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EMBEDDED NARRATIVE AND THE ETHICAL IM/  
POSSIBILITY OF “GIVING VOICE” IN THE AGE OF REFUGEE  
MIGRATION: HENNING MANKELL’S *THE SHADOW GIRLS*

Gabriele Griffin

It is difficult to keep local instances local in their significance (Arjun Appadurai, 2006: 40).

There is no ethically neutral narrative. (Paul Ricoeur 115)

**Abstract:** This article centres on a figure generated by war and conflict, that of the refugee, in a contemporary novel, Henning Mankell’s *The Shadow Girls*, first translated into English in 2012. It explores the use of a specific narratological device, embedded narrative, as a strategy to “give voice” to refugee girls. Mankell’s novel is of particular salience for contemporary conflict-related migration into Europe as it explores the dilemma of how to respond to the refugee crisis in an ethical manner. As such it constitutes an imaginative and narratologically complex intervention in the construction of refugee narratives. In this article I draw on the narratological theories of Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, and the theoretical writings of Arjun Appadurai (2006, 2009), Paul Ricoeur (1990) and Emmanuel Levinas (1961, 1972). I argue that in *The Shadow Girls* Mankell critiques notions of “giving voice” as adequate to the plight of refugees through his use of particular narrative devices.

**Keywords:** refugee narrative, embedded narrative, Henning Mankell, ethical writing, giving voice.

**Resumo:** Este artigo centra-se numa figura que é produto da guerra e do conflito, a do refugiado, em *The Shadow Girls*, um romance contemporâneo de Henning Mankell, pela primeira vez traduzido para inglês em 2012. Explora-se o recurso a uma

figura narratológica, a da narrativa encaixada, como estratégia para 'dar voz' a raparigas refugiadas. O romance de Mankell é particularmente relevante no âmbito da actual migração provocada por conflitos, e que tem como alvo a Europa, na medida em que explora o dilema de como responder de um modo ético à crise dos refugiados. Como tal, o texto constitui uma intervenção imaginativa e narratologicamente complexa na construção das narrativas de refugiados. Neste artigo, invoco as teorias narratológicas de Gérard Genette e de Mieke Bal, bem como os escritos teóricos de Arjun Appadurai (2006, 2009), Paul Ricoeur (1990) e Emmanuel Levinas (1961, 1972). Defendo que em *The Shadow Girls* Mankell critica noções de 'dar voz' como adequadas à difícil situação dos refugiados através do seu uso de estratégias narrativas específicas.

**Palavras-chave:** narrativa de refugiados, narrativa encaixada, Henning Mankell, escrita ética, dar voz.

## Introduction

'Suddenly, as if in a vision, he imagined thousands of small boats across the world filled with refugees on their way to Sweden... We are living in the time of the rowing boat.' (206) The vision of the small boats full of refugees coming towards Sweden depicted here and articulated by Jesper Humlin, Henning Mankell's author-narrator in *The Shadow Girls*, is a vision both familiar and disturbing for contemporary Europe where the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers on boats on its southern shores is a continuing source of intra-European Union political strife. Here questions of humanitarian aid, the responsabilization of trans/national institutions in dealing with the refugee crisis and welcoming refugees, resource issues etc. are engaged with on a daily basis.

In the context of these socio-political contemporary European realities Mankell's narrative deserves attention because of its focus on the reception of three refugee girls. Although first published in 2001, its translation into English only occurred in 2012, pointing to the salience of its content in the contemporary moment. That salience resides in the fact that it speaks to current socio-political concerns in engaging with questions of illegal immigration and survival in a hostile Europe, specifically in Sweden. It constitutes an imaginative and narratologically complex intervention in the construction of refugee narratives, here defined as stories about refugees' experiences as refugees, rather than stories by refugees themselves about that experience. This intervention is driven, I shall argue, by an only partially successful ethical demand that their voices be heard. My concern in this article is to consider how the text seeks to address issues around immigration and refugees, and the ethics of engagement with these through its use of particular narrative devices.

For this I draw, in the first instance, on narratological theory, in particular the work of Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, to suggest that Mankell's narrative strategies, chiefly among them embedded narrative, function to complicate

the moral economy of his text. I also utilize the theoretical writings of Arjun Appadurai (2006, 2009), Paul Ricoeur (1990) and Emmanuel Levinas (1961, 1972) to discuss how Mankell's work grapples with the broader question of the fear of being "overrun" by refugees and migrants, and with the ethical demands made by the need to support refugees appropriately. I argue that in *The Shadow Girls* Mankell critiques notions of "giving voice" as adequate to the plight of refugees, significantly diverging in the course of this from Appadurai by portraying the regime of fear which governs the minoritized – the fear of persecution, the fear of deportation, the fear of invisibility. Mankell produces a counter-narrative to the idea of the adequacy of "giving voice" through three different but interdependent structural and thematic narrative devices which I shall elaborate on in turn. The first of these, the key structural device, is the production of the refugee girls' stories through embedded narratives. The second, a thematic device, is the production of what I term the "indifference of difference". By this I mean the implicit suggestion in Mankell's text that perceived differences between Humlin, the central male character, and the refugee girls, for example, are not "real" and need to be understood as the effects of affect and cross-cultural ignorance. Mankell's third device for constructing a counter-narrative to the one of the dominance of majoritarian fears is the repeated assertion and description of the fear and terror of the refugees, the minoritized. This forms part of the process of "giving voice" to the refugee girls through the embedded narratives.

### **The framing conceit**

At the heart of Mankell's novel is a conceit which readily lends itself to the deployment of embedded narratives, that of a writer in crisis regarding his authorial and moral identity who is searching for a new subject. Mankell, the author, constructs Humlin, the intradiegetic writer, who in turn tries to teach three refugee girls how to write whilst extracting their stories from them for his own writing. Narratologically this constitutes the "Chinese box" structure of the novel. Ethically Humlin's simultaneous support for and expropriation from the girls is a classic first-world/third-world modus operandi or dilemma where aid becomes a means of securing resources, and interest in others is a form of self-interest. The novel, I would suggest, ultimately condemns this stance but does this through irresolution rather than resolution of its central narrative, an irresolution founded on the inadequacy of merely "giving voice" rather than listening and responding to.

Humlin's crisis of identity in part takes the form of a debate about high versus middlebrow culture. A respected *recherché* poet who publishes one obscure volume of poetry selling few copies every year, he is urged by his literary agent, Olof Lundin, to write crime fiction since the new owners of his publishing house want better returns for their investment. At the same time Lundin reveals that he himself is engaged in writing a detective novel, and

a similar revelation is made by various other characters – including Humlin’s rival fellow writer Victor, his financial advisor, and his mother. Even his girlfriend is proposing to write a book, a fictional account of their relationship, anticipated with horror by Humlin who is forever afraid of being ‘found out’. In this, importantly, as the reader gradually discovers, Humlin is not unlike the refugee girls who for the same reason – fear of being found (out) – resist being turned into a novel by Humlin. As Tea-Bag, one of them says: “I don’t want you to write a book about us.” (111). This assertion does not stop Humlin. He first encounters Tea-Bag at a poetry reading in Gothenburg where she asks him if he has ever written “about anyone like me... people who have come here” (48-9). The idea she instils in him to write about immigrants is vigorously contested when he mentions it to his agent, his girlfriend and his mother, but for different reasons. His agent says that no one is interested in such stories; his girlfriend accuses him of exploitative opportunism: “you think you can write whatever you please without effort. I think you should leave this poor girl alone” (69); and his mother tells him that he “know[s] nothing of what it’s like to come to a foreign country” (72). Yet the stories, and the novel, *The Shadow Girls*, do get written. The moral dilemma this involves of what it means to “give voice” goes beyond questions of Humlin’s competence to produce the story.

Mankell’s self-conscious conceit in *The Shadow Girls* references his own history as a writer of both crime fiction and other fiction, whilst gesturing towards the growing international popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction post 2000, which surged with the publication of Stieg Larsson’s *Millenium* trilogy and Mankell’s own Wallander series. But Mankell’s conceit also implicitly juxtaposes the fictionality of crime writing – the bad things we fantasize about that do not happen – with the “real” problematics of life lived on the run and under constant threat of surveillance, discovery and deportation as is the situation for the il/legal and variously oppressed immigrant girls whose lives he depicts. As one of the characters in *The Shadow Girls* puts it: “Why write crime novels when one can engage with reality?” (102) In his attempt to validate himself as a moral person and a writer, Humlin decides to write about these girls since theirs are “stories that haven’t been told in Swedish before” (213), and it is through this that the conceit is shaped into the embedded narrative. As such it poses questions about authorship, narrative voice, advocacy and the moral economy of the novel.

### **Homosocial triangles: The ethico-narrative politics of the embedded narratives in *The Shadow Girls***

In “Hypo-Stories: The Heuristics of Perplexity” Mieke Bal discusses the embedded structure of *The Thousand and One Nights* in which Scheherazade’s stories (N2), told by her to the king to stop him from killing her, are embedded within that main narrative (N1) of her death held at bay by her story-telling.

Bal's analysis of the relation between the two narratives diagnoses a "double subordination" of N2 to N1, first because the stories are told by an actor in N1, Scheherazade, and second, because the stories told "have a function within the action of N1" in that their telling forestalls Scheherazade's killing. These narrative-structural subordinations co-occur with a third, thematic subordination, that of the young female asked to service an older, more powerful male, here in the form of story-telling, a conventional heteronormative model of gender relations. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, the story-telling opens up an alternative to the action initially proposed in N1, namely that Scheherazade is killed once the king is bored with her story-telling. That alternative is Scheherazade's survival and indeed elevation to becoming wife of the king. In that sense Scheherazade's story-telling becomes redemptive and, although not initiated by her but commanded by the king, Scheherazade gains her life, and is elevated to the position of subject as a function of her story-telling.

*The Shadow Girls* shares certain traits in terms of narrative structure with *The Thousand and One Nights* but its structures of subordination are somewhat different and the outcome certainly does not replicate the redemptive moment found in *The Thousand and One Nights*. *The Shadow Girls'* complex narrative structure operates, in Gérard Genette's terms, on two narrative levels: an intradiegetic-homodiegetic one, involving two different third-person narrators with their own situated perspective where the narrator is the protagonist of her or his story, and an intradiegetic-auto-diegetic one involving first-person narrators, where the first-person narrator figures as the protagonist of her story. In Mieke Bal's terms the intra-diegetic-homodiegetic narrative constitutes N1. Since, however, chapter one and chapter two of Mankell's text are told by two different intradiegetic narrators whose stories subsequently intertwine, such that only one of these narrators remains, we have, in order of appearance, N1a (Tea-Bag, the refugee girl) and N1b, Humlin. N1b becomes the dominant narrator. Within N1, three N2s are nested, with three first-person narrators: Tea-Bag, Tanya, and Leyla. They represent both different and similar histories of migration and flight. The N2s all operate on the same narrative plane since they are the refugee girls' histories as told to and by Humlin (N1b). Humlin then occupies the same structural position as the king in *A Thousand and One Nights* in that he expropriates the refugee girls' narratives (N2s) for his own purposes, and the girls function in relation to him like Scheherazade does to the king - intended, at least partially, to service his needs.

The text opens with N1a, in that it begins with the refugee girl Tea-Bag waking in the Spanish camp where she has been for several months, thus giving initial preeminence to her account of her life. The second chapter, however, introduces N1b with the narrator Jesper Humlin, the middle-aged writer in crisis who details his life, and following on from that chapter, their intertwined narratives are told by Humlin, N1b. He thus *de facto* becomes the primary, enveloping narrator of the novel, the framing device through which N1

and the N2s are told and held together. The initial but unsustainable inversion of N1a and N1b suggests that the focus on N1a will not be held, thus confirming her narratively and structurally marginal status. The inversion of N1a and N1b also indicates the thematic or content-particular inside-out movement which accompanies the text: Humlin is taken out of his comfort zone and introduced into the world of il/legal immigrants, learning that within the world he holds dear there exist (at least) two worlds, his life in middle-class Stockholm and as a proponent of high culture, and the Sweden experienced by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. As he himself registers when he first goes to Stensgården, a suburb of Gothenburg inhabited by migrants: "It struck him that he had never spent time in this other new Sweden that was emerging, the ghetto-like city suburbs where every immigrant or refugee ended up." (54). By entering the migrant-dominated suburbs Humlin both peripheralizes himself and re-inserts the centre into the periphery, but in its alienated version. Given these dis-locations it is no wonder that Humlin feels, as he repeatedly states, that he has lost his foothold (86, 133, 155,172). Simultaneously Tea-Bag moves from the outside in, as she migrates to Sweden, where, however, she remains marginalized. One might therefore also argue that the novel as narrative moves from the periphery, the beginning where Tea-Bag is located, to the centre which is inhabited by, and mostly focalized through, Humlin. The initial sequencing of N1s thus reflects this dual movement.

The text employs italics to indicate the refugee girls' narratives, N2. There are eleven such sections, of which six recount Tea-Bag's story, and two each of the other two refugee girls', Tanya's and Leyla's. Each instance involves Humlin asking the girls to tell him the details of their lives. The girls' narratives are always introduced as such (e.g. "That was when she started telling him her story." [114]), separated out from the rest of the text by the use of italics, by beginning as a new paragraph, and by the introduction of each girl as first-person narrator. The text thus engages in clear boundary work, unambiguously separating N1 from N2. Through this it establishes difference, in particular a difference between the girls depositing their story and Humlin's view of them as this emerges in N1b, the framing as well as dominant narrative.

Although there are three different refugee girls, a narrative equivalence is established across their stories through the repeated use of the first person narrator. We might hence describe their narratives as N2a (Tea-Bag), N2b (Tanya), and N2c (Leyla). Their narratives occur in the second half of the novel, averaging about six pages. This relatively limited exposure to the girls' voices in a novel totalling 329 pages literally circumscribes their opportunities to articulate themselves, partly due to their reluctance to speak, partly reflecting the constrained conditions under which they live and which grant them at best a partial presence and render them at worst, as they say to Humlin, invisible: "You see us disappear into the crowd and then we're gone... Stockholm is as good a city for invisible people as any other." (326)

The girls' technical equivalence in terms of narrative voice is matched by a similarity in tone and discursive style. Their stories, though supposedly delivered orally, all have the same well-formed sentence structures that oral narratives and story telling by those speaking in a second language rarely exhibit, and which is in complete contradiction, for instance, to how the recounting of traumatic experiences supposedly occurs, i.e. talking in fragments, in a repetitive, disjointed manner etc. (for further details of traumatic recounting see Whitehead 2004; Lindemann Nelson 2001; Felman and Laub 1992). The constructedness of the narratives is thus foregrounded, the fact that the stories are (re)told by N1b in "his" novel which is also Mankell's text. No attempt is made to establish the "genuineness" or authenticity of the girls' voices through introducing individual linguistic particularities. The text thus engages both in a process of individualization of the girls by allocating to each of them a narrative supposedly told by her, *and* in a process of de-individualizing the girls by constructing their voices narratively in technically similar ways. This points to the ethical conundrum of how to give voice to disenfranchised people effectively, and, indeed, what doing so would mean.

The narrative similarities and resultant equalization of the three girls' narratives has three important and contradictory effects: it gestures towards their sameness; it also affords the girls subject status within their own narratives and hence voice; it grants them a certain bounded autonomy. But, at the same time, it reconstructs the "them" and "us" syndrome typical of narratives about migrants and refugees which the text seeks to interrogate; it establishes textual difference between N1 and N2, and raises questions about the bridgeability of the two positions. More troublingly, it suggests that without being asked, nay invited, to speak, as these women are by Humlin, they will have no voice/s. This immediately and further raises the question of the author's (Mankell's) and N1b's (Humlin's) intention and ethical stance in giving the girls voice. Their relation – of author-narrator and the girls – proceeds from a position of asymmetry of status (as il/legal citizens) and of power, where Mankell/Humlin occupies the position of legitimate subject and voice giver, and the women that of illegitimate or marginalized objects who need to be helped.

Here we have a key gendered, ethical issue: what does it mean for middle-aged men to invent young women in need whom they can "help"? In *The Shadow Girls* Mankell as author invents a series of middle-aged men "ready" to help the refugee girls, a process which always involves, in the classic formulation by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a homosocial triangle in which a young woman is used as an object of exchange between two men intent on securing – through her – their position. The male camp guard in the refugee camp in Spain identifies Tea-Bag as the young woman to speak with the middle-aged male Swedish reporter who comes to the camp, and gives her that "opportunity" because he has a hold on her which forces her to speak positively

about her camp experience. The reporter's interest prompts Tea-Bag to flee to Sweden where she then encounters Humlin. Throughout the novel men as legitimate subjects function as enablers and gatekeepers for the women. Senior women, with the exception of Humlin's mother, are almost entirely absent from the scene. It is a world of older, controlling men and younger women whom the men attempt to control.

However, that control is fragile and ineffective. The novel strongly suggests that this (male) notion of control is an illusion. The refugee girls force Humlin to review his position and thus to see "himself as another", in Paul Ricoeur's (1990) terms. In effecting this, *The Shadow Girls* is constructed to distinguish between appearance and essence, between narrative form and narrative content. When Humlin first goes to Stensgården, "it was as if he had suddenly crossed over an invisible line into a foreign country. The people he saw on the street were different in colouring, dress and posture." (54) This difference in appearance is narratively mirrored in the novel through keeping N1 and N2 formally discrete, including in appearance (font). But in his exchanges with the refugee girls Humlin is gradually forced to recognize that underneath that difference of appearance resides a similarity of affect which the novel appeals to in order to confront Humlin, and through him as focalizer the reader, with the question of how to deal in ethically adequate and appropriate ways with the issue of the refugee girls. That recognition goes together with Humlin's rising sense that he is a character in a novel or in a play "where I haven't even picked my own part." (219) This gestures both towards the framing conceit of the novel – Humlin is, after all, a character in a novel who thus suffers the "unchosen conditions of [his] life" (Butler 2005: 19) in the same way as the refugee girls do – and at the same time reinforces the fact that he lacks control over what happens.

### **Imagining refugee life: giving face, giving voice**

*The Shadow Girls* begins with Tea-Bag, the main female protagonist, in a Spanish refugee camp where a Swedish reporter and his photographer arrive to write "a series on people without faces, refugees who are desperately trying to enter Europe... We want to give you back your face." (17) "Tea-Bag" is outraged at his suggestion, and claims her agency by demanding an apology, stating: "I already have a face. What is he taking pictures of if I have no face?" (17) *She* is not faceless. "I am here, Tea-Bag thought. I am in the centre of things here, in the centre of my life." (10) Tea-Bag equates having a face with ontological presence, but this does not guarantee her either autonomy or self-determination which, one might argue, underpins the notion of a meaningful presence in the social world. As a refugee she lacks both – autonomy and self-determination – in relation to herself and in her relations with others since, as Emanuel Levinas (2015) has argued, "face" requires social relation. According to Levinas, "the face imposes on me and I cannot stay deaf to its appeal..."

(2006: 33). The sense of responsibility for the other that the face, a metonymic expression for the other, imposes on one undoes the egotism of the one who confronts the face and simultaneously calls the former into question. Humlin's journey in *The Shadow Girls* is partly about recognizing that responsibility towards the other. He fleetingly assumes it when he sees the refugee girls, metaphorically, as "his family" (298).

Facelessness has been much debated in response to Levinas' work, to Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) discussions of the rendering faceless of certain groups of people in the context of what she described as "grievable lives", and partly in response to the media rhetoric of plurification, of "floods" and "masses" which had come to dominate some European and certainly British public discourses about immigration (Charteris-Black 2006). Facelessness and sheer numbers have been mobilized as measures to dehumanize immigrants. The faceless masses represent the uncountable, the de-individualized, the multitudes that defy number and hence produce indifference.

Tea-Bag's encounter with the journalist translates into a sense that in his country, Sweden, "people actually wanted to see her face and were interested in hearing her story" (19). The equation of face and voice (Levinas 2015) is important here; humanizing "the other" is both about face and voice, about an immediate social relation between self and other. The reporter's interest in Tea-Bag ultimately turns out to be false, not least because of the issue of the dynamic between individual and mass which I shall discuss below. Tea-Bag's experience with the reporter proceeds as an uneasy confrontation, repeated in various ways throughout the novel, that articulates gender disparity (man, "first-world", "rescues" woman, "third world") and between two people in different states of uncertainty about the meaning of the other. That scenario, uncertainty about the other, fuels – at least partly – hatred and xenophobia.

Sarah Ahmed (2009), amongst others, has written about such uncertainties, in "The Organization of Hate" where she discusses how hate is mobilized to generate "a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth) but also to *take the place of the subject*" (252; my emphasis). This taking of the place of the subject is key in *The Shadow Girls*. It also finds its elaboration in Arjun Appadurai's (2006, 2009) work on the "fear of small numbers" which is useful for thinking about the question of the construction of self and other in *The Shadow Girls*.

The question of how social groups relate to each other underlies Appadurai's work on the "fear of small numbers" where he seeks to account for the increasing numbers of ethno-nationalistically driven genocides that have occurred globally since the 1970s – in India, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, etc. He argues that we live in an age of social uncertainty as the forces of globalization – specifically the transnational flows of capital, people, information – have begun to marginalize nation states' abilities to control their borders.

This results in an “anxiety of incompleteness” as he puts it and manifests itself in questions about identity that relate to the nation state. As he (2006) argues:

One kind of uncertainty is a direct reflection of census concerns: how many persons of this or that sort really exist in a given territory? Or, in the context of rapid migration or refugee movement, how many of “them” are there among us? ... A further uncertainty is about whether a particular person really is what he or she claims or appears to be or has historically been. (5-6)

Appadurai suggests that “these various forms of uncertainty create intolerable anxiety” (6) which may translate into the violence that then becomes a technique for producing a hierarchized order of “them” and “us”.

The question of numbers in conjunction with a sense of social uncertainty (“how many of ‘them’ are there among ‘us’?”) looms large in the context of migration across Europe. Humlin is amazed when he learns that “there are close to ten thousand people hiding illegally in Sweden today” who “are here with no legal rights.” (210) He repeatedly and ineffectually appeals to the existence of the state – e.g. “we do have laws and regulations in this country that ought to be followed” (209) – but the very invocation of “ought” simultaneously invokes an “is” which contradicts that “ought”, where the prescriptive collapses in the face of the descriptive, the fact of the presence of those who are illegal in Sweden. Humlin’s sense, “I *thought* our government *was supposed* to set rules for immigrants, not the other way around.” (154; emphasis added) is one way in which *The Shadow Girls* articulates concern about the state as an ailing structure, incapable of using its institutions – the police, the immigration service, the health service – to control the influx and settlement of migrants effectively.

Humlin’s uncertainty and anguish articulate the anxiety of a certain, conventionally dominant masculinity in crisis, especially in its middle-aged version. He stands for a failing male cultural majority, but also in parallel with the failing state. And failure to control promotes crisis. In this triangle of masculinity in crisis, ailing nation state, and social uncertainty Appadurai’s (2009) “Fear of Small Numbers” becomes relevant. In it he raises the question of the formation of “predatory identities” (236), of which, one might argue, Humlin is one. Appadurai suggests that the anxiety of incompleteness about their sovereignty can turn “majoritarian identities” into predatory ones. Discourses of how the majority could itself become the minority “unless another minority disappears” function as an incentive to become predatory and forestall the possibility of such reversals of fortune.

Appadurai links emotion in the form of fear to the idea of numbers and the liberal imaginary. He suggests that liberals harbour ambivalence about the legitimacy of collectives since the critical number for liberal social theory

is the number 1, “the numerical sign for the individual.” The other important number is the zero as it converts the one into tens, hundreds and thousands: “in other words, zero is the numerical key to the idea of the masses.” (239) According to Appadurai, the masses in liberal thought are associated with “large numbers that have lost the rationalities embedded in the individual, in the number one” (240). They are viewed as the basis for both totalitarianism and fascism, and “it is because of this ... that much liberal thought has been rightly characterized by a fear of large numbers” (240). The presentation of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as faceless masses fuels that fear of large numbers. Appadurai contrasts this fear of large numbers with the fear of small numbers or minorities which carry with them “special interest” claims, hence, especially as substantive minorities that are permanent, become problematic because of their rights claims. Appadurai argues that this has generated unease in western democracies where the struggle over cultural rights as they belong to national citizenship have led to the emergence and reinforcement of predatory identities. He suggests that the fear of small numbers is linked to the majority’s fear of “becoming *minor* (culturally or numerically)” (249).

### **“Fear eats the soul”: Portraying minoritarian experiences**

The fear of becoming minor is strongly present in *The Shadow Girls* through Humlin’s repeated assertion that parts of his country seem foreign to him. Across contemporary Europe, the fear of being “overrun” by uncontrolled immigration flows has resulted in onslaughts on migrants and fuelled right-wing extremism. This was a core feature in the campaign for Britain’s exit from the European Union. Against this fear of the majority, Mankell sets the fear of the refugees, the minoritized, who – as illegals, and additionally and specifically as women who are the objects of the predatory and proprietorial identities of men both from the host and from their own communities – suffer from many fears: that of poverty and of violence that prompts fleeing; that of invisible illegal immigrant of becoming visible, hence vulnerable, not least to the authorities; women’s fear of men – their fathers, brothers, lovers, strangers.

Visibility prompts accountability and hence, as the novel would have it, “freedom – if it actually exists – is always threatened” (286). Problematically in terms of the novel’s attempts at advocacy for the refugee girls, the majoritarian fear is vindicated in the novel since there are clearly many more migrants in the country than Humlin had imagined, many are illegal, and their cultural practices produce gendered forms of violence as Leyla and Fatti’s stories of domestic violence and patriarchal oppression demonstrate. Thus the narrative reinforces the notion of the foreigner as a threat. Here we see some of the possibly unintended ambivalence in Mankell’s work as it both queries and re-asserts notions of “we-ness” and “them”.

Fear emerges as a governing emotion in *The Shadow Girls*. Both the indigen-ous person – Humlin – and the girls are portrayed as fearful. Fear affords them parallel affective experiences. It lessens difference. But Humlin’s fears are also revealed as not about survival (199-200), but about certain kinds of vanity and the thought of potential injuries to his *amour propre*. This contrasts significantly with the girls’ fears. At one point Tea-Bag, for instance, describes her experience of fleeing thus: “The most desperate fear can never be described or told in words. One can never quite say what it is like to run into the darkness with death and pain and denigration only a step behind. I remember nothing of my escape, only the incredible fear I felt...” (272) In this expressive depiction of fear Mankell attempts to shift the perspective from the majoritarian (= Humlin’s) perspective on fear to the minoritarian one.

### **Identity as device, or the indifference of difference: The difficult of speaking truth to power**

At stake in *The Shadow Girls* is in part the question of how to reconcile majoritarian and minoritarian demands, needs and fears. Mankell addresses this by producing a narrative about the “indifference of difference”, by suggesting that differences do not matter in the way we commonly assume, i.e. that they represent an otherness that has to be either submitted to or vanquished. He does this through engaging with the question of identity. In the embedded narratives (N2s) he produces multiple “I”s, whose status as singular and/or indistinct this narrative form explicitly interrogates. Individually the girls and their stories constitute the one, together they are the many.

In portraying multiple embedded narratives Mankell challenges neoliberalism’s insistence on the number one, the “I” as its key figure, as posited by Appadurai. The survival of that “I” as an individual human being depends upon its social reception, on the manufacture of a culturally acceptable self, of a narrative that will have social resonance and recognition. The refugees’ manufacture of different versions of themselves in their efforts to be accepted as refugees are emblematic of this. The problematic of this manoeuvre, however, is that it generates social uncertainty as to the veracity of the narratives. As Humlin’s publisher says to him at one point in relation to Humlin’s idea to tell the refugee girls’ stories: ‘They’ll never tell you the truth.’ (76) The question *The Shadow Girls* itself begins to raise is, what truth is expected, how is “truth” judged, and what is its meaning here. When Tea-Bag tells Humlin her story his response is: “There was something so unbelievable about her narrative that Humlin started to think it was probably true.” (139)

“Truth” becomes one means through which Mankell constructs the indifference of difference. For this he makes use of two devices: he establishes parallels between Humlin and the girls, and he exposes Humlin’s views of migrants as epistemological lack, as solipsism and egotism. In chapters one and two of the novel, both Tea-Bag and Humlin are constructed as seeking a

liveable identity, Tea-Bag as a refugee and Humlin as a writer. In each case this involves a negotiation with others, for Tea-Bag with immigration officials, for Humlin with his agent, the media, his audience. Both assume identities that they hope will gain them recognition, and demonstrate that assumption through the production of narratives to accompany that identity. Identity assumption is thus a dialogic process, negotiated between self and other. It is an attempt at becoming-for-the-other what the other will recognize. Since the aim of Tea-Bag's identity assumption is to gain a more secure foothold in Europe, she seeks to adopt national identities that offer "the best chances for asylum seekers" (4). The success of this strategy is measured by having asylum granted. It is also a measure of epistemological lack or ignorance about the other, as Mankell ironically shows. When, according to the narrative, Germany for a time grants asylum to Bangladeshis, people in Tea-Bag's camp "of all complexions and appearances waited in line in front of the exhausted Spanish bureaucrats and argued with great fervour that they had suddenly realized they were from Bangladesh" (4). In consequence, "at least fourteen Chinese refugees from Hunan province made their way to Germany" (4). Here indifference is manifested in two ways: by the refugees who will perform any identity that guarantees them safe passage, and by the officials who are too exhausted, have no knowledge of, and are largely unable to "read" differences of origin.

Just as Tea-Bag and the other refugees trade on the malleability of identity by assuming one according to circumstance, so Humlin has assorted versions of his "journey to authorship" (43) as is tellingly described, "three accounts that he could choose between at will": the first version is "closest to the truth"; the second is "mostly lies"; and the third "came closest to the man he wished he had been" (43). But, as this section of the novel concludes, "he would never have admitted that any of these things he said about himself were not true." (43-44) Thus whilst Humlin arrogates to himself the privilege of not telling the truth, he is exasperated when he realizes that others, and in particular the refugee girls, do the same.

The importance of both country of origin and name are made clear in the opening chapter. Without a name or country of origin, people remain unplaceable, their dis-location both speaking to their deracination and opening up the possibility of a new rooting. As Ricoeur puts it: "the privilege accorded the proper names assigned to humans has to do with their subsequent role in confirming their identity and their selfhood." (29) Names thus signify more than individuals; they designate belonging. As such they also reference what Ricoeur describes as "self-sameness", the notion of continuity across time and place. The refugee girls' selfhood is unmoored from their self-sameness since they can no longer inhabit the space that guaranteed the confluence of their national identity with a geo-political circumscribed space. This brings with it its own problematics.

As Humlin extracts the girls' stories, their veracity is increasingly called into question by him (191). He measures believability in terms of factual specificities, self-sameness across time and space. But beneath that factual truth lies another truth, that of need. This truth lies undetected – or detected and rejected – beneath the manufacture of the refugees' narratives. It turns their supposedly unique tales into "everywoman", or rather, "every-refugee-woman" tales that return the girls to the masses rather than keeping them in the state of radical individuation that supposedly unique narratives demand. And, unsurprisingly, Humlin finds that Tea-Bag's story appears to be "a combination of everyone's experiences" (279). As Cathy Caruth has argued *à propos* of Holocaust narratives: "[we face] the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story." (vii) This, in many ways, is the dilemma replayed here. Versions of the same story risk the production of indifference through the creation of indistinct narratives: the ability of people *not to see* others, to relegate them to the shadows as they lack distinction or individuality.

### **"Giving voice" is not enough**

The tension between the ability to engage with the few as "ones", as individuals, but not to be overwhelmed by the many which arises in *The Shadow Girls*, has become highly politicized in contemporary Europe where Syrian and other refugees from the Middle East and Africa are requiring shelter. And, in a sense, neither Appadurai nor Mankell offer an answer to this. In neither case is the nation state seen as capable of responding to these needs, nor are its citizens. The state in that sense has become bankrupt. At the end of *The Shadow Girls* the situation of the girls is unchanged. As one refugee girl says: "I came to this country to tell my story and now I've done that. No one listened." (325). The question raised by this statement is what would it mean "to listen"?

From the girls' point of view the position is clear: as Tea-Bag, in reference to Plato's cave myth, puts it: "We are shadows that have to keep to the edge of the light... We're trying to achieve the right to exist in this country... One day we can perhaps emerge fully into the light..." (326). The "shadow girls" want to "*achieve presence*" as Jatinder Verma has put it in a different context. And, indeed, their story is told. But as Tea-Bag points out: "Nobody listened." Listening might be measured by the transformation achieved as a result of hearing the narrative. Here Humlin as focalizer stands in for the reader and the novel suggests the – in this instance aborted – possibility of an education for him, learning both to move beyond his narcissistic self-preoccupation and to attend to others by seeing oneself as other. That abortion occurs when Humlin is invited to meet Leyla's sister Fatti, facially disfigured after an acid attack from her husband. Humlin literally cannot face her. Fatti, perspicaciously, tells Humlin: "You are afraid that I might ask you to write my story."

And you are especially afraid because you couldn't write it without looking at my face." (294) And, indeed, Humlin does not look at her face. When Tea-Bag subsequently tells him that Fatti's face looks "like someone carved a map into it islands, crags and waterways", Humlin says that he does not want "to hear anymore." (295) Here we encounter the difficulty Plato cites of perceiving the form of the good, of coming up against the boundary of what it is possible for Humlin to do. The scene between Fatti and Humlin also returns us to Levinas' insistence on the face as the source of responsibility for the other (2006: 32-3). Humlin in a sense refuses responsibility. When towards the end of the novel he feels that he is "los[ing] his hold on the girls" (325) it seems to provide almost a sense of relief to him.

Humlin fails morally because, as Tea-Bag tells him, "You didn't hear my voice. You only heard your own. You didn't see me. You saw a person who was born through your own words." (326) As Levinas states: "The challenge to the self is precisely reception of the absolute other. The epiphany of the absolutely other is face where the Other hails me and signifies to me, by its nakedness, by its destitution... Its presence is the summons to respond." (2006: 33)

Responding requires action, not merely acknowledgment. In this sense Humlin's perception that "None of [the girls' stories] had a real beginning and an end." (185) is apposite; their inability to gain the right to live - which would provide an end to their stories - does not occur within the novel. But stories require an ending, as Humlin repeatedly suggests to the girls: "You should always finish the stories you tell. Unfinished stories are like restless ghosts. They will continue to haunt you... Unfinished stories can become one's enemy." (140) *The Shadow Girls* remains an unfinished story in the sense that the girls do not achieve the right to exist. As the reader is confronted by this, s/he is invited to consider what finishing that story might mean or, to put it another way, what recognition in its true sense would mean. In the Europe of today there is perhaps no more urgent question.

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