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World-Literary Registration and Refugee Identity: A Case Study of Chris Cleave's *Little Bee*

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ABSTRACT
The paper extends Charlotte Spear's (2024) reading of refugee fiction as world literature by applying Warwick research collective's approach of "world-literary registration" to Little Bee, a novel by Chris Cleave. While Cleave's novel highlights the embodied, gendered, and racialised experiences of asylum and exile in postwar Britain, Spear showed how Mohsin Hamid's Exit West (2017) uses global abstraction and metaphor to reflect systemic crises. This essay contends that Little Bee highlights the conflicts between national identity and global connection by registering the unequal processes of the capitalist world system through its story of oil exploitation, border regulations, and refugee detention. The story dramatises the hierarchy and violence that support global capital by contrasting middle-class life in England with the oil struggle in Nigeria. The text registers both privilege and marginalisation through its alternating narrative voices Sarah, a British journalist, and Little Bee, a Nigerian asylum seeker pointing to other kinds of belonging based on moral obligation and shared vulnerability. When examining Little Bee by means of the prism of world-literary registration, it becomes clear how refugee fiction helps to reimagine belonging outside of national and legal boundaries in addition to criticising structural global injustices.

Keywords: *Refugee Literature; World-Literary Registration; Displacement and Belonging; Global Capitalism; Identity Politics.*

Introduction

One of the most significant issues of the twenty-first century is the refugee crisis, which brings up pressing issues about national sovereignty, human rights, and the prospect of belonging in a globalised but divided society. The significance of obtaining legal nationality as the cornerstone of rights and stability is emphasised by campaigns like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR, 2014–present) #IBelong effort. However, as Spear (2024) has shown, the uneven forces of capitalism and global displacement crises are destabilising such frameworks of national identity. Her analysis of Hamid's Exit West (2017) shows how refugee fiction can be viewed as "world-literature," as defined by the Warwick Research Collective (2015), which registers the contradictions of the capitalist world-system rather than just describing isolated national experiences.

However, it is challenging to isolate the refugee crisis from other systemic forces that perpetuate global inequality, such as socioeconomic dislocation, educational disparities, and climate change. The impact of pedagogical techniques in the education sector on student accomplishment have a variety of systematic injustices (Jan, Riaz & Yaseen, 2023) which

consequently have different implications for different social fragments. Therefore, almost all the difficulties in implementing education reforms (Dur Jan & Kazimi, 2023) are eventually the threads of a segment like educational development that connect to a larger global system of the capitalist education system. Internal ethnic and linguistic politics in nations like Pakistan under the Bhutto administration serve as an example of how state policies produce exclusionary kinds of belonging, much how refugee crises undermine national identity in Britain and Nigeria (Ahmed, Ali, & Riaz, 2023).

The dimension of belonging is not only legal but also psychocultural; as Riaz and Jan (2025) argue in the context of *Shooting Kabul*, refugee identity is shaped by guilt, masculinity, and cultural attachments that complicate the experience of exile. On more or less similar grounds, the structural contradictions examined in refugee fiction, where identity, belonging, and marginalisation issues are also linked to global injustices, are comparable to these local conflicts and marginalisations. This paper illustrates how Cleave's novel dramatises global unevenness through the lived experience of detention, the ideology of language, the precariousness of illegality, and the commodification of refugee lives by utilising WReC's world-literature model in conjunction with Butler's concept of precarity and Agamben's theory of "Bare life". Similar to this, ethnic codes like Pashtunwali and Afghaniyat offer refugees other moral frameworks for belonging in Shooting Kabul, highlighting how cultural customs uphold solidarity and dignity even in the absence of official legitimacy (Riaz, 2021). By doing this, it builds on Spear's observations through careful textual analysis and contextual background, demonstrating how *Little Bee* not only highlights the linguistic, cultural, and psychological negotiations of refugee identity but also complicates the systemic contradictions of global capitalism. The necessity of viewing such fiction via both structural and cultural registers is further confirmed by Riaz (2021), who shows how Little Bee, Shooting Kabul, and Exit West all dramatise the flux of refugee identities produced by displacement.

This article builds on Spear's contribution by using the WReC framework of world-literary registration to Cleave's 2008 novel Little Bee, which dramatizes the collision between middle-class Britain's daily life and Nigeria's brutal oil politics. *Little Bee* concentrates on the corporeal, gendered, and racialised aspects of the refugee experience, from detention facilities to the private negotiations of sanctuary and survival, in contrast to Exit West, which emphasises global allegory and abstraction. I contend that by interpreting Cleave's book as world literature, it captures the unequal dynamics of the global capitalist system, such as the brutal resource extraction in the Global South, the enclosing of borders in the Global North, and the moral quandaries encountered when people from different countries interact (Wallerstein, 2004). Therefore, it imprints a more systematic application of literature on the capitalist political narrative. The existing global culture, as fiction reveals, is an outcome of the more powerful and covert operations of capitalism. The smaller societies may suffer at the hands of the robust cultures.

The WReC's differentiation between representation and registration is essential to this research (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). Little Bee contributes to the cultural formation of subjectivity within the capitalist world-system rather than only portraying the lives of refugees. The inequity of this system is embodied in the novel's dual narrative format, which alternates between the narratives of Sarah, a British journalist, and Little Bee, a Nigerian asylum seeker. Sarah's relative luxury represents the complicity and insulation of metropolitan life, whereas Little Bee's precarious position as a "stateless" subject marks the brutality of immigration policies and border regimes (Malkki, 1995). When juxtaposed, their stories show how structurally intertwined global inequities are lived unevenly.

At the same time, Little Bee's emphasis on affective membership and ethical duty makes a strictly structural reading more difficult. The story alludes to Butler's (2004) concept of precarious life, where shared vulnerability becomes the foundation of ethical relationships, in the moments when Sarah is compelled to acknowledge her involvement with Little Bee's destiny. These actions demonstrate how refugee fiction demands alternative forms of belonging that go beyond legal classifications and national boundaries, even as it is trapped in global capital processes and unequal development. In this context, the article's two main goals are to first show how Little Bee registers the world-system's contradictions in ways that support and expand on Spear's (2024) argument, and then to make the case that this registration highlights the racialised and gendered aspects of the refugee experience that are frequently hidden in more abstract world-literary versions. My goal in placing Cleave's book within the WReC paradigm is to demonstrate how refugee fiction can use cultural subjectivity and ethical encounter to both reveal structural injustices and redefine belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on the Warwick Research Collective's (2015) world-literature model, which defines modern literature not in terms of national representation but as a cultural practice that registers the capitalist world-system—a global order marked by political hierarchy and economic exploitation (Wallerstein, 2004). Within this perspective, literature does not merely depict refugee lives but embodies the contradictions of uneven development that shape them. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, the modern world order is a global capitalist economy that is organised with an intermediate semi-perimeter, a periphery of exploited, less developed nations, and a core of politically and economically powerful, developed regions. By removing resources and labour from periphery regions, this 16th-century hierarchical system promotes the concentration of capital and lucrative activities in core states, resulting in innate worldwide economic inequality.

The coexistence of several temporalities, economies, and subjectivities within a single global order is described by the idea of mixed and uneven development, which is drawn from world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2004). According to WReC, this inequality is both conceptually and structurally registered in world-literature, resulting in writings that simultaneously reveal the problems of global capitalism and bear its imprints in their own structure. This method has been especially popular in postcolonial literary studies because it provides a means of placing texts into larger global processes and transcending strictly national or cultural interpretations (Said, 2000). However, as demonstrated by Spear (2024), it is particularly helpful for refugee fiction, which is also a product of systemic crises and worldwide displacements. Her analysis of Hamid's 2017 book Exit West shows how the book highlights the inconsistencies between a constrictive nation-state system and a globalising capitalist economy by registering the unequal global order through its depiction of magical doors, surveillance, and moving boundaries.

The WReC framework insists on the structural registration of inequality, but additional perspectives show how systemic crises play out across diverse contexts. For example, research on climate change awareness demonstrates how environmental vulnerability intersects with social fragility (Yaseen, Ahmed & Riaz, 2022) much like the ecological and political violence represented in Little Bee. Similarly, studies of remittances in Balochistan (Saleem et al., 2022) reveal how economic flows sustain households while exposing communities to global dependencies—a condition mirrored in the novel's depiction of oil exploitation and resource extraction. This framework's application to Cleave's Little Bee

(2008) reveals aspects of refugee fiction that Spear (2024) merely alluded to. Cleave emphasises on the tangible facts of racialised violence, oil exploitation, and asylum detention, while Hamid's allegory tends towards abstraction. In order to understand Little Bee as world literature, one must acknowledge how it captures the unequal forces of global capitalism in both its topics and narrative structure. In addition, the WReC framework has to be expanded. The emphasis on registration runs the risk of erasing the racial, gendered, and cultural differences that define the experience of refugees. In order to overcome this constraint, I utilise Butler's (2004) notion of precarious living and Malkki's (1995) examination of refugees as individuals whose lives are both irreducibly local and over-determined by global processes. These viewpoints enable us to observe how Little Bee insists on the physical and emotive aspects of refugee life, from trauma and memory to ethical encounter, in addition to registering systemic inequities (Caruth, 1996).

Case Study: *Little Bee*

The 2008 novel Little Bee by Cleave offers a powerful illustration of refugee fiction that highlights the inconsistencies of the capitalist global order. Cleave's book places the refugee predicament in the harsh reality of asylum detention, postcolonial violence, and cross-cultural encounter, in contrast to Hamid's Exit West (2017), which uses allegory and magical realism to examine global displacement as well. By switching between the first-person narratives of Sarah, a British magazine editor, and Little Bee, a Nigerian refugee, the book uses voice, perspective, and form to stage the intertwined and unequal forces of global capitalism (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). It is significant to mention that this reading also builds on previous analyses of refugee literature (Riaz, 2021; Riaz & Jan, 2025), which show how displacement and fluid identities are dramatized in Little Bee, Shooting Kabul, and Exit West. Although thematic connections were noted in other studies, this article places Little Bee more specifically within WReC's paradigm, emphasising how the novel's alternate narrative voices capture systemic global injustices in addition to individual pain.

Such a rush to imprison refugees is criticised by Michael Welch and Liza Schuster in "Detention of Asylum Seekers in the US, UK, France, Germany, And Italy: A Critical View of The Globalising Culture of Control" because it reflects a cultural character that encourages a greater reliance on prisons while ignoring the long-term harm that mass incarceration imposes on society, communities, and prisoners (332). Bee spends two years in a detention center in Essex, UK, which is described as a place lacking basic amenities and where refugees face inhumane living conditions. The detention center is likened to a "British concentration camp," where detainees are treated poorly, and their rights are neglected. For example, detainees must apply in writing for basic medication like paracetamol. The detention center is overcrowded, and detainees live in fear of being deported or spending their lives in confinement. Women in the detention center are particularly vulnerable, facing threats from men and being forced to wear untidy clothes to avoid unwanted attention. Some women offer sex to officials in exchange for favors, such as release. Bee describes the psychological toll of detention, including feelings of hopelessness and contemplating suicide. She mentions imagining "a thousand ways to kill herself" during her time in the center. The prolonged uncertainty and lack of communication about release dates lead detainees to believe they might grow old or die in detention.

The majority of the British public are not well-informed about the state of these camps. Given her background as an editor and the fact that she conducted research on refugees using her husband's paperwork, Sarah is not your typical British woman; still, she is ignorant of the sorry

state of migrants. Sighing, she says, "so it is true then" (LB 662). Lawrence is roughly as aware of the circumstances facing asylum seekers as he is.

“Nothing. Asylum seekers, apparently, they just lock them up when they arrive here.” “For two years?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t believe her. Two years in detention?” (LB 272)

Little Bee's release from a British immigration detention facility, which perfectly captures the paradoxes of global belonging, marks the beginning of the book. Although the detention centre was officially created to control the flow of migrants, it actually reveals the workings of surveillance capitalism, where people are reduced to identification numbers and their humanity is left in a state of bureaucratic limbo (Malkki, 1995). According to the Warwick Research Collective (2015), the detention facility symbolises how the global system depends on borders to uphold hierarchies between the Global North and South. Arendt's (1973) assertion that stateless individuals are denied the "right to have rights" is echoed in Little Bee's descriptions. Her detention symbolises more than just the existence of a refugee; it also reflects the systemic cruelty of a global system in which nationality determines one's rights. The conflict between nation-state exclusionary policies and the universal claims of human rights is revealed in this literature (UNHCR, 2014–present).

The violent confrontation on a Nigerian beach when soldiers threaten her life, which forms the horrific episode at the centre of Little Bee, is a result of the oil conflict in the Niger Delta. The "combined and uneven development" that Wallerstein (2004) describes is dramatised by the exploitation of oil resources by international corporations and the cooperation of local elites. Little Bee experiences the immediate violence of globalisation when forces from far outside Nigeria's borders devastate her community, kill her family, and upend her life. By contrasting this violence with Sarah's English suburban life, Cleave highlights how unjust the global system is. Little Bee's struggle for survival stands in stark contrast to Sarah's battles with infidelity and magazine deadlines. However, the book makes it apparent that these lives are intertwined: Britain's consumer culture's comfort Cleave emphasises the injustice of the global system by drawing a comparison between this violence and Sarah's suburban life in England. In sharp contrast to Sarah's struggles with infidelity and magazine deadlines, Little Bee is fighting for her life. The book does, however, show how these lives are intertwined: the comfort of Britain's consumer society is indirectly supported by the exploitation of people and resources in places like Nigeria (Said, 2000).

The inconsistencies of belonging are revealed by Little Bee's status as an "illegal immigrant." Despite surviving detention, she is still under danger of being deported at all times. The fact that she practices suicide if caught and is afraid of being discovered highlights the fact that belonging is a psychological state influenced by ongoing exclusion rather than just a legal position (Butler, 2004). Whereas Cleave's story emphasises the immobilising systems of paperwork, incarceration, and monitoring, Hamid's doors in Exit West dissolve borders allegorically (Spear, 2024). The book exposes how national institutions sustain statelessness, criticising frameworks such as the UN's #IBelong campaign (UNHCR, 2014–present). The rotating narrators in the book express uneven subjectivities: Sarah's sardonic tone contrasted with Little Bee's traumatised voice. The world-system's "combined and uneven" processes are embodied in this juxtaposition (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). The reader is compelled to embody both luxury and precarity since the structure defies a single viewpoint. Systemic inequality is thus ingrained in Little Bee's structure (Caruth, 1996).

Despite its harrowing portrayal, Little Bee gestures toward alternative belonging. Sarah's reluctant recognition of responsibility toward Little Bee dramatizes Butler's (2004) notion of precarious life, where shared vulnerability becomes the basis for ethical relation. These gestures extend Spear's (2024) call to rethink belonging beyond national frameworks, while also foregrounding racialized and gendered vulnerability. Refugee fiction thus registers systemic inequities while insisting on the embodied dimensions of subjectivity. Bee's struggle to recognize the humane side of trying to rescue a man committing suicide also subsides because of the systematic injustices portrayed.

By interpreting Exit West as world-literature, Spear's (2024) intervention reframes refugee fiction by demonstrating how it encodes contradictions of global capitalism—borders, surveillance, and belonging—instead of merely depicting refugee experiences. She contends that Hamid's allegorical doors represent the possibility and inability of migration. The Little Bee study both extends and validates the value of this paradigm. Similar to Hamid's book, Cleave's work highlights the unequal processes of the global system, such as precarity, refugee policies, and oil exploitation (Wallerstein, 2004). Little Bee, however, emphasises on the tangible reality of pain and incarceration, in contrast to Exit West. Its world-system registration is embodied rather than abstract (Malkki, 1995). The novel's emphasis on asymmetrical voices further builds on Spear's (2024) observations. The exact unevenness that WReC theorises is enacted by the alternate narrations (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). Thus, systemic inequity is both conceptually and formally registered in refugee fiction. However, Little Bee exposes a flaw in the WReC model: its propensity to minimise embodied and cultural distinctiveness. Little Bee concentrates on racialised and gendered aspects of displacement, while Exit West tends to be more abstract (Butler, 2004; Caruth, 1996). Refugee narratives preserve both systemic critique and cultural testimony, as these experiences defy assimilation into institutional categories. This conflict suggests a hybrid strategy that combines conceptions of refugee subjectivity (Malkki, 1995) and precarity (Butler, 2004) with world-literary registration. This method enables us to view refugee literature as both cultural testimony and systemic critique, revealing injustices while expressing human voice and vulnerability.

Conclusion

This paper extends Spear's (2024) observations from Exit West to a different type of refugee narrative by arguing that Cleave's Little Bee (2008) can be read productively through WReC's framework of world-literary registration (Warwick Research Collective, 2015). Similar to Hamid's book, Cleave's work highlights embodied, racialised, and gendered experiences, confounding abstraction while simultaneously registering the tensions of the capitalist world-system—borders, exploitation, and detention.

By placing Little Bee in this context, I have demonstrated how the book both thematically and formally dramatises combined and uneven growth, while also highlighting shared vulnerability and ethical duty. Accordingly, refugee literature serves as both cultural testimony and a structural critique. These observations go beyond literary analysis. Refugee fiction can serve as a tool for reconsidering rights and belonging if it captures structural injustices while maintaining cultural uniqueness. Little Bee envisions belonging based on vulnerability and ethical relationships, but UNHCR's #IBelong (2014–present) and similar initiatives are still confined to national frameworks. Therefore, literature not only depicts displacement but also influences the conception of political community and human rights.

To sum up, Little Bee demands a hybrid lens that takes embodiment and culture into account while also highlighting the importance of interpreting refugee fiction as international

literature. As it documents the rifts of global capitalism and insists on human voices and solidarity that defy erasure, refugee fiction emerges as an essential form for our times.

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