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# A Multidimensional Transnationalism: in Between Juba and Portland in Terry Farish's *The Good Braider*

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## **Abstract**

One of the main issues addressed in Terry Farish's novel *The Good Braider* (2012) is the protagonist's journey and the enormous influence that it has on her identity, which is a complex and intersectional process of creation. Identity is an ever-changing process *per se* which is encouraged by temporal factors that encompass the past life of migrants and its evolution in the course of time. Moreover, *The Good Braider* — as in most migrant literature — not only takes into account a temporal advance, but also a physical mobility — in this case, from the protagonist's mother country, Juba, South Sudan, to Maine, United States —, which complicates the configuration of the aforementioned identity. Furthermore, transnational differences also encourage an intergenerational clash between the members of Viola's family. For this reason, the notion of home and its creation are analysed, while devoting special attention to gender issues since the female, racialised and migrant protagonist suffers, not only the South Sudanese independence war, but a triple personal war. This paper critically analyses identity, which is physically embodied in the protagonist's hair, as a multi-layered realisation of the self where non-places — as coined by Marc Augé — such as transportation methods or refugee camps play a paramount role in its shaping.

Key words: Self-identity, forced migration, diaspora, generational gap, Terry Farish.

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## 1. Introduction

From Olaudah Equiano to the current conflict in Ukraine, there have always been different ways of forced migration rooted in our history. In the colonial period of expansion overseas, imperialist policies reconfigured the distribution of the different countries. Great Britain and Egypt established the Anglo-Egyptian (1898-1956) domain over Sudan and South Sudan (Sharkey 2003, 4). After fully obtaining the Sudanese independence from Egypt and Britain in 1956 and the right to autonomy, an interior conflict arose: the first civil war between North Sudan and South Sudan (1955-1972) (Poggo 2009, 1). Such were the differences between both countries that the second civil war (1983-2005) outbursted. Indeed, it confronted “the Arab Islamic nation to the north which had one history, language, territory, culture, religion, economy, and historical vision; and the African nation to the south, comprised of communities or tribes sharing common African culture, languages, religions, and systems of tribal polities and land use” (Kasabian 2016, 5). As Rolandsen states, “[u]nderlying factors such as civil war legacies, neo-patrimonialism and a weak state made a new civil war in South Sudan possible, if not unavoidable” (2015, 171). The upheaval of the war caused the death of some people and the migration of others. In fact, the resettlement of Sudanese refugees has occurred all over the world, including in Portland, Maine (Kasabian 2016, 5). Following this line of argument, Terry Farish’s *The Good’s Braider* (2012) reflects the South Sudanese survivors of the second civil war and the role of their forced migration in the transformation of their identities. It presents Viola and her family and the journey from Juba to Maine as well as the transformation of their identities. As is the case in refugee literature — which will be thoroughly analysed in the next section —, migrants’ identities and narratives help in the representation of migrants’ realities.

Even though diasporic narratives inevitably differ between people’s different perspectives and journeys, according to John McLeod, the contributions of different writers and academics — McLeod references writers such as Avtar Brah, Zadie Smith, Stuart Hall, Benjamin Zephaniah, Homi K. Bhabha or Paul Gilroy, among others — have served as a means to analyse “the new possibilities and problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life” (2010, 238). As will be demonstrated in this dissertation, *The Good Braider* (2012) — which is a novel written in the format of a verse novel and in free verse — forms an integral part of refugee literature. As Terry Farish explains in an interview, “I wrote *The Good Braider* which was about a family, in particular a young girl who survives genocide in Sudan [...], and I [Farish] absolutely found it necessary to understand this experience and talk to people who had come to Portland about

their experience and to make sense of it myself” (2021, 2:12). Based on the previous premises, this paper aims at introspecting Viola’s multidimensional journey: her physical journey has been a central feature in the shaping of her identity. By focusing on the characters’ journey after being forced to leave Africa, this paper will analyze, first, the destabilisation of Viola’s identity after the disruption of her former life, especially focusing on Mbembe’s necropolitics. Later, it will be observed how non-places — as coined by Marc Augé —, such as transportation methods, refugee camps and the telephone line, negatively condition the well-being of refugees and the self-realisation of their identity. Indeed, they are maintained both in a state of suspension — characterised by a continuous and indefinite wait — and a constant (dis)placement: a continuous placement in different places serves to displace the characters even more. A more specific approach will be necessary to highlight women’s vulnerability in a patriarchal society which discriminates the female figure in each and every sphere of society endangering their integrity and identity. Additionally, even though Viola and part of her family have established in America, there are still conflicts between transnational modes of life, cultures, and different people. Hence, the aforementioned strifes as well as the comforting situations, which are responsible for (d)estabilising — both destabilising and estabilising respectively — the characters’ identity, are appreciably represented in Viola’s hair which, at the same time, enables the exploration of the transformation of her identity. Finally, it will be constated, as Homi K. Bhabha theorises in *The Location of Culture*, that Viola has a feeling of in-betweenness (1994, 127) since her identity is a combination of all of the changes and places that have conditioned it. Migratory flows have been widely analysed; nevertheless, there has not been much research about the impact of the physical journey from Juba to Maine on the female character, whose psychological identity is reflected in her hairstyle. In this sense, the migration journey is a determining factor which conditions people’s physical mobility and psychological creation of identity. *The Good Braider* exposes the narrative of the forced migration endured by the female protagonist, Viola, and reveals the constant physical displacement from her home country and relocation first, in a refugee camp, and later in the United States. Similarly, it evidences Viola’s metaphoric journey and distortion of her identity framed around a feeling of ambivalence when intergenerational and social differences interact with the protagonist’s personal and ever-changing identity.

## **2. Refugee Literature**

Refugee literature encourages a new interpretation of the world since it is considered a place that includes realities which reflect non-static identities. Traditionally, identities have been considered to

have an inherent connection to a specific nation-state (Chiang 2010, 29). Indeed, there have been narratives that simplified and only perceived refugee stories as “unidirectional ‘stories of flight’” (Coundouriotis 2015, 78) or considered them “‘humanitarian narrative[s]’” (Bakara 2020, 289) which erased the complexity of refugees’ realities. The aforementioned narratives foster a “romanticized figure of the literary exile [which] ends up denying [...] a genuine refugee voice” (Behrman 2016, 38). However, as Heraclitus already invalidated, identities cannot be fixed because they are, just like rivers, in a process of constant transformation (Kahn 1981, 53). Contrariwise, the “writers once identified with both postcolonial and diaspora representations (and the historical consciousness linked to both)” (McLeod 2008, 3) and their writings encourage the representation and visibility of different modes of life that are not linked to a single place (Rupp 2020, 36).

Modern refugee literature emerged a century ago (Bakara 2020, 289). Apart from the aforementioned simplistic and inaccurate exceptions, refugee literature represents diasporic identities which are like “broken mirrors” (Rushdie 1992, 11). They metaphorically reflect migrants’ configuration of identities which are influenced by different locations that challenge the traditional and conservative ideas of pure and static races and identities (Rupp 2020, 35). At the same time, the restatement of the concept of identity also serves as a means to create a sense of unity between the same diaspora identities which are sustained and “created out of the ‘confluence of narratives’ of different journeys from and links to the ‘old country’ which create the sense of a shared history” (Brah 1996, 183). In this way, as Bhabha states, there “is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1994, 1) so that “these ‘in-between’ spaces [...] initiate new signs of identity” (1) that faithfully reflect and construct refugees’ lives and realities.

### **3. Critical Analysis**

#### **3.1. Forced Migration: Destabilisation of Identity**

The war between South Sudan and North Sudan is the prompt which causes the initial destabilisation of Viola’s life, comfort and, ultimately, identity. The characters’ identities experience an ever-lasting process of self-transformation in Juba which has been disrupted by the aforementioned war since it will force their future migration and reconfiguration of their identity in a different way. From the beginning of the novel, Viola describes that her house feels “like a prison” (Farish 2012, 21). Being frightened that northern “soldiers will break into [her] house” (27), the

private sphere of “home” has shifted away from its positive connotations related to comfort and intimacy. Considering that “home becomes a place of danger” (Fox 2002, 590) which encourages that the protagonist would “rather escape than eat” (Farish 2012, 21), the aforementioned positive features “of home as a place of safety, of security, of control over oneself and one’s environment; become subverted, and the effect can be psychologically very damaging” (Fox 2002, 590).

What is more, apart from being a secure retreat to live, home is a place where the self is constructed, “where we ‘are’” (Lloyd and Vasta 2017, 16). Related to women’s subjugated role whose place has often been considered to be within the limits of the home, in South Sudan, women’s “job is to cook” (Farish 2012, 27). In fact, the protagonist claims that she has “never seen a boy cook before” (113). Ever since the first page of the novel where Viola’s mother, Thereza, is placed in the kitchen (8), the loss of home also implies the displacement of women’s only governed position at home (Fathi 2021, 983): the kitchen, whose place has often been related to enslaved people (Cade 1935, 299). Even though it could be perceived that the abandonment of the kitchen could imply absolute freedom, it is not the case. Women’s displacement from their only place where they could have some agency in a patriarchal society is now obsolete, they can no longer construct their identity as they used to (Lloyd and Vasta 2017, 16) because they no longer have a place.

Moreover, the union of the domestic space with daily routines, habitual chores and the dispositions and uses of certain household objects also have an impact on people’s identities because objects and daily rituals become inscribed in our bodies (Fathi 2021, 988). When Viola and her family escape from Juba and start their journey to America, their bodies clearly reflect the emptiness of their lives and the lack of resources that they are able to carry because they “must pack everything on [their] body” (Farish 2012, 46): that is, a little bit of food and a book (46), necessary to feed both their stomachs and minds respectively. Not only do they leave behind their belongings that help to construct their identity, but they are also involuntarily renouncing all of the different parts that constitute their home such as their family. It is, therefore, no surprise that “the word ‘home’ like the word ‘family’ conjures up images of ‘personal warmth, comfort, stability and security’”(Watson and Austerberry 1986, 8) which are lost after departing from the members of their closest circle. A distinction is made not only between the North Sudanese soldiers and the South Sudanese population but also within the same families. People’s restriction of mobility is due to their lack of money — there is a necessity “to pay / at every step of the way” (Farish 2012, 21) —, old age (51-52) or even pregnancies (122).

Although engaging with a new journey could imply certain agency and a direct control of their lives, that is not the case. Visas or legal documents also limit their journey (McConnachie



2016, 398). The characters hurriedly left their home with no documents that could physically acknowledge their refugee status (Farish 2012, 47). For this reason, governmentality, as well as the organs and bureaucracy on which it is sustained, enacts a form of power which regulates the circulation of the population, and therefore their lives (Butler 2004, 52). After their arrival in Cairo, and without having the chance to mourn the death of Viola's younger brother Francis (Farish 2012, 69–70), the protagonist has to find the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) so that they can have a refugee status — which legally fixes their identity by identifying them — that approves the continuity of their journey to America (69). After a two-year wait (85), they are finally granted a “blue card that means / [they] are eligible for resettlement” (87). Consequently, the loss of their nation also encourages the loss of the control of their lives — which are now restrained by the government and the blue card —, their home and their family. Heavily constrained by gender-based violence, the identity of Viola and her family is distorted because they are forcibly displaced, they no longer have a place, a home, to exercise their identity as before.

### **3.2.A Constant and Physical Mobility: Necropolitics and Non-Places**

The whole journey from Juba, South Sudan, to Portland, USA, drifts human subjects from one place to another and hinders their physical settlement due to the constant wait in temporal places, such as refugee camps or means of transportation. Viola's hometown before the war was compared to an idyllic place surrounded by nature (Farish 2012, 40), but after the second civil war (1983) has started “even the trees and birds don't find life in Juba” (40). Belonging to the non-invading side automatically served to make a distinction between those people worthy of living or not since Southerners were considered to be disposable. The South Sudanese population “don't want to be Muslim, [they are] people of the south” (151). As a result, Viola points out how “many died” (152) after Northerners had “throw[n] people away” (152) or killed without any kind of scruple. The above-mentioned practices of selection reflect Mbembe's coined term “necropolitics” which evidences the tyrannizing “power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (2003, 11), which creates, in this way, a controlled selection of (un)living people. In fact, controlling food and vetoing its access is another form of exerting necropolitics in Juba. Viola and her grandmother, Habuba, usually “*wait* in the food line / in the sun to collect rations” (Farish 2012, 44; emphasis added) and water (26) while trying not to be killed in the process (44). The desperation caused by waiting in long queues — to ensure vital resources and people's subsistence — accentuates with time, or more specifically, with the absence of time. No matter what they do, they are constantly waiting to travel, which causes them a feeling of uncertainty (64). Places are

also used as a biased filter to measure people's worthiness since in Africa — both in Cairo and Wadi Halfa — Francis' well-being is disregarded (62). Conversely, and to Viola's surprise, when arriving in Maine the police officers — “who to me [Viola] are like soldiers” (102) — not only do not prosecute Viola — as soldiers did in Juba (15) — but they also care about people's lives (102). Depending on the place where people live, Viola and her family are subject to a different treatment which endangers their lives.

Moreover, before starting their journey, the telephone, which is immanent to real-time communication between different places, also emphasizes the characters' sense of displacement. Back in Juba, as Viola claims, “if you know / somebody who knows somebody, / sometimes an Arab merchant will let you talk / to your family in America” (23), particularly “to an uncle in Maine, America, / if you want to talk about freedom” (14). The phone serves as a means of union between the cybernetic dimension and the characters' present situation by compressing and transporting their bodies via phone line to a different place with other bodies (Stone 1994, 179). Compared to mirages in deserts, or to a ray of light in moments of desperation, this parallel dimension brings them closer to freedom but it also evidences “a disembodied subjectivity [which] messes with *whereness*. In cyberspace [people] are everywhere and somewhere and nowhere, but almost never here in the positivist sense” (179; original emphasis), they are in-between. In fact, the telephone — which enables Viola to contact her uncle in Maine — encourages the illusory mobility of the protagonist, or rather, her immobility since she cannot physically advance.

When they can finally start their journey, the characters continue to drift. They are unaware of the quantity of time that has passed due to the extensive period of time that they wait. After their “wait through the dry season [and] till the rains begin” (Farish 2012, 56), they embark on a plane to escape from Juba to Khartoum (57). Similar to the outrageous traditional transport of cattle, refugees “sit on the plane's floor, packed with hundreds of others” (42) since people of African origin are normally reduced to things, objects and merchandise (Mbembe 2017, 11). Also, just like pack animals who carry goods attached to their backs, Viola has “the rations strapped / to [her] stomach” (Farish 2012, 48). Afterwards, Viola and her family “wait from one day to the next for the / [first] bus to come” (59), but then “[she] loose[s] count / of the days it takes” for the second one that will transport them to Wadi Halfa (60). What is more, similar to air and land modes of transportation, which have failed to provide a dignified journey, water transportation is no different since “the steamer [...] / will come in a week, / maybe, maybe not. Maybe two. / [They] wait” to go to Aswan (60).

Furthermore, their (re)settlement during “a few days” (59) in a liminal space such as the refugee camp near Khartoum is not enough to fully establish themselves. As Marc Augé claims, “[t]he installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centres, or the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked” (1997, 34). As Viola narrates, the stay in a camp of such enormous dimensions means that “you can lose yourself in these streets of plastic shelters” (Farish 2012, 59): meaning both orientation, but also identity. Non-places, such as refugee camps or transportation methods, are the infrastructures that have the power to subscribe people to a social hierarchy in which those in power can preserve (or destroy) in border areas those people deemed vulnerable (Butler 2020, 55) which are left in a state of abeyance and indefinite containment (McConnachie 2016, 398). Even before Viola and her family have started their journey, the practice of necropolitics and the indefinite stay in non-places characterise the subjugated role of refugees who are constantly moving from one place to another and whose lives and identities cannot be established in places of undefined detention.

### **3.3.The Physical Settlement in Maine: Ambivalence and Intercultural**

#### **Incompetence**

The previous and constant (dis)placement of Viola and her family has a direct repercussion on the lack of intercultural competence that they have since the coexistence of African and American cultures hampers the characters' self-awareness. As a matter of fact, the creation of migrants' diasporic identity comprises all of the transformations of their ever-changing identities already from the starting point of their journey in Juba to the goal located in Portland. Indeed, as Caren Kaplan states, “[t]ravel proceeds from some point in space and time and endures across a span of places, to result in an arrival or a return to a fixed site” (2002, 36) and, as a result, “travel produces the self, makes the subject through spectatorship and comparison with otherness” (36). Therefore, travel has a direct impact on the construction of people's identities. In fact, apart from the influence that the resettlement in a new place exerts on people, the diasporic identity is formed by “one's history (immigration itself being an integral part of that history), with one's traditions, ways of living, feeling, acting and thinking, with one's language, one's religion and all the other social, political and mental structures of one's society [...] or, in a word, with one's culture” (Sayad 2004 3-4). In this way, when Viola and her mother immerse themselves in the new country, there is a collision

between their personal identities. Before they initiate their journey, Thereza, Francis and Viola try to escape at night, but they hear a mortar round which creates a big explosion (Farish 2012, 53). Consequently, they start running and they all “pull in different directions” (53). The fact that they go in separate ways could foreshadow the future disputes between Thereza and Viola about their immersion in a new country in America (99). Even though they belong to the same family and the same diasporic group, their identity varies from one person to another.

In this sense, Thereza, who corresponds to her family’s first generation of refugees, is more reluctant about the new ways of living, and she is always comparing them to her former life in Africa (Farish 2012, 120). Nevertheless, according to the creator of the term, Rubén Rumbaut, Viola is categorised as a migrant from the “1.5 Generation” or, in other words, people who migrate as children (2012, 983). Viola embraces certain cultural fluidity because she fluctuates between both cultures (Farish 2012, 125). An aftereffect consequence, encouraged by their complicated mother-daughter relationship, is an increasing alienation between them since the mother is “finding difficulty in adjusting to the changed condition” (UNHCR 1994, 10). This is somehow reflected in the use of language since, differing from Viola who learned English when she was younger (Farish 2012, 103), according to Thereza, “English is spoken when useful” (126). In fact, not speaking in the new language, in this case, English, complicates the connection with the American culture (Kasabian 2016, 29). Speaking in English would imply a linguistic relationship with America, and thus it would ease Viola and Thereza’s personal immersion.

What is more, Viola and Thereza’s mental immobility and lack of inclusion surpass their personal dimension because the Sudanese community living in Maine is also paramount in the shaping of their identity, which is reflected in Viola’s hairstyle. As a matter of fact, Sudanese people who belong to the same diasporic community “are grateful to be in Portland with a community of peers and are striving to preserve their culture while adapting to American culture” (Graves, Lado and Romney 2006, 5). However, in Thereza’s case, it is actually the opposite because she only wants her family to have a relationship with Sudanese people — mainly women (Farish 2012, 117) — living in Portland (105) without immersing in the American culture in any way (99). In fact, even though there is physical stability after their settlement in Maine, Thereza’s identity journey is appreciably more limited because she refuses her (and her daughter’s) diasporic identity since she is not able to embrace the changes in her life (as easily as Viola) and admit that her past life has transformed (161). Such sense of distortion and frustration caused by the aforementioned lack of recognition of their self-identity is physically embodied in Viola’s hair. Braided hair is a characteristic feature of Africa (89) and Viola (81); however, she claims that the fact that she does

not “belong anywhere anymore” (81) makes her “no longer braid [her] hair since it is broken” (81), just like her, who is unhappy (81) and whose identity resembles a “broken mirror” (Rushdie 1992, 11). Despite the diversity of hair arrangements present in Africa (Sieber and Herreman 2000, 56), the lack of inclusion which causes “mourning is often expressed by deliberately abandoning the usually carefully coiffed hair” (57), which is Viola’s case.

Furthermore, apart from exemplifying their lack of inclusion in Viola’s hair, it is also portrayed in the limited possibilities that Sudanese women have in jobs. Even today, it has been destined a budget of 18,189,686 USD to encourage gender equality in South Sudan in 2022 (UNHCR 2022, 25) — where a woman “would never have a job in Juba” (Farish 2012, 79). Nonetheless, the employment situation for Sudanese women in America is also unfavourable. South Sudanese women’s freedom and occupational choices are limited since they work in “lowly, illegal jobs” (Farish 2012, 79). Their arrival and physical establishment in America does not ensure their immersion. Viola’s identity — which is reflected in her hair —, cultural heritage and personal history collide with cultural and intergenerational differences since language, jobs or the Sudanese community do not help with their inclusion.

### **3.4. The Physical Settlement in Maine: Stability of Personal Identity**

Despite the fact that there is a constant physical and psychological mobility and destabilisation that the protagonist and her family have to endure throughout the whole journey and even when they have physically settled in Portland, stability is also achieved when freedom and a certain agency are present in America. In fact, freedom is represented through the symbol of the car when Viola learns how to drive. As often stated, “[c]ars were purchased not only to fulfill mobility needs but also to signify freedom and a higher socioeconomic status” (Pojani, Van Acker, and Pojani 2018, 211). Learning how to drive a car is not only “helping [them] to be free” (Farish 2012, 138) but it also encourages Viola to comprehend where and who is she: “[f]or a minute I am on the edge of knowing who I am, / I mean feeling in the place where I actually am, / flying on the highway in America (143). The car improves Viola’s stay in America because it enhances her emotional autonomy and the freedom that she has to control her life.

Moreover, education also encourages Viola to have more freedom and opportunities. The place where characters are born determines to a large extent their future since “[i]n Sudan [they] would have thirteen kids, Poni, / and be somebody’s second wife [...]. / Back home, [they] could not go to school” (202). According to the National Learning Assessment (NLA) “the quality of education is generally poor” (UNICEF 2018, 9) due to the “shortage of basic school

infrastructure” (9) or “an acute shortage of qualified teachers in Sudan” (9), among others. Contrariwise, in America Viola is astounded because in Maine people have more opportunities to learn such as libraries where students can borrow as many books as they want without paying for them (Farish 2012, 112). Furthermore, in Juba there is a low number of “[f]emale teachers [who] are also conspicuously absent in the rural areas” (UNICEF 2018, 10), which may result in the lack “of the needed role models with whom they can relate and share their concerns” (10). In Portland, Viola has a female teacher, Mrs. Mejía, who represents female students and encourages Viola to become a teacher because as Mrs. Mejía claims, “if girls study, / they can have the world” (Farish 2012, 129). In America, Viola fosters her education and freedom by attending her lessons. Women’s empowerment is not only achieved by female education, but also by male education since it is also an essential part to achieve women’s rights. Back in Juba, Viola was considered a shame because she had been raped by a northern soldier (Farish 2012, 34). Viola suffers a multidimensional war: apart from the Sudanese war, “rape is an act of war” (186). Rape attempts against women’s rights since they are persecuted on the basis of their gender (Beyani 1999, 31). The lack of a feminist education taught to a male audience increases female subjugation and patriarchy (Khattak 2011, 73). In this way, a feminist and sexual education would respect women’s liberties and identities.

Apart from the aforementioned importance of feminism, a certain stabilisation of Viola’s identity is also achieved due to certain social interactions fostered when people braid. In the first place, braids are a unifying element that create a sense of community since “[b]raids are from [their] culture” (Farish 2012, 83), meaning the African culture (Bhopal and Preston 2012, 202). Moreover, braiding tends to encourage social interactions between “friends or relatives. Hair in the hands of an enemy, could be incorporated into a dangerous charmor ‘medicine’ that would injure the owner” (Sieber and Herreman 2000, 67). In fact, braiding is taught from mothers to daughters because it is a paramount feature of motherhood (Babou 2008, 4). Since braiding also encourages the time spent together, it also serves as a means to reconcile Thereza and Viola. In the beginning, Thereza negatively affects the transformation of Viola’s identity by forbidding her to have a relationship with an American boy (Farish 2012, 136). In this case, the space of home is exclusively occupied by the Sudanese community in Maine and used as “a defensive measure to allow access to the resources of the home to a select and privileged few” (Allan and Crow 1989, 4): not Americans. Thereza married the man that her parents wanted (Farish 2012, 193). This marriage practice exposes the commodification of Thereza’s body — since the groom’s family had to pay Thereza’s family for such marriage (193) — and the distressing (but still current) practice of child marriage (UNICEF 2017, 6), which is inherent to poverty since marriages decrease as education and resources increase

(7). Thereza also wanted Viola to conform to the past life that she had (203). Later, when they are braiding, Thereza reconsiders her position and allows Viola to have an American boyfriend (203). It is when Viola regains her agency — either by the car symbolism, a feminist (sexual) education or braiding — after her physical settlement in Maine that she achieves certain stability and self-knowledge about her personal identity.

### **3.5. The Diasporic Identity: a Fluctuating Combination of Cultures**

Viola's identity has undergone a process of constant transformation which combines features from the lifestyle of both countries, Juba and Maine. The transformation has varied depending on the personal state that the protagonist has endured in all of the different parts of her journey. Moreover, her identity has collided with social differences since they have caused her a feeling of ambivalence. Viola's identity combines her past and her present events that continue to shape her identity in a never-ending way. Personal memories encourage Viola to have a feeling of "in-betweenness" (1994, 127) because they simultaneously evoke multiple countries. Firstly, Viola is filled with grief because, among other factors, she has compulsorily left her mother country (Farish 2012, 27). As Viola notices: "I thought I would have a better chance in America than in the camps in Kenya, / but here in America I must hold these desert places all by myself" (Farish 2012, 117) which refer to the emptiness caused by her solitude when missing her homeland (81). The emptiness caused by the destabilisation of Viola's identity is channelled through the remembrance of her past (Allan and Crow 1989, 8). Indeed, despite the smell of American food (Farish 2012, 129), remembering the food that she ate in Africa (193) can help Viola feel more connected to her past life and re-construct the idea of home in a new place (Nowicka 2007, 72). Even though Viola feels sad because she is not in her motherland, remembrances of Juba partly relieve Viola.

As opposed to the above-mentioned solitude that evokes a deserted image in America (and not in the stereotyped deserted and poor Africa), Viola also remembers her homeland. African rains are an important part of her life because they give "good luck [...] [i]n Africa" (Farish 2012, 123), and contribute to form the Nile (113). Rivers are generally significant locations which encourage commerce, social relations or the provision of supplies. More specifically, South Sudan has a hydrological dependency on the Nile, which is crucial for people's development, because it increases agricultural productivity, preserves the environment and creates electricity (Roozenbeek 2014, 17–18). Indeed, the Nile also forms part of their identity as it is pictured in the South Sudanese flag with a blue triangle in the left-hand margin under a yellow star that stands for unity. Conversely, and not denoting unity, Viola's lack of comprehension of her fragmented identity is

represented by the duality between Viola's body and psyche. Her body is placed in America but her identity is transforming: "I [Viola] am still waiting. / I am waiting to feel alive. / I am waiting for myself / to catch up with / my body" (Farish 2012, 137).

Finally, Viola's identity is defined by the comparison of Africa and America since, as it will be further explained, it evidences the complex features of Viola's changing identity as one combining different cultures. Before acknowledging the cultures which fluctuate between them and define Viola, her identity was incomplete: "I have been here less than a year, / yet I do not think I can be all Sudanese, all the time. / Already, am I part American? / I don't feel like any *one* thing" (137; added emphasis), in fact, she is the combination of both. Indeed, in America, a "star formation [...] / is called the Elephant's Trunk" (208). Similarly, Khartoum, which is located next to the refugee camp, "means Elephant's Trunk, / [which is] the shape the two rivers make / when they meet" (209) or when "the Blue Nile and the White Nile / come together" (209). The two rivers — which have been already used as a trope by Heraclitus to define identity — and the constellation of stars depict Viola's actual identity: a mixture of Juba and Maine. It could also be considered that Viola's identity could be realised differently: she could either be metaphorically characterised by water (in relation to the Nile and Africa) or by stars (similar to the constellation and America). In this way, a comparison could also be drawn between the already explained South Sudanese flag and the flag of the United States since the latter does not have a single star — which reflects unity like the South Sudanese flag — but instead, it has fifty different stars which, despite being separated, represent the States as united.

This complex union of countries and identities is directly reflected in Viola's braids. In the colonial era, slave traders sought to dehumanise enslaved African people by shaving their hair (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 9). Each hairstyle worked both as a social and identity marker that revealed the place where they came from, their status or the language that they spoke (9). Consequently, if they could not reflect their identity through their hair, their communication was restricted "since shaving someone's head equated erasing their identity" (Nyela 2021, 16). It is no surprise that Viola voluntarily shaves her head when she does not understand her complex identity (Farish 2012, 101). The braids, which are physically present in Viola's hair, reflect through Viola's mixed identity the emergence of new and diverse cultures which are directly in contact with one another (129). The union of cultures serves to create a great new whole like the braid. In an email conversation with the author, Farish confirmed that Viola's braid could be compared to her identity since each part of her life combines, interacts and transforms all of the other layers of her identity, and thus it creates a new one (Google Mail, May 19, 2022). Eventually, Viola acknowledges the complexity of her



identity and the combination of both places as driving forces which condition her identity changes: “I am not American. / Or Sudanese. / I’m not in Sudan and not really in Maine. / Or maybe I’m in both of them / at the same time. / I’m in someplace I’m making *up*” (185; original emphasis). For this reason, her transforming identity is finally (un)defined: paradoxically, Viola’s identity is defined when Viola is conscious of the constant transformations that condition her identity. As Viola concludes in *The Good Braider*, “I’m an American girl in Portland, Maine. But I am also a girl from Juba” (213). Viola’s self-understanding is possible when she accepts and apprehends the complexities of her identity and how they combine.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) between North Sudan and South Sudan has been a pivotal element in the development of the character’s identities. The displacement from Juba to Portland acutely presents their physical (im)mobility — a journey combining both processes of immobility and mobility — as a factor which conditions the characters’ identities. In fact, the forced migration synchronously drifts and shelters Viola and her family in different locations — such as the refugee camp. The journey evidences how their identity is negatively affected by the use of precarious transportation and their sojourn in no-places. Furthermore, when arriving in a new country, intergenerational and cultural differences are also present in the characters’ realities. In this sense, this dissertation also focuses on the psychological process of the creation of identity during the whole process of relocation of the characters from Juba to Portland. Even before refugees have started their journey, Mbembe’s necropolitics exposes the belligerent attitude of the Sudanese armed conflict which automatically discriminates the Sudanese population who have fled their country as refugees to survive the genocide of the North Sudanese invasion.

Migration, gender and race notably condition Viola’s subjugation in a patriarchal society, be it in her birthplace or in America. In this line of reasoning, refugee literature exposes the difficulties encountered by Viola and Thereza — both throughout their journey and after their arrival in Maine — and how they shape their identities. Viola’s self-awareness of her identity represents the hardships encountered by most refugees’ due to the lack of self-recognition. It is not until Viola realises the complexity and transformation of her identity — while she fluctuates between countries — that she can actually understand herself — without being limited by neither a specific country nor any other precise way of being — and accept this new reality that now configures her identity.

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