a life he feels belonging to him unfolds, that is, his body.

3.2. The Body

He can have a new body in England, even be a new person. Maybe.
(Mukherjee 2011, 45).

The public toilets in Oxford Ritwik goes to while he is a student are the first place where he "cottages" (that is, using the public toilets for homosexual sex) in England. This space is brilliantly described as:

> A true laboratory of the senses: all of them are stretched to their experiential limits – the eye at the door hinge; the ears pricked to catch footsteps entering or exiting, the flush of the cistern, the hissing drum of a jet of urine hitting the metal pissoir […]the slightest movement and shift of feet; the nose acclimatized to the acrid bite of ammonia (Mukherjee 2011, 122).

Public toilets for the cottaging community are the places where the body is able to escape the control of society and subvert the norm (Beretta 2017, 40); in this intimate and parallel dimension, people create their own set of codes and norms, as in society deemed as normal. For instance:

> 5. Several people at the urinals. Sometimes this has what Ritwik calls the 'honeypot effect – one or two cruising men at the urinals suddenly start attracting practically all the cottagers in the St. Giles toilets until there is a row of men, cocks out, checking each other out […]. It is a predictable set of movements, but of all the methods this gives the most direct access to the goods. This is when it becomes most transparently a marketplace: there is no pissing around, wasting time and acting out tired old moves; it is sharp, to the point and immediately effective (Mukherjee 2011, 125).

Public toilets constitute the territory of a specific community, a borderland where Ritwik feels he belongs (Beretta 2017, 36) and that become a fixture in his life while in Oxford. Almost every night "he finds his way here unerringly, like an insect following a pheromone track" (Mukherjee 2011, 127). Sometimes, on rainy days, he sits on the toilet and listens to the sound of the rain which "lulls and comforts him" (Mukherjee 2017, 128) pointing out that even in potentially uncomfortable

situations, such as a lack of cottagers due to the rain, Ritwik still prefers to be there by himself, alone but at peace. The comfortable and non-judgmental feeling in the toilets is contrasted with the sense of exclusion he experiences in the student community, with its coating of politeness and superficial inclusiveness. As soon as he arrives at the university and is introduced by his tutor to his fellow students, they “murmured polite hellos, thrown somewhere across the room vaguely in his direction, but he didn't feel any of those reached him” (Mukherjee 2017, 42). This sensation of being a person who is addressed politely and kindly by people without ever really understanding him and without him being able to open up, accompanies him throughout his entire study experience. While queuing during lunchtime he meets a boy from High Wycombe who tells him that he loves India despite having never been there: “'It's so exotic isn't it? And wild, do you know what I mean? And all the mysticism and stuff, it's spiritual, like isn't it?"(Mukherjee 2011, 41).This simplistic and romanticised view clashes with Ritwik's actual experience in Calcutta:

> The squalor […] the wet sticky monsoons; the blood-drying heat of summer […] the insects that came out in giant colonies […] the sheer filth and mud of Calcutta streets, which welled in over the edge of his frayed sandals and oozed between his toes; the thirteen hours of power cuts everyday; the chronic water shortage; the smell of paraffin and kerosene oil everywhere[…] the random days without meals, all fanning and exacerbating the tensions in the joint family, year after slow festering year? (Mukherjee 2011, 190).

The perception the privileged white man who gets to enjoy only a mystical and “cool” India, filtered through the stories of other privileged people, makes Ritwik feel like a fish out of water, chained to a poverty that has shaped him and that slowly devours him, making him different. Ritwik's description of poverty starkly counteracts the preconception of some of his fellow students who assume that since he is now studying at Oxford, he must be part of an Indian elite, or his family must be influential and well-connected to buy his son an education. He sees poverty as:

> The slow drip drip drip which[…]hounded you every fraction of your time, got under your skin, into every space in your head and made you a lesser person, an edgy jittery animal because, you see, it never finished you off but gnawed at you here and there just to remind you it was there and that you were powerless in its half-grip. Gloating and victorious, but sleazily so, poverty not as Death triumphant

in a Bosch nightmare but instead, one of his low, seedy, taunting thieves (Mukherjee 2011, 102).

Gavin, who is supposed to be his best friend, always seems to want to belittle him in public, treating him as a "clown-freak" (Mukherjee 2011, 98) for whom he has to apologise: Gavin in front of other people seems to have a disclaimer that reads "you must treat Ritwik with indulgence, he's a third world peasant" (Mukherjee 2011, 98). However, Ritwik does not want to dent Gavin's role as "educator and civiliser. It's a role that has taught Ritwik to smooth over the jagged edges of his own behaviour, to learn to observe, ape and conform" (Mukherjee 2011, 98). He cleverly manages to turn these unpleasant attitudes to his advantage. It is crucial for him to become more conformed to a society to which he knows he must adjust; observing and trying to understand the dynamics of a world in which he has to blend in is important to draw as little attention to him as possible once he enters the world of irregular migrants.

Despite managing to make a few so-called friends Ritwik keeps feeling like an outsider in the university world. He does not belong to his nation or his family and friends, but to his body, and vigorously claims his identity in places his parents would condemn. The toilet cubicle is not only a place where he lures men but is a metaphor for home, a place where Ritwik feels comfortable and safe. Thus, the most unthinkable place becomes also a place of reflection and introspection, where memories of his abusive and violent mother and his troubled childhood resurface.

While generally the feeling associated with home is one of familiarity, comfort and protection, in the case of Ritwik, domesticity represents something quite different. His childhood is characterised by misery and the violent verbal, psychological and physical aggression of his mother and the toxicity of the rest of the family described as "a twisted version of some domino effect […] all linked by their use of each other as channels of anger and resentment" (Mukherjee 2011, 107). His parents want Ritwik and his brother to have a good education in the hope that when they grow up they would save them "from the miserable lives in which they had got mired" (Mukherjee 2011, 192). Both brothers excel in their studies and Ritwik wonders if it is not simply because "he had been beaten into doing well by his mother" (Mukherjee 2011, 193). Home, a place of support and loving care, is for Ritwik synonymous with abuse and selfishness. It is therefore not at home – as a synonym of biological family – that Ritwik feels safe and accepted but in the cottaging community, an environment at the antipodes of anything that can be considered home in the traditional sense of the term. He contrasts the heteronormative family with a family of outsiders, with no female presence. While his family raises him and his brother as "pack horses, blinkered to see nothing else

but the path straight ahead" (Mukherjee 2011, 192), Ritwik's chosen path totally breaks out of this rigidity and shatters mainstream representations of the family unit that see it as composed of good heterosexual citizens, valiant in the case of men and virtuous in the case of women (Osha 2003, 97). Ritwik's family shows a picture at the antipodes of this portrayal, presenting a situation where a dominant mother constantly abuses her children while the father, like the rest of the family, does nothing to oppose her, convinced that a "just measure of pain" (Mukherjee 2011, 155) is necessary to discipline the children. Ritwik's trauma resurfaces in the very place he perceives as home, and his transgression becomes a revenge on his mother, against whom he asserts his deepest and most tormented being.

> At other times he just sits away the hour in *his* cubicle thinking, 'What would you think if you saw me now? This, this stench of urine and disinfectant and cock, this is what I am, not what you wanted me to be'. And he punishes her more by staying on another extra hour when he knows there won't be anyone else visiting the public toilets that night (Mukherjee 2011, 183).

The body is also the vehicle through which trauma is processed. After a hallucinatory vision of his mother and the awakening of traumatic memories related to the violence he suffered as a child, Ritwik's body "leaks". Hallucinations about his family are flushed through his impure body, turning a potentially shameful moment into a liberating act (Beretta 2017, 43).

> He lets the liquid heat of his piss comfort him in its trickle down the inside of his legs and, when his saturated jeans cannot take it any more, watches it leak through pathetically in weak, stuttering drops on to the carpet. He is pissing, shaking and sobbing beside his desk, his room now completely in the grip of the dark. He feels he can never stop his trembling […]. It is only much later that he notices how walking past that armchair is no longer a problem, no longer a consuming terror (Mukherjee 2011, 48).

Illegal migrants, excluded from belonging to a nation, depend on their bodies (Beretta 2017, 45), the only location of belonging they can experience. Not being able to count on the rights and privileges reserved to citizens and risking everything on a daily basis, from work to freedom itself, they rely on their bodies, the one thing they cannot lose. Ritwik's body and his relationship with other bodies are the means through which he tries to exorcise his ghosts, express his most hidden

nature and create a reality for himself. He is also aware, however, that his body inextricably links him to his place of origin, which means “his is a type of minority appeal, catering to the special interest group rather than the mainstream, because of his nationality, looks, skin colour. He keeps pushing the word ‘race’ away” (Mukherjee 2011, 127), as if he wanted to renounce his origins, his background, meaning nothing to him but unpleasant memories, and knowing how much it actually marginalises him further in an already marginalised world like cottaging. However, despite his being a non-mainstream category, he feels safe in the Oxford community.

The situation changes drastically when he arrives in London and starts prostituting himself in Meat Mile, a place that if by day it is so desolate and dismal as to “make suicide seem sensible, natural, even desirable” (Mukherjee 2011,324), by night it turns into a fearsome, soulless and dangerous place. Ritwik calls the individuals that populate the place "creatures that dart in and out of shadows"(Mukherjee 2011, 325), emphasising its animalistic, subterranean, liminal dimension.

The small, cosy environment of the toilets, protected by the four walls of the cubicle, is replaced by the squalor and exposure of the dark streets of Meat Mile. His change of status is also reflected in terms of spaces. If the economic security given by the scholarship and the visa are reflected by a protected and safe environment of transgression, the lack of money and insecurity given by his new status as an irregular migrant is reflected in dangerous, unprotected environments. Also in this world, as in Oxford public toilets, the most important thing is awareness, adherence to codes that to the untrained eye might be invisible"(ibid.). However, if the unwritten rules in Oxford are the basis on which safe and generally positive interactions develop, here the rules seem to lead to more rigid and discriminatory attitudes, and Ritwik is immediately aware of this by the way he is received. After a prostitute spits out "fucking queer" he decides not to go to Meat Mile for a week. He realises that he is breaking with what is expected in Meat Mile, as the majority of prostitutes are women. According to Nussbaum the feeling of disgust is associated with a form of social behaviour in which “a dominant group subordinates and stigmatized other groups” (Nussbaum 2004, 336). When someone expresses disgust, they are projecting fear of their own animality onto a less powerful group that becomes a vehicle for the dominant group's anxieties about itself (ibid.). Since their bodies are considered disgusting, members of the subordinate group generally suffer various forms of discrimination (ibid). Ritwik is discriminated against by a “colleague” just for being a “freak” according to the standards of Meat Mile, in which a system dominated by a group – prostitutes considered “normal” – feel disgust for Ritwik's non-conformity, just as in the ordinary world the dominant group of so-called “normal” citizens tend to feel contempt for the world of street

prostitution. Even in Meat Mile standards of normality based on “discrete and non-overlapping oppositions such as masculine/feminine, hetero/homo, black/white” (Phillips and Stewart 2008, 382) seem to apply, reinforcing the basis of social oppression (ibid.) and reflecting omnipresent power dynamics. The “tyranny of the ‘normal’ over the unusual” (Nussbaum 2004, 337) is also evident in Ritwik's encounter with “the builder-type man who called himself Greg” (Mukherjee 2011, 328). Greg threateningly makes him wear women's underwear and heels and then tries to rape him: “food aid sacks were usually handled like this, Ritwik thought” (Mukherjee 2011, 330), an object in the hands of a brute. The moment Ritwik manages to break free Greg starts beating him; Ritwik wounds Greg with the stiletto and the latter throws him out of the car with unprecedented violence. It is in this moment that Ritwik demonstrates:

> The presence of mind to stand up right, naked except from a bra dangling from his shoulders [...] rush to the front of the car, one stiletto in hand, and shout “I have your registration number. If you don’t throw my clothes out, right now, I’m going to break your windscreen with this shoe”. (Mukherjee 2011, 331).

The bare life, thrown to the side of the road, gets up and stands up to the crippling effect of the dominant one, applying an unwritten but equally functioning code to assert himself, a code that is necessarily developed in a context where the ordinary rules are suspended. This encounter, like others where ordinary people meet the "freak", echoes in Nagel's quote: “having sex with an Other might reflect a heartfelt longing or act of rebellion or a way to demean and defile another person or group. No motivation is likely to be entirely pure since it is hard to untangle the desire from the disdain” (Nagel 2003 in Osha 2004, 94).

As after the episode with the prostitute who insulted him, Ritwik decides not to go to Meat Mile for a while. His time away from prostitution is tinged with “sleepless, worried nights, imagining attacks, assaults and other unthinkable things” (Mukherjee 2011, 326) but also with thinking about “the question of the market, supply and demand”(ibid.): would "anyone in their right mind would go and buy clothes in a food market […] surely, the one clothes shop in a food market would thrive and prosper” (ibid.). He bravely decides to return to Meat Mile, hoping that the fact of being a queer man, different from the majority of prostitutes there, will be a contributing factor in attracting customers. Ritwik rebels against abuse and voluntarily decides to return to prostitution. This image does not reflect the mainstream idea that regards prostitution as inseparable from the trafficking

of people (Wagenaar, Amesberger, Altink 2017, 51). In the dominant scenery, tight control over prostitution and the hope of eradicating it thus becomes crucial to save victims from exploiters and "remove this moral blight from our midst" (ibid.). Once again, the state and ordinary society set themselves up as advocates for the victims, making them de facto individuals without any agency, bare life that must be saved: to do so the sovereignty uses strategies that actually lead to situations they claim to want to eradicate.

> Most measures inspired by the trafficking frame reduce the number of working places, make it more difficult for the sex worker to exert control over work conditions, or force her into unwanted dependency or mobility, thereby increasing the likelihood of the very same exploitation that the anti-trafficking advocates purport to eradicate (Wagenaar, Amesberger, Altink 2017, 51).

In reality, many irregular migrants may be attracted to prostitution because, compared to other gruelling jobs offered to them, it has several advantages such as a decent wage and a modicum of control over one's work situation (Wagenaar, Amesberger, Altink 2017, 50). There is a tendency to focus much more on exploitation in prostitution than on that in other sectors of the low-end labour markets, which is nonetheless present and pervasive (Wagenaar, Amesberger, Altink 2017, 51) as the novel itself shows. Fruit picking is a case in point: in this sector Ritwik works for twelve hours a day for twenty pounds, in extremely poor conditions.

> Just half an hour into picking strawberries Ritwik had realized why the farmer didn't do it themselves. You had to either squat or bend, moving like a crab, awkward and hobbling[…] before midday, Ritwik felt as if he would never walk straight again, his back hunched […] When the dehydration headache kicked in, first a slow contracting behind the eyes and then the drilling at the temples and at the back of the head, Ritwik decided that finding water couldn't be put off any longer (Mukherjee 2011, 285).

Prostitution seems a better option than the farm but despite his reasonable hopes it does not go as planned and Ritwik does not attract many customers. However, he manages with his actions to challenge the mainstream assumption that when migrants become illegal they become people forced to respond to social or economic necessities, not as "active constructors of the realities they find themselves in" (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, 202).

Sanya Osha, in analysing the sexuality of black bodies, says that the coloniser romanticises the

colonised subject through a process of de-agentification and objectification, or else he attributes to him/her an excessive character, a violent carnality without rules and limits, thus highlighting a sexual stigmatisation linked to bodies other than those of the coloniser (Osha 2004, 92). The non-normative sexuality of black bodies manages to manifest genuine moments of agency in situations characterised by the dynamics of invisibility (Osha 2004, 93). Ritwik is non-normative in every respect and he does not belong to the nation. Nation building is generally "patriarchal and sexist at its foundation" (Osha 2004, 97) as the aspirations of nationhood are related to a procreative, controlled and responsible sexuality, a force of order, not chaos (Osha 2004, 96). The nation promotes a sterilised sexuality that has no place for black, queer, nationless bodies; good citizenship "relies on appropriate sexual behaviour and proper gender performance" (Osha 2004, 97). As Butler argues identity is politically constructed: power creates what it claims to represent (Butler 1990, 2) and juridical laws seek to delimit, "engender, naturalise, and immobilize" (Butler 1990, 5) identities. Meat Mile seems to mirror the rigidity of the society deemed normal. Ritwik is not only discriminated against because of his queer and non-white body, but also because of the ways in which his body performs: he in fact decides to prostitute himself without a pimp, defying the unwritten rules of the place. Because of this he is threatened with a bottle of acid by two pimps who warn him not to turn up again: "this is not your boss street. This not your ground. You don't come here again" (Mukherjee 2011, 343). Ritwik defies the code of the place by deciding to work independently and for this, he risks to be disfigured. His non-definable and elusive presence is not welcome in the rigid dimension of Meat Mile. He challenges the unwritten laws of a society that reflects the power dynamics of the ordinary world, where if you do not conform to the norm you are excluded from the dominant narrative. His is not a direct attack on power, he does not want to directly oppose the mobs of prostitution, however it is significant in that it is an attempt to reclaim his freedom in expressing his nature and drives.

After the acid threats Zafar, a rich and mysterious Arab customer, makes Ritwik promise never to return to Meat Mile. Zafar would like Ritwik only for himself and offers to support him. Although Zafar's opulence would benefit him greatly, Ritwik does not feel comfortable with him. When Zafar takes him to a luxurious hotel Ritwik "feels so out of place that he registers this opulence only as something that shines by in the margins of his field of vision" (Mukherjee 2011, 335). Not only does he feel excluded and uncomfortable in this wealthy world that has never belonged to him, but also in the intimacy with Zafar that is reduced to a minimum, in a one-sided relationship where Ritwik

doesn’t feel present:

> The sex is unchangingly swift and one-sided and Zafar retreats into an aloof and impenetrable world of introspection after each time. It is as Ritwik starts fading for Zafar during the sex and disappears completely afterwards. It is as unintimate as physical contact gets and is always preceded and followed by a shower, in an attempt, Ritwik supposes, to sluice off ritually not only semen, sweat, the touch of another body […] but also the bigger intangibles that he perceives to come with this paid sex (Mukherjee 2011, 351).

It seems that bodily fluids are washed away by the shower in a purifying and sanitised, almost mechanical ritual, in stark contrast to the free and “dirty” atmosphere in which sexuality is experienced in Oxford's public toilets (Beretta 2017, 43).

The abyss separating Ritwik from Zafar grows into a huge burden when Ritwik finds his various passports peeking into the hotel room. Ritwik feels envy, associating the number of passports with Zafar's ease of mobility. His superiority in status is not associated with his opulence but with the freedom to travel, which Ritwik lacks. When Zafar accuses him of returning to Meat Mile despite him asking him not to, Ritwik explains that this is how he earns his living: “I am an illegal migrant in this country, I have no working papers, no permit to stay” (Mukherjee 2011, 345). This is the first time Ritwik articulates his no-exit situation to anyone.

> Now that he has somehow let it slip out[…]it becomes enormous and all-consuming, the sound of it so deafening that there is nothing but this roaring by which he is defined, against which every other note in his little life is sounded. The room shrinks to the size of a grain of sand within which his whole body is compacted (Mukherjee 2011, 346).

His body is the resonance chamber of a situation that oppresses and deafens him. Ritwik fully realises how, in England, his condition as an irregular migrant will always come before his condition as a human and will be the first to define him in the eyes of others and within the dynamics of everyday life. Despite the brief moment of openness with Zafar, Ritwik does not feel comfortable with him: he feels a “smoky unease” (Mukherjee 2011, 347) when they are together and soon discovers how his perception is not deceiving him and how incompatible Zafar’s world is with his own. The mysterious Arab is part of the system of power that crushes those like Ritwik, he is an

arms dealer. When Ritwik finds this out, he feels an urgent need to return to where he feels he belongs, despite having promised Zafar otherwise. He rebels against Zafar by doing the thing he has forbidden him to do. Just as his revenge on his mother was to do the opposite of what she expected, leading a promiscuous and dissolute life, his revenge on Zafar is to return to Meat Mile.

> His insides are fizzing fireworks of fear; it runs, thick and sluggish, in his feet, his calf muscles, his knocking chest, turning them heavy and light at the same time. Where does this end and hunger begin? Initially, he stays on streets from where running out onto York Way or Caledonian Road would be a short sprint, but the slowly diffusing smoke of the drug inside him obliges with its addictive hits only when he strays into the darker, more remote areas of the maze. The thought of those pimps with the acid bulb explodes in a delicious crackle-and-flash of fear in him. Tonight he will go with anyone and not ask for any money. Tonight it is faceless pleasure he's after (Mukherjee 2011, 393).

Ritwik, in his extreme transgression, asserts the will and need to be free. Zafar, like his mother, is a master, a strong figure who tries to control him and make him conform to what he wants, another figure who wants to force him to follow a path that he did not choose. His decision to go with everyone without asking to be paid, in search of a pleasure that Zafar cannot give him, is his final act of rebellion against those who want to control him and mould him, pushing him to be who he is not. If he cannot be free in a world that crushes him, marginalises him and deprives him of everything, at least he can feel alive in a world that he chooses. The decision to go to places where he knows he is risking his life is his final challenge to those who seek to harness him. In dying, his mother left him "a freedom so vast and so dark" as if he had been "catapulted into deep space" (Mukherjee 2011, 192). His dark freedom is represented by this ravenous drive towards darkness, danger, transgression, possible self-destruction. His life is finally his, "no one could lay any claim on it" (ibid.). His addiction to transgression, to the fear and excitement that having sexual encounters with strangers causes him is stronger than his sense of self-preservation. Society does not grant him rights, inclusion and support. He does not need Zafar's money if it becomes a means to exert control over him. It is as if he realises that he has nothing left to lose apart from his body and his drives, the only things that belong to him and make him feel alive.

However, his body, from which he wanted in Oxford to remove any sign that connected it to his origins, is what makes him identified as an unwelcome minority to the nation, which can destroy him without repercussions, as expendable bare life. The racist mob he meets immediately identifies

him as “Paki”. The ensuing tragedy has a sad foreboding in Ritwik's journey on the metro where newspapers are scattered around. He notices a headline from the *Daily Mail*: “BRITAIN TOPS ASYLUM SEEKER INTAKE IN EUROPE” (Mukherjee 2011, 393). This headline creates a sense of emergency, as if the nation is being invaded. Media are crucial in constructing a reality that makes the migrant's body alien, a body that must be removed from society. Innes argues that British narratives always tend to portray migrants and especially asylum seekers as a “threatening homogeneous collective” (Innes 2010, 461). Metaphors are often used to represent the entry of migrants, such as “waves” or “floods”, a terminology that highlights the magnitude, uncontrollability and overwhelming nature of the phenomenon (Cooper, Blumell, Bunce 2021, 197). In the media bombardment, all the extremely important differences between the various types of migrants are generally lost as they are portrayed as a homogeneous collective. The use of terminology is usually inaccurate and generalising and leads to a flattening in the perception of different types of migrants. In this way, all the stories, the agency, the life path of each migrant are obliterated, in favour of an erroneous construction that sees them as a dangerous threat to the nation's order and values.

> One common observation is that refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants are often only present within news coverage as a statistic and rarely presented as full and complex humans – with jobs, education, histories and families. Indeed, asylum seekers rarely appear within news stories at all (Cooper, Blumell, Bunce 2021, 201).

Journalists rely for their sources on those in power, who seek to marginalise disruptive voices and operate to suppress the agency of minorities. This representation, projected by the elites, is thus absorbed and internalised by the public, shaping public opinion (Cooper, Blumell, Bunce 2021, 201). It does not matter whether Ritiwk is a well-educated, caring, gentle and working individual. In the collective imagination his image is reduced to that of an unwanted invader. Ritwik has a very rich and multifaceted life, a life that would never be chronicled in the British media. He has a good education, a difficult family, a troubled history. He decides to leave a privileged and legal world in an attempt to build a new life for himself, despite the enormous price to pay. He builds several new lives, marked by different jobs and affections. He defies the norm and makes important decisions, not because they are convenient for him but to stay true to what he feels. He lives intensely and overturns any stereotype generally attached to migrants: he is educated but takes on the most degrading and illegal jobs, he prostitutes himself without being forced, he chooses exile to the

nation, he manifests strong agency and is always aware of his actions. His being other is a blow in the face to any flattening and categorisation. His body becomes the bearer of a stigma that his life, in all its facets, cannot erase. Ritwik's body is laden by the media and the hegemonic discourse with invasive, dangerous characteristics, worthy of rejection from England. Society cannot accept him because his story does not exist, but only what his physicality represents, a diversity that is not welcome: he is called “fucking wog” and “Paki scum” before being attacked and stabbed to death by five men. While being brutally beaten Ritwik, before losing consciousness, does not have the vision of the "diorama of his entire life flashing past his life"(Mukherjee 2011, 396) but two moments of clarity: in one, he asks himself "How can one small human harbour a sea of such anger inside him? Why do they not drown under it?” (Mukherjee 2011, 397) while in the other he realises that he has “wet his jeans” (ibid.). Ritwik's body leaks again, initially urine that frees him from consciousness and shortly afterwards blood that “trickles out onto this dark corner of a back street that will be forever England” (ibid.).

Ritwik's body is his “site of struggle” (Nast and Pile 2005, 2) and resistance. The strength to resist comes mainly from two other bodies, the real one of Anne Cameron and the imaginary one of Miss Gilby. The two women are, in a way, his doubles: both are outcasts in the world they live in. If with Anne Ritwik establishes a relationship of care and complicity that sustains him during his time in London, Miss Gilby gives him the opportunity to escape with his head and use his creativity to create a story that has strong parallels with his own and acts as a kind of catharsis.

3.3. The Others

The weak among us need love
because the strong have everything
(Mukherjee 2001, 277).

There are two characters in the story that in a certain way reflect and complete Ritwik's story. Two women, two outsiders, two resisting spirits. One of them is Miss Gilby and her story, invented by Ritwik, alternates in the book with the episodes of his life, becoming a mirror and a deepening of it. Miss Gilby is a fringe character in in Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire*: set in the early 1900s, the novel chronicles the first waves of Indian independentism against the British. Ritwik makes Miss Gilby the protagonist of his story, narrating her point of view, that of an English woman in colonial India; her role in the original novel is “so marginal, her presence so brief, vanishing almost before her story

began" (Mukherjee 2011, 55-56) but in Ritwik's narration she transforms herself into a powerful and subversive character. The other character is Anne Cameron, the old woman who lodges undocumented migrants in her house as caretakers. Anne lived in India with her Anglo-Indian husband, but once he died, she returned to England with her son, who committed suicide, probably due to his homosexuality. Her condition of social marginalisation and alienation mirrors Ritwik's, and, at the same time, her story connects with that of Miss Gilby, rewritten by Ritwik.

The detached house where Anne and Ritwik live is like "a first-world version of the flat he left behind in Grange Road for a better life, a place where dirt is slowly edging out humans from their space" (Mukherjee 2011, 202). Despite his unease at the thought of having to live there Ritwik immediately feels a great sorrow at the thought of Anne alone in a house so decrepit that his eyes "prick with tears" (Mukherjee 2011, 203).

Immediately a bond of strong complicity is established between the two, united by their lives on the margins, on the fringes of society. The relationship between them becomes one of mutual care and understanding. According to Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos, the most important dimension within the dynamics that regulate and facilitate migrants in their movement and everyday life is the "politics of care" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192). Care is "the generative force through which the forms of life that facilitate the sustainability of migrant movements and the lives of migrants are created" (Bishop 2011, 167) and it includes mutual cooperation, friendships, emotional support and closeness, as well as trust (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192). Ritwik and Anne find in each other a powerful dimension of care and humanity that drives Ritwik to feel at ease in Anne's huge, decaying house and to see it as home. Ritwik recognises the inauthenticity of all homes (George 1999, 175) distancing itself from a narrative common in the migrant genre that portrays a yearning for an authentic home, located in the present or the future (ibid.). The feeling of not belonging anywhere is certainly present in him; nevertheless, his perception of home is linked to an emotional attachment and can therefore vary. Home is not to be understood as a place linked to roots but to an affective dimension of "familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment" (Antonsich 2010, 646).

Ritwik and Anne's state is also mirrored by the exotic birds that perch on tree branches in Anne's wild garden: "a pair of improbable birds", so "utterly out of this world […] they couldn't be real" (Mukherjee 2011, 239). Birds are, like migrants "creatures of flight" (Mukherjee, Vescovi 2019, 229) and the ones in Anne's garden are Quetzals that are only found in forests in Mexico and Panama. Ritwik thus finds out about Anne's deep passion for ornithology, an ambition that could not be

turned into a profession because women, in her time, did not go to university. Anne begins to open up to Ritwik more and more, letting him into "the hidden maze" (Mukherjee 2011, 240) and "penumbral spaces" (ibid.) of her life, full of shattered ambitions, important losses and loneliness. Every time he goes to work, Ritwik thinks of her and genuinely cares for her: she is not just his old woman but also a human point of reference in a world that forces him into an in a situation of alienation. At work in the fields Ritwik soon realises that the groups of migrants are divided "along ethnic lines: the Polish men clumped together, the few Kurdish women stayed close to each other because they were returning to the same council estate or bedsit" (Mukherjee 2011, 292). These static divisions are based on the place of origin and the consequent ability to speak the same language, as many of them do not speak English. Ritwik thinks they probably do not trust him, an outsider "who looked starved but could speak fluent in English, so what was he doing here among them" (Mukherjee 2011, 292), when he could find a better job elsewhere given his command of the language. To return to Anne is to return to a protective and inclusive nest in which he can engage on a deeper level with a human being who welcomes him.

Ritwik reads Anne stories, listens to her life tale, jokes. Her home becomes a dimension where he feels safe and accepted, and London is immediately perceived as an exciting, welcoming place: its bustle, its heterogeneous mix of people, buildings, shops "keep redrawing the contours of this surprising pocket of England. Oxford is a "beautiful, pale, homogeneous thing", while London is "Life-Lite" (Mukherjee 2011, 200), "a life with all the dampeners thrown to the four winds" (ibid.). For Ritwik, "this indicates that there are other such delicious and defiant dissonances scattered across the country; he will have to keep his ears open to discover them from now on" (Mukherjee 2011, 201). Ritwik's words show his enthusiasm in realising that there are places that can welcome and not squeeze him to the margins, where he can blend into a stream of people coming from many different places and backgrounds. They also show all his will to be an active agent in his life, to be open to new situations and experiences, to be flexible, observant and pragmatic.

Anne Cameron's story to some extent reflects Ritwik's own in its present marginalised condition. Miss Gilby's story also can be read in parallel with his life and its written in the form of a novel by Ritwik himself. Her story occupies almost half the book and alternates in chapters with Ritwik's in a contrapuntal structure. During his time at Oxford, driven by his curiosity about classical music, he reads about the concept of counterpoint in the Collins Encyclopaedia:

> The term comes from the idea of note-against-note, or point-against-point, the Latin for which is punctus contra punctum. It consists of melodic lines that are heard against one another, and are woven together so that their individual notes harmonize. In this sense Counterpoint is the same as Polyphony (Mukherjee 2011, 117).

The use of the contrapuntal structure is functional in reading Ritwik's story against that of Miss Gilby. Said adopts the counterpoint structure in the literary arts to indicate interweaving narratives that have no hierarchical order and where all parties are equal and independent (Bartine 2022, 62). This structure is useful when applied in the reading of colonial texts to give equal importance to the perspective of the coloniser and the colonised, “to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached Western observer” (Said 1994, 51). This critical vision, open to different worlds, is evoked by Said in his description of the status of the exile, with his acute awareness of different dimensions (Mortimer 2005, 57). This awareness is easily relatable to that of the migrant.

> Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that-to borrow a phrase from music-is contrapuntal. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be (Said 1984, 55).

In the case of Miss Gilby and Ritwik, the contrasting environments are those of modern England and colonial India, both seen from the point of view of two outsiders. At the same time, the reality of the coloniser and the colonised are counterpointed in Miss Gilby's narrative. However, they do not have such clear-cut boundaries as Miss Gilby, despite being English, is extremely open and empathetic towards the reality of the colonised and challenges the figure of the coloniser. In creating Miss Gilby as a kind of alter ego, there seems to be above all Ritwik's desire to portray her

as a multifaceted human being, beyond the reductive categorisations concerning her belonging to a certain nation. Like Ritwik she is open, curious, eager to inhabit a reality that does not exclude and discriminate. The fact of being British should not be an impediment to her self-expression just as the fact of being an Indian migrant should not preclude Ritwik from expressing himself. The reality, however, does not reflect Ritwik's desires for inclusion and free expression. Both Miss Gilby and Ritwik become outsiders in a world that excludes and silences those who do not conform to the dominant narrative.

When she arrives in India Miss Gilby feels a thrilling sense of freedom: "it was a country where she would have to learn everything all over again. So she set out to do just that" (Mukherjee 2011, 29). If Ritwik, in his personal way, affirms the will to be free to follow his impulses and non-conformist ways, Miss Gilby takes this will to a higher level: she is not afraid to be opinionated and behave according to her nature in public, actively trying to subvert the rigid hierarchies that govern interaction between British and Indians. Ritwik has no intention of fighting to change his situation and that of other migrants, he just needs to find a niche where he can be himself. Miss Gilby, on the other hand, is outspoken, she takes the future of Indian women to heart and misses no opportunity to show her defiant attitude. Ritwik projects onto her the desire for change on a larger scale and the wish not to always have to hide. At the same time, Miss Gilby belongs to the dominant and privileged class of the colonisers, so this guarantees her a far greater safety and sphere of action than that of an irregular migrant, the lowest rung of society. Ritwik is aware that he cannot alter the system, but he gives this mission to Miss Gilby. She tries to act as a bridge between the British and Indian culture and would like to be able to intermingle more with Indian women, for whom she hopes for increased freedom. She regards Indian women as sisters, not as inferior beings. By acting in this way, Miss Gilby subverts the coloniser/colonised structure reflected in the treatment of women on both the English and Indian side. The presence of British women was crucial in the colonial project of the British Raj, not only to ensure the legitimate birth of future rulers but also to recreate the moral, domestic and social values that legitimised imperial leadership (Beretta 2017, 38). The Englishwoman had to "replicate the empire on a domestic scale" (George 1999, 50) and the encounter between white and Indian women, in either's home, served to emphasise the superiority of the English woman (George 1999, 57). The status of the white woman in society was the norm against which the inferiority of native women clashed (George 1999, 58): in the Indian Empire "there was a comfortable belief that the emancipation of women was a completed project – one only had to look at "native" women to know so" (ibid.).

Miss Gilby, instead, is strongly anti-conformist in her attitudes. During social occasions she tries to socialise with everyone, men and women, earning herself a reputation as "'dangerous', unwomanly', 'unpatriotic' and 'unnatural'" (Mukherjee 2011, 30). She has an ally in Violet Cameron, another non-conformist woman who establishes a school for Indian women in her backyard – we may assume that Violet Cameron is, in Ritwik's invention, Anne Cameron's mother-in-law. It may seem a paternalistic attitude for two women in a privileged position to stand up for the weaker, but both of them are genuinely interested and active in Indian cultural and political life. Miss Gilby studies the local culture and language and writes about women's rights, and Violet is also involved in Indian political and cultural life. The two women are united by their status as outsiders, as women not conforming to the stiffness of the English community. This inflexibility is perfectly portrayed in the description of the parties, occasions that one would associate with leisure, freedom, fun. Instead, the parties mirror a limited and monotonous reality; they are only occasions to reaffirm the rigidity of a society that is based on exclusion and discrimination.

> She had refused to play their game, she had refused to live in a little England […] parties were thrown to show who stood where, immovable, the possibility of mobility a dangerous mirage[…] The natives inhabited a different world from their masters […] Rule set in stone, cast in iron. There was no deflection from that. (Mukherjee 2011, 30).

Like Miss Gilby, Ritwik refuses to live in the stiff and suffocating world that India is to him. Becoming illegal means rebelling against the rules set in stone by his Bengali family and the reality he grew up in, which wanted him at home in a den of selfish and oppressive relatives, reflecting a society that does not accept and oppresses him.

When Mr Roy Chowdhury, a progressive Indian, asks her to become his wife Bimala's English teacher, Miss Gilby moves to their house. As the Swadeshi movement grows, urging a boycott of British products, Miss Gilby researches and studies, realising that she wants to participate "in the thick and press of this germinating revolution" (Mukherjee 2011, 213). As she makes up her mind, a new feeling assails her: she feels "oddly divided, melancholy, as if her loyalties were neatly riven and have been called into question, as if two equal forces were pulling her in contrary directions. The sense of implied betrayal she feels is already enormous" (Mukherjee 2011, 213). She realises that her way of being and thinking estranges her even further from her nation, to the point of siding with Indians. She would like to feel part of and not to betray her nation but this would go far against

her being and her values. This creates a sense of sorrow and sadness that stems also from the realisation that she belongs to neither world. Just as England does not represent her, she can never truly be part of the Indian world. This indeed manifests itself at the moment when, during the height of the Swadeshi movement, she is attacked by a group of four Indian men she knows. She does not understand how it is possible that people who used to address her lovingly now want to attack her. Her profound humanity and openness clashes with the brutal realisation that her being British in the eyes of the Indians will always be stronger than her being human: it doesn't matter if you don't want it, your citizenship is attached to you and is the basis on which the events that characterise life are determined. Both the English and the Indians exclude Miss Gilby: if the former discriminate against her for her transgressive and non-conforming behaviour, the latter identify her with the figure of the coloniser.

Ritwik also feels he is betraying his roots when he arrives in London in its vibrancy and multicultural variety. His feeling, unlike Miss Gilby's, gives him a sense of exaltation because London represents a freedom that is new to him, a freedom to which he wants to belong. He is excited just at the thought of all the other contrasting, multicultural and lively places to be found in England: although he does not yet know them "they speak to his blood with an intimacy he finds almost embarrassing, as if he has been exposed as unfaithful, disloyal" (Mukherjee 2011, 201). His enthusiasm and exaltation are somewhat dampened by the melancholic feeling of Miss Gilby. He seems to project into her the bitter realisation that ultimately not even London will be able to eradicate his sense of alienation. Like Miss Gilby, his heart, his instincts go in a direction that contrasts with the common feeling of belonging to the community of birth and the ties of blood as they both belong to the world, to the situations they deem congenial to their being, to their instincts and humanity.

Ritwik is an outsider both within his country and his family. He wants to escape the squalor of Calcutta and refuses to become like his father, "helpless and exploited, unable to escape" (Mukherjee 2011, 190) and to bow to Bengali family rules, where families are "based more on subtle ties of provider and receiver than on any intangible emotional bonding"(Mukherjee 2011, 9). He becomes an outcast even in London where he is perceived as different, as an invader both of physical places – he does not belong in Meat Mile and in farm jobs – and of community identities as he can't be assimilated by proper English values. Despite this, Ritwik approaches the world with curiosity, empathy and eagerness, and does not passively suffer reality but strives to create a life for himself which has at its core the possibility of expressing his desires, inclinations and innermost

nature without being bridled and judged. Like Miss Gilby he finds a friend in another outcast, with whom he establishes a relationship of confidence, support and complicity. Like Miss Gilby he belongs and wants to stick to a non-conformist world, viewed with disdain by normality but where he manages to be himself and feels free.

Unlike Miss Gilby, however, Ritwik is not saved. His belonging to non-privileged categories – irregular migrant, queer, prostitute, non-white – does not allow him to escape reality. Belonging to the privileged world alongside power allows Miss Gilby to re-begin and flee from a dangerous situation. Mr Roy Chowdhury sends her back to Calcutta, considering the circumstances too unsafe for her. The last image of her is in Calcutta in the company of Ruth Fairweather, the ornithologist with whom Anne Cameron had bonded in India and from whom she had learned so much; Miss Gilby is helping Ruth with illustrations of different feathers and flora that belong to the habitats of various native birds. The stories of these women intersect once again in Ritwik's imagination, creating an anti-conformist situation where what binds is not family, status or community membership, but human ties, solidarity, openness and curiosity about the world and its creatures. Ritwik, however, is not allowed to live a life marked by new experiences and discoveries. His death is symbolically the death of the diverse, the deviant body, a threat to mainstream Western values (Anthias 2016, 182). This does not mean, however, that along the way he has not lived intensely and exercised the strong agency that is often forgotten to belong to the most marginal strata of society. In creating Miss Gilby's story, Ritwik gives voice to his creativity and creates a character who, like him, embodies a nonconforming, open minded, full of life and curiosity way of being.

Ritwik's story is in stark contrast to mainstream narratives. To representations of aggressive, intrusive, super-masculine migrants who invade the nation and undermine its values, Ritwik contrasts a gentle, polite, fragile image. If prostitution is generally linked to an idea of work performed only under coercion, he claims the will to make this work his occupation because it is in accordance with his nature. Heteronormative sexuality is countered by a queer sexuality untold by hegemonic discourse, especially in the context of migration, and promiscuity is portrayed as a means to express oneself and exorcise trauma. Ritwik's story stands out in all its versatility, vitality and uniqueness against the invisibility into which power strives to relegate him and all other migrants.

Conclusion

The aim of this research has been to shed light on ways of exercising agency by refugees and irregular migrants, in order to provide an insight into a reality that is rarely narrated in hegemonic discourses. Although the facts analysed in this thesis do not represent the totality of the experiences of a world as diverse as that of migrants, I nevertheless think that they can provide an important glimpse into the migratory experience that contrasts with the mainstream perspective, which silences migrants' stories or relegates them to incomplete and fallacious narratives.

It is worth noting that the two novels portray two seemingly very different realities. In *The Hungry Tide* we travel through a choral and poetic world where ancient traditions and songs are interwoven with the stories of the present, and nature gives new forms to human experiences. The focus is on the ways in which the refugees' community exercise resistance, highlighting the enormous potential that lies in acting as an organised and cohesive community. In this way, it challenges a pervasive narrative that sees refugees as masses to be handled, at the mercy of powers that dominate and ostracise them. *A Life Apart*, on the other hand, transports us into a dark, insidious and alienating world, where the metropolis, with its vitality and shadowy areas, is the backdrop against which Ritwik's daily struggles are played out. The focus is placed on the protagonist's personal experience as a queer, sensitive, troubled and curious migrant, in stark contrast to the common imagery associated with the migrant as an aggressive and masculinised encroacher.

The collective resistance of the refugees in *The Hungry Tide* unveils the dynamics of an arbitrary and brutal power, determined with all means to crush them. Ritwik, on the other hand, voluntarily puts himself in a situation where he is aware that power can act upon him. *A Life Apart* prompts a reflection on the general propensity to consider forced migrations, where the displacement is due to fleeing from situations at the limit of survival, such as wars and repressive regimes, as more legitimate than voluntary migrations. Ritwik's will to escape from a life that makes him miserable according to his standards in order to pursue a better one, should be considered as a more than legitimate reason to migrate. Ultimately, both stories, like most migrants' stories, have at their core the struggle to be able to live freely, according to one's own nature, something that is often taken for granted but which is precluded to a huge segment of the population.

If the hegemonic narrative silences migrants' stories in order to be able to manipulate and use

them within its political agenda, the creation of spaces where their experiences can be told and heard becomes crucial. Only in this way can we begin to become aware of the incompleteness and deceptiveness of the reality that is presented to us on a daily basis and, therefore, open up to a different and more inclusive perspective.

One of the most effective means of circulating alternative narratives is precisely literature, as it is a medium that makes accessible content that would otherwise not be easily available. Literature is capable of generating an emotional connection that facilitates our engagement with realities to which we often have no access and ignore. The fact that the characters in the books are given human depth, in which their feelings, drives, desires and hopes are explored as well as their interaction with others, allows for a more complete view that offers a perspective in which they emerge from the rigid category of bare life, regaining a multisided humanity that is too often denied to them. Being able to rely on different narrative styles, narrative focuses, points of view and atmospheres makes literature a comprehensive vehicle to give depth and relevance to the variety of the migration experience.

The Hungry Tide and *A Life Apart* give visibility, dignity and strength to refugees and illegal migrants' complex realities. If Amitav Ghosh and Neel Mukherjee narrate situations they did not experience directly, although based on topical and documented facts, there are also cases in which literature becomes direct testimony of the migration experience. A fitting example is that of Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish-Iranian journalist detained for years in the Australian-run detention centre on Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea. He chronicled his and the other detainees' situation inside the camp in Persian on WhatsApp messages, which he would send to a translator friend. Once all these messages were translated, his experience became an award-winning book, a first-hand account of Australia's brutal immigration detention system.

Literature manages to escape the camps, crosses borders and reaches multiple people, bearing witness to realities that, coming out of the enforced silence to which they have been relegated, become essential building blocks to construct a new and necessary perspective on the migrant world.

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