# ‘Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped building’: Subaltern Figures and S

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Revelatory Readings?

# 'Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped building': Subaltern Figures and Spectral Metaphors in Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways* (2015), and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017)

*'Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped building': Figures subalternes et métaphores spectrales dans The Year of the Runaways (Sunjeev Sahota, 2014) et Temporary People (Deepak Unnikrishnan, 2017)*

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## *Abstracts*

English Français
Some works in the British sphere have recently focused on refugees in the UK (Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways*, 2015) or Indian migrant workers in the UAE (Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 2017). The former sheds light upon characters which have not often been staged in British literature, such as an "untouchable" who was forced out of the country or a man who was drawn to sell a kidney to pay for student visa. The latter, a collection of short stories, revives the ghost trope, suggesting that the often undocumented workers have spectral lives. I wish to reflect upon the representation of subaltern figures in literature and more particularly on the spectral

metaphor. According to Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, the concept of “ghost” may refer to social outcasts, “impotent and ineffectual victims rather than powerful aggressors” (2010, x). Is the figure of the ghost in literature still empowering? Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s discussion on “marked” bodies (*Strange Encounters*, 46) and other theoretical works, this article discusses what literature performs on the lives, voices and bodies of marginalised figures and ponders over the ethics of writing and reading works focusing on such themes.

Certaines œuvres littéraires anglophones se sont récemment penchées sur des figures de réfugiés au Royaume-Uni (Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways*, 2015) ou celles des travailleurs invités indiens dans les Émirats arabes unis (Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*, 2017). Le roman de Sahota met l’accent sur des personnages qui n’ont pas souvent été représentés dans la littérature britannique, tel un Dalit qui a dû fuir l’Inde ou un homme indien forcé de vendre l’un de ses reins afin de pouvoir s’offrir un visa étudiant. Le second texte à l’étude est le recueil de nouvelles écrit par Deepak Unnikrishnan ; recueil dans lequel est revisité le trope du fantôme, suggérant que les personnages de travailleurs sans papiers ont des vies spectrales. L’article vise à réfléchir à la représentation de figures subalternes dans la littérature et à étudier plus particulièrement la métaphore spectrale. Selon Maria del Pilar Blanco et Esther Peeren, le concept de ‘fantôme’ peut renvoyer à des personnes marginalisées socialement (2010, x). On peut se demander si la figure du fantôme en littérature est encore susceptible de conférer une forme d’*agency*, de pouvoir, à ceux et celles qui se trouvent en situation de précarité. À l’appui des travaux de Sara Ahmed sur les corps étrangers (*Strange Encounters*) et d’autres travaux théoriques, il s’agira de discuter de ce que la littérature produit sur les vies, voix et corps de figures marginalisées dans le monde et de réfléchir aux positionnements éthiques liés à l’écriture et à la lecture d’œuvres littéraires ou artistiques portant sur des figures précaires.

## *Index terms*

**Mots-clés :** réfugiés, Littérature postcoloniale, invisibilité sociale, hospitalité, éthique, représentation, marginalité, spectralité, précarité, vulnérabilité
**Keywords:** refugees, postcolonial literature, social invisibility, hospitality, ethics, representation, marginality, spectrality, precariousness, vulnerability

## *Full text*

1 A few Anglophone literary works have recently focused on precarious figures: Sunjeev Sahota’s *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) deals with refugees and migrants in the UK while Deepak Unnikrishnan’s collection of stories *Temporary People* (2017) tackles Indian migrant workers in the UAE. All the figures depicted in these works can be said to be in situations of precarity, according to Judith Butler’s definition of the term: in *Frames of War*, Butler considers ‘precariousness’ as ‘the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all’ (2009, 14).[1] Butler also defines precarity as a particular case of precariousness, ‘that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’ (25), which leads her to think of precarious people as people being ‘at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection’ (25–26).

2 *The Year of the Runaways* deals with the lives of three Indian men and a British-Indian woman over the course of a year as they meet and/or move away from each other in the city of Sheffield. The novel sheds light upon characters which have not often been staged in British literature, such as a Dalit man, a British Indian woman who agrees to a fake marriage to enable a fellow Indian to get a permanent visa after spending a year in the UK or a young man who sells a kidney to pay for a student visa. *Temporary People*, a collection of short stories, revives the ghost trope as the quote in the very title of this article shows.

3 The aim of this article is to reflect upon the representation of subaltern figures in literature as ghosts and more particularly to analyse the use of the ghost figure and of the ‘spectral metaphor’, as Peeren calls it. We tend to often imagine ghosts as active agents: ‘Ghosts are expected to act as powerful figures of disturbance whose appearance

causes mayhem: in most ghost stories, unsettling questions are raised about the status of "reality" and the border between life and death, secrets from the past are revealed, revenge is exacted, bloodlines and inheritances put in question, and only decisive action on the part of the living can exorcize the apparition' (Peeren 2). Referring to Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887), Peeren shows that the ghost's alleged power is yet 'counterbalanced by vulnerabilities' (Peeren 3): 'the ghost's incomplete and intermittent embodiment not only makes it ungraspable, but often leaves it unable to affect the physical world directly or effectively' (Peeren 3). In her study entitled *The Spectral Metaphor*, Peeren moves from the analysis of the ghost figure to that of 'ghostly figures', asking the question: 'what does it mean to live as a ghost, especially when this spectral metaphor designates a state of dispossession?' (Peeren 4). She coined the notion of 'living ghosts' to refer to 'undocumented migrants, servants or domestic workers, mediums and missing persons' (Peeren 5). As she explains, what links these figures is that they are 'likened to ghosts or related figures, on the basis of their lack of social visibility, unobtrusiveness, enigmatic abilities or uncertain status between life and death' (5). These ghostly figures may thus simply refer to "social outcasts" as Peeren and Del Pilar Blanco argue: 'impotent and ineffectual victims rather than powerful aggressors' (Peeren and Del Pilar Blanco x). It is therefore necessary to examine 'the ambiguity of the ghost's relationship to power: it may appear as a dominant, even sovereign being, but can also manifest as a figure of compromised agency' (Peeren 3). One is thus led to wonder if the literary works under study are likely to give new visibility to subaltern figures or if they further increase the invisibility that already characterises the said figures. Given what is aforementioned, one may also wonder whether the ghost trope can be considered as an empowering metaphor,[2] or on the contrary, if its repeated, if not hackneyed, use to refer to marginalised figures and lives may not deprive the corresponding subjects of any possibility of agency.

4 The article will also be an opportunity to discuss what it is exactly that the literary works of these two authors perform, as well as the ways in which they can be received, from an ethical point of view. As Barbara Korte insightfully reminds us, 'Representing the misery of others can raise sympathy and awareness . . . but it can also, more dubiously in ethical terms, fulfil needs of the recipient rather than the represented' (Korte and Regard 8).[3] Both works engage with dialectics of visibility and invisibility and make use of the spectral metaphor, albeit in different ways, as will be shown in the present article.

## *The Year of the Runaways*: Looking for (In)visibility

5 It should be recalled that the novel was published in 2015, at a time when many images of makeshift camps across Europe swelling with asylum seekers, or of overcrowded boats across the Mediterranean, circulated across the globe. The novel opens with all the male characters aforementioned having arrived in Britain. Their main preoccupation then being to find, and above all, keep, their menial jobs. Tochi, the Dalit character, entered the UK as a *fauji*, an illegal laborer with no official identity. This character in particular is likened to a ghost because unlike his fellow countrymen who have official papers which grant them the right to be in the UK, if not the right to be seen, Tochi must absolutely remain invisible to the authorities; his invisibility can thus be seen as a characteristic shared with ghosts. Indeed, when speaking of 'ghostly figures', Peeren reminds us that one main characteristic is their 'shared association with that which escapes or exceeds the visible' (Peeren 5). The fact that the three male Indian characters, and their fellow-counterparts, should inhabit underground locations —they sleep in crowded squats, on the floor at their jobs, or in makeshift camps under railroad bridges—emphasises their spectral condition as they are looking for invisibility by investing places that remain hidden from the general public.

6 Other features such as 'repetition, displacement and duplication' (Peeren 4) are also qualities that have been assigned to ghosts and that can be found in the novel, both on the diegetic and narrative levels. For instance, when new recruits are referred to, the narrator explains that 'they came and went *all the time*' (Sahota 14). The evocation of the characters coming and going suggests an idea of duplication as new recruits substitute for others while the temporal reference implies the repetition of this process of substitution. These notions of repetition and duplication are also to be found at the level of onomastics as the similar sonorities between, for instance, the names Randeep and Gurpreet may suggest interchangeability, making each character the double of the other. The notion of displacement is more particularly perceived in passages describing incessant movement which alternate with moments of stasis ('it seemed to him that each new week took the span of an entire age' [Sahota 23]). This signals the coexistence of disjointed temporalities as if the characters' temporalities were out of sync with the rest of the people in the UK:

> Soon the house was a whirl of voices *and* feet *and* toilet flushes *and* calls to get out of bed. They filed down, rucksacks slung over sleepy shoulders, taking their lunchbox from the kitchen counter; *next* a rushed prayer at the joss stick *and out* into the cold morning dark *in twos and threes*, *at* ten-minute *intervals*. (Sahota 18, emphasis added)

7 The evocation of the ten-minute intervals highlights the repetitive process while the specification of the characters moving 'in twos and threes' reinforces the fact that the individuals are hardly identifiable and distinguishable from each other. The use of the polyptoton in the first sentence anchors repetition within the rhythm of the sentence itself while the many syntactic breaks create disjunction at the narrative level, which as a consequence, connects the characters and their moves with the figure of the ghost. Adding to these notions of repetition and displacement, Slavoj Žižek's association of the ghost with insistence is an interesting frame through which the novel can be analysed. According to Žižek: 'That which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence' (*Welcome* 22, original emphasis). At the beginning of the text, Randeep's attempts to reach out to Tochi are met with indifference: '"Would you like a blanket? I have one spare," Randeep whispered. He asked again and when he again got no reply he tiptoed forward and folded out his best blanket and spread it over his new room-mate' (Sahota 16). The repetition of the adverb 'again' conveys this idea of insistence which is both visible on the diegetic level and the narrative level. Randeep's insistence is indeed perceptible in the fact that despite Tochi's lack of response, he still reaches out to him by spreading his blanket over his new room-mate's body. It is thus noticeable that ghostly characters, meaning characters who do not benefit from social visibility, are themselves likely to reproduce invisibilising practices towards fellow Indians.

8 Sahota's novel complicates the visibility/invisibility dialectics, including Guillaume Le Blanc's concept of 'social invisibility'—by which the philosopher refers to people seen as marginal, as being nobody, as being deprived of any remarkable qualities (Le Blanc 12–13). In Sahota's novel, invisibility is indeed often sought by the main protagonists, which echoes Françoise Král's reflection on the dialectics between visibility and invisibility:

> Sometimes the migrant chooses to be invisible for his/her own convenience—this is the case with illegal immigrants for example—sometimes s/he becomes invisible despite his/her efforts to be socially or politically visible. And very often the deliberate invisibility triggers a long-term unwanted invisibility as the migrant finds himself/herself caught in a vicious circle of marginalised second-class citizenship, doomed to exist on the outskirts of society, without a right to health care or any form of social welfare. (Král 53)

9 The agency underlined in Sarah Sharma's phrase, 'strategising of invisibility' (Sharma 142), still needs to be qualified as such strategy is necessarily implemented as a response to the threats embodied by police raids in Sahota's novel. Invisibility is thus a strategy that is forced upon the characters rather than one freely chosen. Sharma

actually writes about the characters of Stephen Frears' movie *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) that 'invisibility is a requirement of the banned economy to which these characters labor, but it is also a strategy of survival' (Sharma 142), which shows that the externally imposed and self-imposed dimensions of this 'strategising of invisibility' are not incompatible.[4]

10 Moreover, such a strategy of remaining unseen can be articulated with Achille Mbembe's concept of the 'living dead'. One of Sahota's characters saying 'We're like flies trapped in a web' (Sahota 317) reminds us of Mbembe's definition of the 'living dead': 'extreme forms of human life, death-worlds, forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)' (Mbembe 132). More precisely, what Mbembe sees as these living dead's 'ability to metamorphose'[5] finds an interesting echo in Randeep, one of the Indian protagonists of Sahota's novel, who takes over a new identity as Narinder's husband before the authorities and is forced to navigate between his various identities throughout the novel. What is particularly striking in the novel is that while some characters seek invisibility, others, as what Peeren says about undocumented migrants, 'remain unseen despite being physically present and fully available to ocular perception' (Peeren 29). In the novel, Randeep wishes Narinder saw him, not just literally but metaphorically (as a potential husband).

11 A supplementary dimension of the dialectics between visibility and visibility appears in the novel when, indeed, Randeep acts as Narinder's husband. On one occasion, immigration officers come and visit their flat and the two characters use photos of themselves to suggest that they have shared memories while they do not: 'That night they hung up their wedding photos, and around the TV Narinder stood the holiday pictures Randeep had brought with him on one of his first visits' (Sahota 243). This partakes of a process that this time consists in making visible what is not, in giving visibility to what does not even exist.

12 The fact of seeing and not seeing is clearly a literary stake in the novel as the many occurrences of the verb 'see' show. When Randeep begs Narinder to provide shelter for himself and two of his 'friends' and himself after their house was raided, one reads the following:

> "OK. A week. But no longer, please. Someone might *see*", she added. . . .
> "We'll be out looking for work during the day," Avtar said, joining them. "You won't *see* us." (Sahota 351, emphasis mine)

13 When the vulnerability of these characters who are associated with ghosts is not linked to the necessity of morphing and being invisible, it can be found in the characters' experience of dispossession as Butler and Athanasiou define it: 'a term that marks the limits of self-sufficiency and that establishes us as relational and interdependent beings . . . . We are dispossessed of ourselves . . . by virtue of being moved and even surprised or disconcerted by [the] encounter with alterity' (Butler and Athanasiou 3). In the novel, even if competition for jobs is fierce between the various Indian characters, cooperation is also central—it is literally what enables the characters to survive in Britain. In one passage in the novel, one Indian character suffers from intense stomach-ache but his fellow-companions cannot afford to call an ambulance as they would risk being arrested by the police. They thus find a way to leave the man near a doctor's surgery so that he should still be taken care of without their own lives being put at risk.

14 Tochi, the Dalit character, also experiences dispossession in a way that is similar to how Butler and Athanasiou have defined the concept. Dispossession leads Tochi from a state of aphasia to extreme volubility. In the first half of the novel, the text abounds with sentences suggesting Tochi's silence and/or refusal to speak, as the following occurrences show: 'Tochi said nothing' (19), '"How did you get there? Ship or truck?" "On your mother's cunt"' (20), 'Tochi didn't reply' (25), 'Tochi said nothing' (26), 'Tochi remained silent' (57), 'Tochi said nothing' (83/87/89). It is only when he is 'affected' by

Narinder's love, the British-Indian woman who is officially Randeep's wife, that he can tell her about the traumatic events he has experienced throughout his life:

> He told her everything. About his father's accident, his sister's wedding, his attempts to make it as an auto driver. The riots that engulfed them and killed his family. His two years working in a brick factory in Calcutta and the travel across to Europe by plane, ship and truck. His weeks on the streets of Paris and the year in Southall and, finally, the trip up to here, Sheffield. 'Life,' he said. (Sahota 425)

15 The juxtaposed sentences suggest words being suddenly unfettered and create a sense of rhythm that conveys the idea of a transient life. Later in the novel, another moment of intimacy between the Dalit character and Narinder suggests reciprocal dispossession. Tochi asks her where her God was when his entire family died. An emotional moment of disclosure occurs as Narinder takes off her turban before him,[6] realising that loving this man means severing ties with her own family, while Tochi undergoes a similar process of dispossession:

> she raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on the table. She eased out the hairpin down by her neck and placed that on the table too. And then the pin above that, and then pin after pin and clip after clip and all the while her hair was coming down in ribbons, loosening, uncoiling, falling. . . . She stared at him, her arms arranged over her chest as if she were naked. Candlelight on her long hair. He came forward and knelt beside her and put his head in her lap. He felt her hands lightly touch him and they both wept for all they had lost. (Sahota 433)

16 It is interesting to see how the fact that Narinder touches Tochi makes him move from the social status that used to be referred to as 'untouchability' in India to a moment when he is recognised through touch, thus no longer ghostly and invisible, at least in her eyes. One can also note that the act of touching Tochi is part of a scene marked by tenderness and eroticism, as the narrative addition 'as if she were naked' seems to suggest. More importantly, the fact that he should be the one touching her first, as is underlined by the phrase 'put his head in her lap', makes the scene eminently subversive as it consists in a Dalit committing the ultimate sin from the point of view of members of the highest castes in India—*i.e.* running the risk of polluting Narinder by the mere fact of touching her. It is interesting to notice that this is one particular passage in the novel where caste is annihilated as opposed to other excerpts where Tochi is often reminded of his 'Dalitness'. This passage also echoes Sara Ahmed's discussion of touch as she explains:

> . . . Rather than thinking of skin as always exposed and touchable, we can think about how different ways of touching allow for different configurations of bodily and social space. Friendship and familial relation involve the ritualisation of certain forms of touch, while the recognition of an-other as a stranger might involve a refusal to get too close through touch. (Ahmed 49)

17 Narinder's act of touching Tochi thus consists in a recognition of the character as anyone but a stranger. Ethical encounters occur between characters that are invisible to the British majority and that become visible to each other.

18 Maurice Blanchot's concept of hospitality can also prove useful when analysing the scenes when Tochi and Narinder start eating together while Tochi is living unofficially at her place. According to Blanchot, 'Hospitality consists less in nourishing the guest than in restoring in him a taste for food by recalling him to the level of need, to a life where one can say and stand hearing said, "And now, let us not forget to eat"' (Blanchot 95). Here again, the novel is the site of an evolution from Tochi hardly eating, despite Narinder once preparing a tray with food for him that he leaves untouched, to them cooking together, in spite of the fact that he is a Dalit, which leads them to develop some sense of intimate bonding: 'That became the shape of their evenings: one of them cooking up the dhal or sabzi, the other making the rotis, and then a meal together, quietly, peaceably' (Sahota 426). Despite the fact that this is not specified in the text, we

can imagine the two of them sharing a meal, sitting at the same table, which would be unimaginable in India because of the caste system which basically forbids such interactions. One can remember in contrast the passage where Tochi's status is discovered by the parents of a woman who could have become his wife. The woman's mother starts insulting him: "'You bhanchod cunt! You dirty beast! What do you think you are? . . . To think we trusted you. To think we let you into our home. Marry my niece? Go back to cleaning shit, you dirty sister-fucking cunt . . . . Get out of my home"' (Sahota 309). Adding to the violence of the insults uttered here, what is striking is the clear division that is operated between the woman (and her family) and Tochi through the use of the pronouns 'you' and 'we'. The move from 'we' to 'I' even suggests differentiation within the woman's community. In other terms, even when the boundaries seem clear, the ghost still makes them more complicated than they are. This echoes Peeren's notion that:

> the specter stands for that which never simply *is* . . . and insists on blurring multiple borders, between visibility and invisibility, past and present, materiality and immateriality, science and pseudo-science, religion and superstition, life and death, presence and absence, reality and imagination' (Peeren 10),

and we could add to the list, between caste and 'outcast(e)'.

19 Sahota's novel operates upon various levels: first, it gives readers the opportunity to see an alternative Britain, one that is less white, less rich than the Britain that could be portrayed in contemporary British novels, while it invisibilises the dominant population by the same process. It certainly invites us to complexify the dialectics of visibility and invisibility as the main characters do not systematically look for invisibility while they are generally made socially invisible. Some share a desire to be seen, hence desire for visibility/invisibility appears to be adjustable, depending on circumstances. Something that the novel also does is that it re-injects meaning into journalese phrases like 'scam marriages', 'illegal workers', or 'abuse of student visas'.[7] The novel replaces common administrative jargon with voices, names and subjectivities. Similarly, it also challenges and complexifies terms such as 'migrants' or 'refugees', by presenting such characters as three-dimensional and eschewing narratives which tend to make similar figures unambiguously into either victims or aliens. In that respect, the phrase 'Indians in the UK' becomes more complex than ever, as Indian characters in the novel range from the kindest expatriates to the most exploitative ones: 'Our own people are the worst at bleeding us dry' (Sahota 340), a friend of Narinder's notes in the novel.

20 Sahota's novel gives materiality to these invisible and invisibilised characters, which is something that can also be stated about Unnikrishnan's collection of stories *Temporary People*, even if the figure of the ghost and spectrality are conjured up in a different way in these writings.

## *Temporary People*: Re-embodying Spectral Lives and Characters

21 Unnikrishnan's collection of stories is characterised by formal experimentation. The interesting situationality of the author should probably be mentioned as the author is a writer of Indian origin who was born in Kerala, lived in Abu Dhabi, studied in the US and is now teaching at New York University in Abu Dhabi. As he said in an interview:

> I am not Emirati. I am someone who grew up in Abu Dhabi. I've got an Indian passport, but I've never lived in India. So when I say I am from Abu Dhabi that makes sense to me, because I am not lying at all when I say that. When I say I am from the States, especially New York City and Chicago, I am not lying when I say that either. I suppose I am claiming spaces. I am a perpetual transient. I am certainly not an "international writer" or a "global citizen" either. . . . I grew up in a city that trained me to leave it behind. Detachment was expected, and accepted. In that sense, I am always waiting to see when I will be asked or required to leave.

> This thought is on standby in my brain all the time because I have had a visa, or at least a temporary contract, in every place I've called home. I am aware of time, always. As a writer, this might be why I gravitated towards the short story. It's as though the form understands the preciousness/ephemerality of time and space (Barron 2017).[8]

22 The volume *Temporary People* includes alongside the stories, drawings, short texts reminiscent of press chronicles, short plays, and even the wording of a mathematics exercise, among others.

**Figure 1.—*Temporary People* (Unnikrishnan 2).**[9]

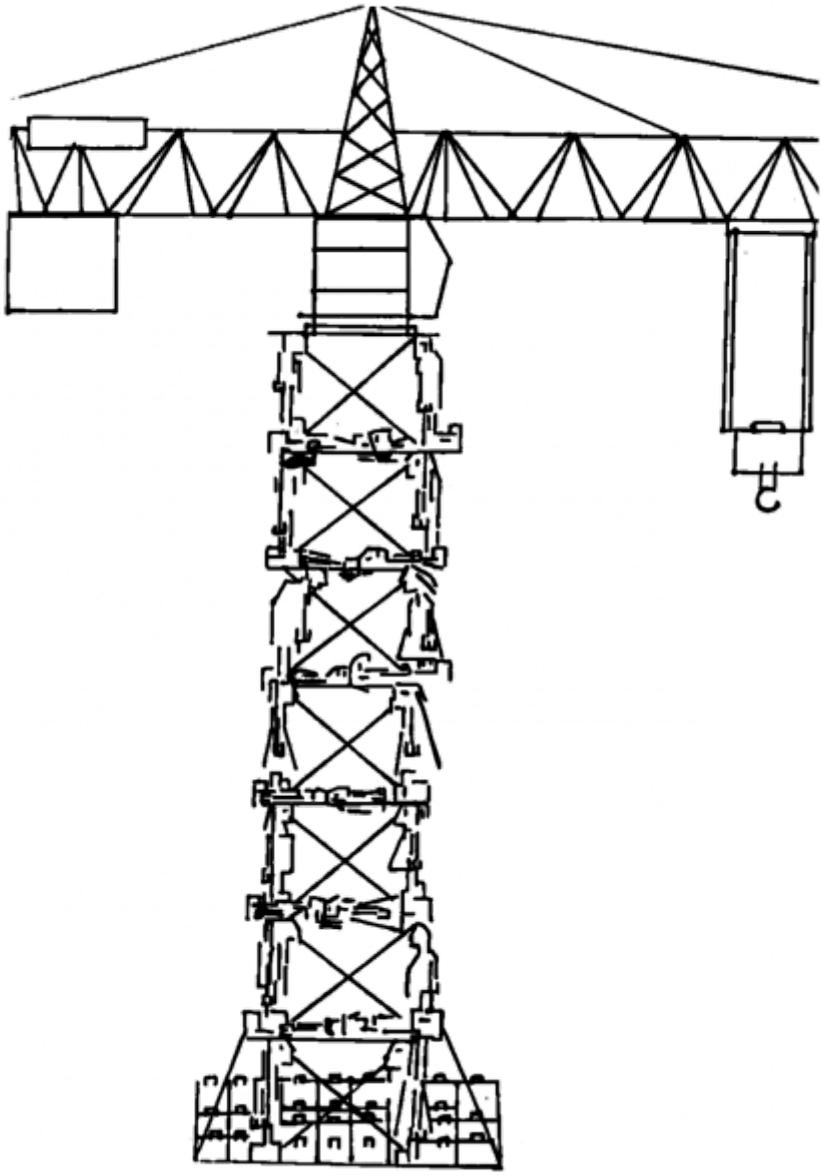
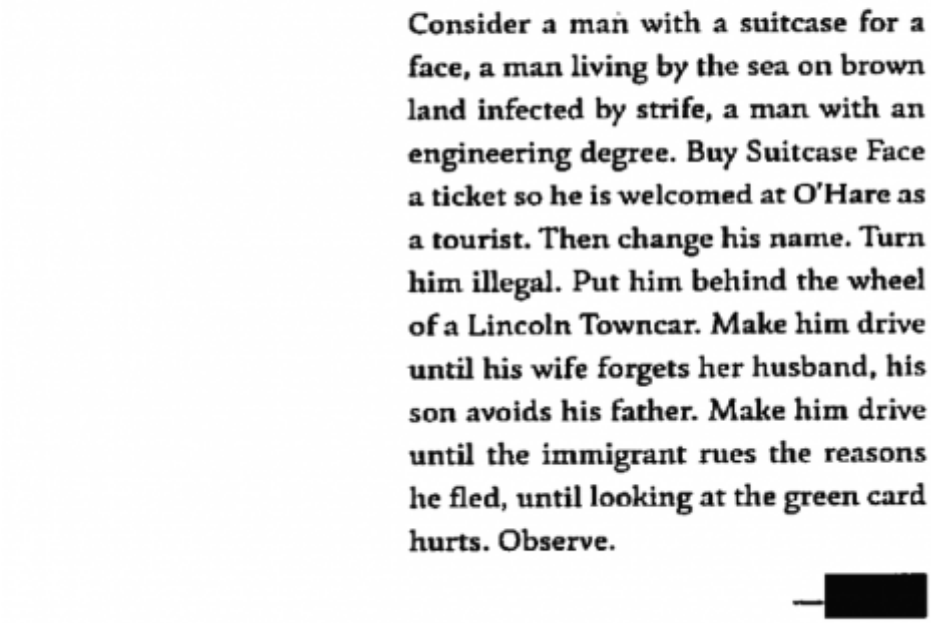


**Figure 2.—'Veed' (Unnikrishnan 189).**




23 The texts oscillate between realism and fantasy. The stories, in the same vein as Sahota's novel, stage characters that can be said to be lacking social visibility, *i.e.* Indian labourers from Kerala working in the Gulf as labourers on construction sites, nurses, domestic workers, among others. Indians represent about 30% of the population in UAE, being reportedly the largest ethnic community in the region. In 2017, three-fourths of the population were immigrants from foreign countries, including India. While 85–90% of the Indian community was blue-collar in the 1970s and 1980s, the profile of the community has allegedly evolved alongside the new needs of the country.[10] Still, a substantial part of the Indian population present in UAE on work visas will ultimately be required to leave. As Kavya Murthy says about the migrants in the Gulf, '[they] cannot stay or claim the place for their own—some 80% of its resident population is expatriate non-citizens. There is no second generation' (Murthy 2017). There is a sponsorship system in the UAE; dispossession is in this context erected as a system since the 'guest workers', as they are called, may be deprived of their legal documents, of customary rights such as residency permits or family visitation rights, of their freedom of movement until they have to leave, hence their temporary status which is echoed in the very title of the collection.[11]

24 Despite the Protean nature of the work, the term 'novel' appears on the front cover, suggesting some sort of thematic homogeneity, if not a formal one. The quote I borrowed from the collection for the title of this very article, by referring to the term 'ghosts', associates the migrant characters in the Gulf with evanescent figures. But *Temporary People* includes other references to the ghost(ly), for instance, references to the phantom in the more photographic dimension of the term: 'what he was, how he smelled, walked, moved—hard to recall. Suppressed somewhere in the folds of my brain. I loved him dearly. One day he disappeared. To remember his face now, I require photographs' (Unnikrishnan 63). In this passage, the character who happens to be the narrator's father can hardly be reminisced, except when his son looks at old photographs. In Unnikrishnan's stories, there is also a conflation of tropes related to ghosts or the 'ghostly' to suggest the social invisibility of the characters, and of their real-life counterparts. For instance, in the story 'Birds' where the Indian labourers in

the Gulf are said to become ghosts, one reads: 'Pedestrians mostly ignored those who fell outside the construction site, walking around them, some pointing or staring . . . it didn't matter where labor fell. The public remained indifferent' (Unnikrishnan 11). Later in the story, such characters are also said to sometimes disappear, moving from the status of ghosts to that of 'missing people', which echoes one of the categories delineated by Peeren in her study on spectrality: 'Then there were those who would never be found. . . . A fallen worker might last a week without being discovered, but after a week, deterioration set in' (Unnikrishnan 11). The reference to the deterioration of the bodies in this quotation finally highlights the material dimension I mentioned earlier in regard to Sahota's work and which I now wish to return to.

25 In the very same story and in other texts taken from the collection, a common, feature is the extreme corporeality of the characters that are still likened to ghosts in other aspects. In 'Birds' for instance, the characters who are said to become ghosts are labourers working on construction sites, which cannot but remind us of the many men who regularly lose their lives in such accidents 'in real life'.[12] The narrator indeed writes: 'what unnerved most witnesses was that when the men fell, they not only lost their limbs or had cracks that looked like fissures, but they lost their voices, too' (Unnikrishnan 11). The very mention of 'limbs', 'cracks', 'fissures' implies a material dimension which prevents us from seeing these ghosts as ethereal creatures. The reference to their 'voices' also makes them speaking creatures, which goes against a certain vision of the ghost as a mere silent being. On the matter of invisibility, the use of the terms 'witnesses' and 'unnerved' confirms the idea that these characters are not invisible *per se* but that others want them to be, refuse to see them, and become upset when the former fall down from construction sites as they then cannot *not* be seen.

26 What is therefore performed in Unnikrishnan's stories is a re-corporalising of these ghostly characters and lives. In neoliberal capitalism, some people can be deprived of their bodies while their work force may be exploited to the fullest but characters here, despite being invisible to most of the Gulf society, except when such accidents occur, speak loudly, laugh, cry, have sex, as is visible in the story 'Veed' through the witty revisitation of Camus's first line in *The Outsider*: 'The month I began masturbating into socks, my maternal grandmother, Amooma, died' ('Veed', Unnikrishnan 211). It could be argued that these characters simply become bodies, in a process that could be deemed as dehumanising as that which consists in transforming them into ghosts likely to be forever re-duplicated. I would argue on the contrary that re-corporalising these ghost figures is a way to give us access to the 'rest'. As Françoise Král recalls: 'The body is a prerequisite for social visibility in the sense that its material existence is what makes me visible or at least what allows me to become perceptible to others—who may choose to acknowledge my presence or ignore it' (Kral 69). In Unnikrishnan's stories, the workers' extreme corporeality gives us access to their voices and subjectivities.

27 Contrary to what might be expected from socially invisible characters, the Indian characters living in the Gulf in Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* are loud, garrulous characters, often irreverential ones, with material bodies that ultimately cannot not be seen. One cannot therefore but be stunned by the striking image of these very lively characters falling and having to be sewed back into shape and stitched together with tape in the story entitled 'Birds'. The metaphor of bodies being re-membered is precisely used by a reviewer of Unnikrishnan's novel: 'Split into three parts—"limbs," "tongue" and "veed" (home)—the novel constitutes and reconstitutes, limb by limb, the bodies of people who are routinely written out of the history of places to which they are not permitted to belong (Xie 47).

28 Unnikrishnan's insistence on materiality gives full meaning to Esther Peeren's concept of 'living ghosts' as by recorporalising these figures, the stories challenge preconceived ideas about ghosts being invisible or immaterial ('the ghost's incomplete and intermittent embodiment' [Peeren 3]) and about migrants being incomplete.[13] Something occurs in these stories that could, to some extent, be associated with the concept of the '*retournement du stigmate*' (Candea and Véron 2019): while some communities reappropriate terms that used to be slurs such as the N-word or the term

'bitch', it could be said that the stories are the site of a reappropriation of the figures both of the ghost and the migrant, and by extension, that they offer a space for the characters associated with the two to regain agency. If a migrant body is, as Ahmed argues, 'a body that feels out of place' (Ahmed 91), the artist's gesture when depicting migrant bodies may be to make this out-of-placeness an assumed endeavour,[14] something that is precisely desired. If these bodies are anyway seen as out of place and disturbing, and from a different point of view, if they must be moved out of invisibility, why not make them hyper-visible through, for instance, magic realism combined with the 'absurd'? Unnikrishnan's story 'Gulf return' opens, for instance, with these striking images: 'In a labor camp, somewhere in the Persian Gulf, a laborer swallowed his passport and turned into a passport. His roommate swallowed a suitcase and turned into a little suitcase' (Unnikrishnan 5). If the author's intention was to have readers remember these bodies and characters, magic realism and incongruous images can be means to force them back into our worldview and imagination.[15]

29 Finally, what may be Unnikrishnan's most remarkable engagement with the ghost figure and the spectral metaphor is when the stories fill up the silence surrounding guest workers in the Gulf with a flurry of words and languages. Contrary to the idea that logorrhea is sometimes a way to hide silence by filling up the void with words, words in Unnikrishnan's stories enable readers to have access to often unheard voices.[16] Contrary to Sahota's staging of Tochi's eloquent silences which are still telling of communal violence and of the violence of the caste system, many properly distinctive voices can be heard in Unnikrishnan's stories. The characters are not doubles of each other but really individualised entities, with distinctly recognisable voices and subjectivities contrary, for that matter, to the drawings in the book which tend to represent them as undifferentiated figures.

**Figure 3.—*Temporary People* (Unnikrishnan 82).**

30 The voice of the taxi driver speaking to his client in the second person in the story entitled 'Taxi Man' is one such individualised voice:

> See, when you've been in the taxi business as long as I have, you get a feel for people. Like when they're cultured, ordinary, decent. First, their skin gives them away. With you, I guessed Indian. Wasn't sure, though. You don't act Indian, more

> like *Amree-kun* with your military haircut and glasses. Someone foreign, that was clear. And you've got that *wisha-washa-wusha* Englishness about you. But I knew I could talk to you. You said hello. (Unnikrishnan 39, emphases added)

31 Some terms give us a feel of the English that is spoken in Abu Dhabi by the Indian Malayali diaspora and contribute to making this language 'remarkable', literally one that can be remarked and stands out against more standard—or at least considered as such—forms of English. The fact that the taxi driver should be recognised by his client, as the latter said hello to him, forces us readers to acknowledge him as well. The use of the second person is part of a mode of interpellation aiming at interpellating us, readers.[17] The English language, in Unnikrishnan's work, is haunted by other languages and voices often marginalised from a Western vantage point. This can be seen in the othering of English from its standardised Anglo-American versions with the terms 'chabter' being used for 'chapter', 'moonseepalty' for 'municipality', among many other examples, which all contribute to making us hear an English language that we can imagine would be spoken by Malayali people living in the Gulf.

32 Frequent use of foreign words—*chunni*, *gurdwara*, *dhal*, *sabzi*, *roti*, etc.—within the English language, or words written in Malayalam in Unnikrishnan's stories, make the texts even more other to Western readers that are not familiar with Indian languages.

**Figure 4.—*Temporary People* (Unnikrishnan 248)**

This is my moment. I fidget. I ponder hard. I start my confession.

"My name is ദീപക് ഉണ്ണികൃഷ്ണൻ," I begin, "I used to live here." Popeye leans against the table, stroking his chin.

"Go on," he prompts, "about the man you killed—"

"My sister's name is [redacted]. She was born here."

By now, even the translator has seated her robust bottom in a chair, listening, biting into a cookie. Popeye raises his brow.

"My father's name is [redacted]. My mother's name is [redacted]. When they first arrived in this city, Edward Heath was Britain's prime minister. Heath died in 2005, my father should die before the end of the day."

Someone lights a cigarette. Another dials the German consulate.

"My grandfather's name is ബാലകൃഷ്ണ മേനോൻ," I continue. "He died here, too."

I stop talking. Popeye walks over, hands me a glass of water.

"I visit every two years," I tell the room. "I am studying pathology."

Popeye watches me for a while, adjusts the knob on his walkie-talkie, motions his subordinate to hand him another cookie. "And the purpose of your visit?"

"Family," I say, "family."

"Family expecting you?" Popeye asks. "Father expecting you?"

"My father is on life support, or he was—I am not sure anymore," I explain.

"What happened?" he asks, munching his cookie.

"Someone beat him with a pipe three days ago, put him in a coma," I share.

Popeye and the others process this information. Someone's checking if the recorder is working. Men have come with a stretcher and a body bag. Popeye is told something. He looks at me, looks at the messenger, nods.



33 Both works are spaces where renewed ways to catch the readers' attention by appealing to other senses than mere eyesight are invented. By having this extra visual, aural dimension and protean form, Unnikrishnan's stories are even more difficult to categorise as they veer between realism and fantasy, but also between fiction, life-writing and witness-bearing. The final section of this article will be devoted to a burgeoning reflection on ethics and literature, focusing both on authorship, reception and the concept of empathy.

## Ethics and Literature

34 The issue of how to represent minorities in literature and arts is of course a very tricky one as authors and artists often run the risk of being accused of stealing the represented ones' voices. Such works as those written by Sahota and Unnikrishnan recenter peripheral figures and provide alternatives to more hegemonic narratives

about globalisation and migration by stating that there are always lower forms of minority. While so-called postcolonial writings could be said to still occupy a marginal position compared to English literature, in academia among other places, the guest workers in the Gulf countries are, to say the least, even more marginal in cultural productions in English. Such productions still remain at the margins of postcolonial literature, not just because of who is staged, but also because of the politics at stake in the global publishing sector which still tends to prefer postcolonial novels such as those written by Roy, Ghosh or Adichie to short stories, which thus remain minor in the postcolonial corpus.[18]

35 Other issues to be addressed are those regarding who has access to representation, who grants representation and whom is one represented for, *i.e.* issues having to do with visibility and reception, which will take me back to my initial question regarding what is performed with the ghost figure and the spectral metaphor. To put things simply, do these representations challenge the association between workers and ghosts or do they reinforce it, confirming potential readers' preconceptions that these characters, and their real-life counterparts, are indeed invisible or not worthy of figurative representation? As often, the authors may be well-intended but the question that remains is who ultimately benefits from such visibility? Wishing to raise middle class readers' awareness about invisibilising processes resulting from globalisation seems fair enough. But one can wonder if such literary works change anything for the workers in the Gulf or the refugees who may have been the inspiration for both authors' characters. Yet, can we expect works of literature to change the world we are living in? They do not have to but this is something that we, readers, can consider to be one of literature's goals—to have an impact upon the world (and possibly, make it a better place to live in). As Barbara Korte asks about popular culture and poverty: 'Should depictions of poverty be allowed to entertain audiences? And should poverty be marketable and actually sell?' (Korte 188). Maybe the difference lies in the fact that both Sahota and Unnikrishnan did not write commercial best-sellers, despite the literary quality and political relevance of their works and the fact that they finally gained recognition by obtaining a few prizes.[19] The reasons aforementioned that have to do with the power relations at stake in the publishing world (Unnikrishnan's preference for the short story genre, both authors' choice of themes, etc.) account for this.[20] Still, new migrant writing will be read by people who may be expected to sympathise with the characters' lot, most possibly from afar, from the comfort of their globalised situationalities and of their academic positions, but may not be read by the people who directly inspired the writings such as the blue-collar labourers working on construction sites.

36 This brings me to an interesting reflection that was developed by Carolyn Pedwell on 'alternative empathies' (Pedwell 18). In the piece in which she develops the concept, Pedwell questions the assumption that empathy is a universal and 'good' affect by stating that the injunction to 'be empathetic' is located within 'Euro-American liberal and neo-liberal discourses' (Pedwell 18), policies and ideologies. According to Pedwell, the 'liberal narrative of empathy' consists in thinking that 'in a transnational and multicultural world, social crises, hierarchies and antagonisms can be addressed affectively through practices of empathetic imagination, perspective-taking and engagement' (Pedwell 18). She also argues that the possibility to be empathetic exists rather for Western, privileged readers and that this affect is generally oriented towards their less-privileged others: 'in the vast majority of these [liberal] texts, it is an imagined subject with class, race and geo-political privileges who encounters 'difference' and then chooses whether or not to extend empathy and compassion . . . . The act of "choosing" to extend empathy and compassion can itself be a way to assert power' (Pedwell 19). Speaking more specifically of the context of academia, Pedwell argues:

> it is nearly always a socially advantaged subject who is compelled to imagine the situations, constraints and feelings of 'others' and, through such empathetic

> engagement, be moved to recognise their own complicity in oppressive power structures and their concomitant responsibility to act for social change'. (Pedwell 19)

37 The main problematic consequence of this being that even if it is desirable that people should become aware of such injustices that can lead to the invisibilisation of other people, a *status quo* remains:

> While the affective capacities and skills of privileged (middle class, white, and/or Western) subjects can be cultivated, honed and tested through empathy, the less privileged (poor, non-white and/or 'third world') 'other' remains simply the object of empathy and thus once again fixed in place'. (Pedwell 19)

38 Beyond the scope of the two novels which bring to the fore figures that are generally (made) invisible in society and in literature, I think having works in which non-Western subjects remain the object of Western empathy can be problematic as they continue to, more or less indirectly, feed into narratives of African catastrophism, of subjection of Muslim and/or Indian women (without taking into account any of their contextual specificities), and make it possible for 'white savior' attitudes to persist.[21] On the other hand, such figures, of course, need to be represented in literature so that they should not remain inaccessible others but subjects that all of us readers could relate to.[22] This is an issue that Unnikrishnan is very much aware of when he speaks about his desire to provide alternative images of Abu Dhabi than those Western readers have:

> I had a feeling that Western chatter about the U.A.E. was somehow reproducing, however unconsciously, the same dehumanization that it appeared to criticize. There was money-drunk decadence at the top, raw immiseration at the bottom, and little else: no middle ground—or middle class, for that matter—no mixed bags, no flawed and compromised agency. No real life' (Baker 2017).

39 Both works are about making the migrant characters in the Gulf both visible and alive and having them literally escape the status of 'social death' they are forced into. Unnikrishnan indeed explains in a different interview, 'dignity is often about visibility: understanding that people have names, that they have lives beyond their profession(s), and that they can contribute towards the ethos of a place after their shifts have ended' (Barron 2017).

40 Through her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's essay/novella *A Small Place* (1988), Pedwell invites us to think of 'alternative empathies' which would leave room for affects not as favourably considered as 'empathy' such as shame or anger and would enable us to think of empathy as being potentially 'shaped by transnational, social, political, economic and cultural positionalities and hierarchies' (Pedwell 24).

41 I am not saying that these authors are necessarily writing for privileged audiences; nevertheless I do think it is crucial to reflect on how these works might be received, and by whom, knowing that the readership of such works is not a monolith but that it is made up of a variety of subject(ivitie)s.[23] The fact that Sahota and Unnikrishnan should be precisely writing from the margins of hegemonic postcolonial imaginaries, while being themselves situated in or having strong links with the Global North and focusing on subaltern characters from the Global South, slightly changes the perspective, though. Some readers may feel ashamed of considering the labourers in the UAE as invisible and powerless after reading Unnikrishnan's stories. Others may feel angry that caste should not be annihilated by the diasporic and migratory processes, contrary to what might generally be imagined—Tochi's mistreatment by his Indian fellow-companions in Sahota's novel testifies to the contrary. The writings of Sahota and Unnikrishnan thus leave room for other affects that 'empathy from a distance' to be expressed but this can only occur if their works are accessed by a greater variety of readers.

42 Unnikrishnan and Sahota's works expose the vulnerability of migrant subjects by making their bodies, subjectivities, even names, (hyper)visible. These texts tell us about the possibilities of working with the metaphor of the ghost, 'reshaping it to activate

other, more empowering associations of the ghost in order to go from being overlooked to demanding attention by coming to haunt' (Peeren 8). They echo Peeren's call that 'despite being ephemeral, something is *there* that matters and has to be taken into account' (Peeren 10). It feels that the textual performance is slightly more potent when spectral traces[24]—traces of other voices, accents, cultures—are given to be seen and heard compared to rather traditional use of the ghost trope. Such texts still force us to see and acknowledge the minor figures of globalisation and may contribute to making the lives they are inspired from slightly more 'grievable' to use Butler's terminology. There is always a risk for these authors of speaking for the others but a greater risk could be for these marginalised lives to remain absolutely invisible without their figuration in literature.[25] Spectral forms in literature remain powerful ways of encountering 'disturbing forms of otherness' (Peeren and Del Pilar Blanco 3), events that force us to remain attentive to the lives of others, and literature may still operate as a soundbox for these issues. It is essential that the lives of marginal characters should not only be visible when tragedies occur.[26] Even if this may be too optimistic a vision of literature, one may hope that texts that contribute to making us hear and see characters and worlds which otherwise would remain invisible or out of reach,[27] are still written, circulated across our globalised world and available for all of us to analyse from a variety of positionalities.

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## *Notes*

1 In 2004, Butler had already defined precariousness as a condition of human existence that implies a 'fundamental dependency on anonymous others' (Butler xii).

2 'While such living as a ghost can be dispossessing, the ghost is far from a dead metaphor in which the figurative dimension has been naturalized to the point of becoming invisible'. In the same paragraph, Peeren evokes 'the ghostly metaphor's continuing liveliness—its apposite proclivity to *keep coming back to life*' (Peeren 6)

3 On the ambivalence of empathy, see Rae Greiner: 'sympathy serves an important purpose for realists precisely because it denies what empathy most highly prizes, namely the fusion of self with other' (Rae Greiner 418).

4 Invisibility as a strategy of survival was already present in Sahota's first novel, *Ours Are the Streets* (2011) when the narrator, with a Muslim background, evokes his parents' self-contained attitude when they were once faced with drunk British (and we can assume, white) youths in a restaurant: 'It were then that those slappers came in, drunk. [. . .] I could feel you were nervous, though, Abba and Ammi. The way you went quietly over your food. Like *you were trying to make yourselves as* small and as *invisible* as possible' (Sahota 2011, 44). The use of the adjective 'invisible' combined with the verb 'try' which implies a wilful attempt at doing something suggests that invisibility is indeed a strategy for the characters.

5 According to Mbembe, 'The act par excellence of morphing consists in constantly exiting out of oneself, going beyond oneself in an agonising, centripetal movement that is all the more terrifying as the possibility of returning to the center is never assured. In this context, where existence is tethered to very few things, identity can only live its life in a fleeting mode. Inhabiting a particular being can only be temporary. It is essential to know how to disguise this particular being, reproduce it, split it, retrieve it as necessary. Not to be ahead of oneself literally means running the risk of death' (Mbembe 145).

6 It is worth highlighting that Narinder is a Sikh woman, hence the fact that she should be wearing a turban. The practice of wearing turbans for Sikh women has developed among the younger generation through diaspora. See https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35563415, last accessed on 7 June 2021.

7 Edwige Danticat's story 'Without Inspection' also challenges the dry and cold language of the press when it sets against it Arnold's voice and subjectivity: 'he saw a news story about a boat that had capsized in the waters near Turks and Caicos. Twelve bodies had been found: seven men, five women. Ten more were still missing'. The impersonal dimension of the report is highlighted by the objective reference to numbers and the use of terms such as 'bodies', 'men' and 'women' that hardly confer humanity upon the said subjects. (Danticat 2018). "Without Inspection" | The New Yorker. Accessed on January 5, 2021.

8 In contrast, Sahota is a third-generation British man, descended from immigrants who arrived in 1962 in the UK.

9 All the images included here are taken from *Temporary People*, © 2017 by Deepak Unnikrishnan. Used with permission of Restless Books.

10 Information available on the website of the Indian Embassy in the UAE. https://indembassyuae.gov.in/indian-com-in-uae.php, last accessed on 6 January 2021.

11 Things might be changing. According to Unnikrishnan, 'Sheikh Khalifa approved new regulations to protect domestic workers from a draft law passed by the Federal National Council (FNC) in June. The law guarantees domestic workers a weekly day off, at least 12 hours off-duty a day, including eight consecutive hours and 30 days of paid annual leave' (Barron 2017).

12 One may also recall Danticat's haunting first line in 'Without Inspection': 'It took Arnold six and a half seconds to fall five hundred feet' (Danticat 2018). Danticat's story epitomises the concept of precariousness aforementioned as the hero's life literally depends on Darline: '"*Ede m*" "Help me" he mouthed. He did not want to be detained or returned. He wanted to stay. He *needed* to stay, and he was hoping to stay with her'.

13 Cf. Stallybrass and White's discussion of the bodies of migrants as 'strange bodies [being] represented as bodies that are incomplete, that threaten to leak and contaminate and that have open orifices' (Stallybrass and White 1986, 9, quoted in Ahmed 2000, 53).

14 Ana Cristina Mendes reminds us that the out-of-placeness of the migrant has been a topos of postcolonial literature for a very long time: 'The experience of a displaced existence felt by the migrant, in the sense of being socially and culturally "out of place" and the resultant fissures of identity, has been an enduring subject of postcolonial diaspora literature' (Mendes 64).

15 Analysing Monira al-Qadiri's visual works would be outside the scope of this article which focuses on Anglophone literature but the artist's re-introducing of subaltern figures into a soap opera (cf. Her SOAP video, 2008) forces the viewers to acknowledge the presence of these figures who have been made invisible from the original production. The fact that the mansion is clean necessarily relies on the presence at some point of domestic workers. The workers' inexistence as characters in the soap opera thus echoes the treatment of workers in the Gulf countries in general. But by forcing them back into the picture, al-Qadiri makes us doubly acknowledge them. First the audience sees them as strange(r) bodies that should not be there and are thus jarring, echoing Sara Ahmed's notion that 'strangers are [. . .] those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place' (*Strange Encounters* 21). But disturbance occurs when these bodies are then recognised as bodies which have been invisibilised because the surrounding environment could not be the way it is, all neat and proper, without the domestic workers' effective action. It seems to me there is something similar in Unnikrishnan's use of absurd and incongruous images of workers in his stories. This, as would occur with al-Qadiri's works being exposed in museums, forces us readers/viewers to acknowledge these worker figures as strangers before recognising them as essential in the context under study. For a very interesting discussion on al-Qadiri's visual works, see Sindelar (1988).

16 In her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak stated that what constitutes the position of the subaltern is precisely the impossibility of being heard (Spivak 1988).

17 One can think of Mohsin Hamid's use of the same device in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) which simultaneously creates an atmosphere of proximity, as readers are interpellated by the I-narrator, and a sense of distance since it is indeed impossible for the said readers to forget their status of readers.

18 One could argue that short stories may be less popular than novels among readers but within the field of Postcolonial studies in particular, the novel has long been the prevailing genre: 'The novel has been the aesthetic object of choice for a majority of postcolonial scholars. While

postcolonial writers have by no means failed to produce poetry nor have critics in the field entirely neglected verse, it is the novel and studies of the novel that have had the greatest influence in the field. To some degree, this focus on the novel reflects a general shift of attention within literary studies away from poetry towards narrative, but we can further attribute the novel's predominance in postcolonial studies to three factors: the representational nature of the novel, its heteroglossic structure, and the function of the chronotope in the novel' (Murphy 1997, 2017).

19 Sahota's novel was shortlisted for the 2015 Man Booker Prize Note and Unnikrishnan was awarded the Restless Books New Immigrant Writing Prize in 2016.

20 Unnikrishnan himself is very realistic about his fame: 'I'm more like a subway busker. Few people know my name. Most readers hadn't heard of me before the book came out, not that they know me now.' (Sabin Iqbal, 2017).

21 Unnikrishnan states that he prefers writing about joy than trauma: 'I'm not claiming that people are not unhappy with what they are doing here, especially if they work in construction. But I think it's important to be careful and ethical when individuals are reporting on behalf of the other, or how they write about the other, especially when the writer is in a position of privilege, owing to his/her profession, race or nationality, or a combination of all three'. In the very same interview, Unnikrishnan explains how he refuses to say he writes about the 'voiceless', which could suggest that seeing these people as voiceless is a biased way of reading the lives of the migrant people living in the Gulf that contributes to dehumanising them even further.

22 This reminds me of what a group of black French actresses wrote about in their book *Noire n'est pas mon métier* (2018). In the volume, some of them ask for more visibility but they also resent the fact that they should be given certain stereotypical roles on the basis of their skin colour. What is interesting is this seeming contradictory injunction, a desire to be seen because of a lack of diversity in French cinema and a desire for their blackness not to be used as a pretext to give them stereotypical roles, in other words, for their blackness not to be overread.

23 It is important to qualify the idea that student communities in western-based universities are all homogeneous and privileged. It is yet important to call for even more diversity within student communities so that the 'universally acknowledged' affect of empathy should be confronted to the 'alternative empathies' that Pedwell discusses in her article. I myself am speaking from an ambivalent position, being on the one hand based in a Western university, being on the other a POC, so having strong ties with the Global South, which has me reflect on the very ethics of analysing literary works on precarity and precariousness from the comfort of my current situationality.

24 Derrida's concept of the trace may prove useful here as it does not refer to immediate presence. In Derrida's words, 'La trace n'est pas une présence, mais le simulacre d'une présence qui se disloque, se déplace, se renvoie, n'a proprement pas lieu, l'effacement appartient à sa structure' (Derrida 13 14).

25 See Victor Hugo's short preface to *Les Miserables*: 'So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine, with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless'. Last accessed a https://www.bartleby.com/br/71.html on 17 July 2021.

26 Some communities suddenly gain global visibility when some of their members experience traumatic events. One could think of the Morecambe Bay tragedy in 2004 when 23 Chinese undocumented labourers were drowned by an incoming tide as they were picking cockles off the Lancashire coast. The movie 'Ghosts' (2007) by Nick Broomfield bears witness to this tragedy. It is poignant to know that the main characters were played by former illegal immigrants who relied on their own life experiences to act in the movie. In the movie, the term 'ghosts' is interestingly used to refer to the English, which challenges the notion that the figure of the ghost is strictly applicable to powerless, marginalised characters. I wish to thank Vanessa Guignery and Judith Misrahi-Barak for drawing my attention to the Morecambe Bay tragedy and to Broomfield's movie.

27 For instance, Danticat's short story 'Without Inspection' draws readers' attention to the specific predicament of female refugees who often experience the fact of being refugees differently than their male counterparts. See Danticat: 'Darline had been the only person sitting on the beach in the predawn light the morning that he, nine other men, and four women were ditched in the middle of the sea and told by the captain to swim ashore. The sea was relatively calm that morning. As Arnold got closer to the beach, he became aware of the towering buildings behind her. *All four women had drowned. They could not swim*. Their bodies might eventually wash up on the beach, just as his did, except that he was still alive'. (Danticat 2018, emphasis added).

## List of illustrations

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## References

*Electronic reference*
Jaine Chemmachery, "'Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped building': Subaltern Figures and Spectral Metaphors in Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways* (2015), and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017)", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 61 | 2021, Online since 01 November 2021, connection on 04 October 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/11064; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.11064

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