

Listening to the Eritrean Migrants' Vulnerability Voices in *Ragwah Saudā`* Arabic Eritrean Novel: A Postcolonial Perspective

Mahmudah

mahmudah.arb@ugm.ac.id
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

First Received: 09/10/2025; Final Proof Received: 25/05/2026; Accepted: 04/06/2026

Abstract

The study aims to demonstrate the vulnerability of Eritrean migrants in the Arabic novel *Ragwah Saudā`* (2018) by Eritrean writer Ḥajjī Jābir. It analyzes this phenomenon using Postcolonial Theory in relation to migration, considering that migration is a long-term consequence of European colonialism and that the new Eritrean authorities behave in a colonial manner. To operationalize this framework, the study applies the concept of vulnerability to examine the conditions Eritrean migrants face. This research employs an interpretive method, a technique of giving meaning to data that have been classified interpretively in a postcolonial perspective. The results indicate that the primary cause of Eritreans' departure from their homeland was compulsory military service imposed by the authoritarian government. Thus, Eritreans experienced vulnerability from the outset, a condition that can be described as a form of biopolitics. Eritrean migrants are also narrated as experiencing vulnerability throughout their migration journey, particularly in several locations in Ethiopia and in their destination country, Israel. This vulnerability is closely related to religious identity and otherness. Although migrants have attempted to create new narratives about themselves, they have not been able to escape the vulnerability they experience.

Keywords: Eritrea; Ḥajjī Jābir; migration; postcolonial; vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

Geographical movement can be seen as a crucial human experience, occurring within a striking concatenation of economic, political, social, and cultural circumstances that provide both the structural forces driving mobility and the controlling mechanisms that limit and channel the selection of people and places involved (White, 1995, p. 1). Migration is a global phenomenon (Scholten, 2022, p. 21). Castles and Miller (1998, pp. 8-9) introduced the term "the age of migration". Migration, as a postcolonial phenomenon, shows that the movement of people, both domestically and abroad, is inevitable, especially in countries that have experienced colonialism. Migration (Tataru, 2019, pp. 13-14) is the crossing of an administrative unit's border for a certain period of time.

The migration of people in the Eritrean region, in particular, and the Horn of Africa region in general to Israel is generally due to the colonialism of European countries, especially Britain, France, and Italy, in Asian and African countries. Eritrea's subsequent postcolonial era is closely related to the founding of Israel as a result of colonialism in the Arab world by British colonialists, as the novel *Ragwah Saudā`* by Ḥajjī Jābir illustrates. A very surprising phenomenon is that non-Arab countries, in this context, Eritrea, produce Arabic-language novels of quality that can be compared with those of writers from Arab countries. It is evident from the appreciation of these novels and their authors in various regional and international forums and competitions.

The *Ragwah Saudā`* (abbreviated as RS) novel by Ḥajjī Jābir was chosen as the object in this research due to several considerations, namely: (1) it was selected in the 2019IPAF (International Prize of Arabic Fiction) Long List, an annual prestigious award for Arabic novels, (2) it won the *Jaizah Katārā li ar-Riwāyah al-'Arabiyyah* (Katara Prize for Arabic Novel) in 2019, (3) it is an Arabic-language Eritrean novel that can be said to represent other Arabic-speaking Eritrean writers, and (4)

Ḥajjī Jābir's works have been translated into various other languages, including English, Italian, Persian, and Hebrew.

This research will trace Eritrean migration through *Ragwah Saudā's* novel. This novel tells the story of the people of the Horn of Africa, particularly Eritrea, who leave their homeland for a place they perceive as better. During their journey, they faced problems, including dangerous travels, checks at border posts and shelters, conflicts between immigrants, and identity issues. They changed their history and identity to be accepted by the Jewish community and in Israel. Thus, the main objective of this research is to examine the vulnerability that Eritrean migrants experienced in the RS novel. The study strives to find plausible answers to the following questions: (1) In what areas does vulnerability occur? (2) Why are Eritrean migrants vulnerable, and how do they overcome this vulnerability?

The authors will analyze the above problems using postcolonial theory, given that migration is closely related to the colonial period, even long after colonialism ended. Ashcroft et al. (2007, p. 2) assess postcolonialism as a continuous process of resistance and reconstruction that involves discussions of different types: migration, slavery, oppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, and responses to influential European imperial dominant discourses, such as history, philosophy, and language. Matz (2004/2016, p. 327) explains that postcolonial literature addresses what happened to colonized people and places after the end of colonialism, both positively and negatively. In this sense, the postcolonial condition is a question of '*Ilā mā satastaḥīlu al-ummah al-mustaqillah ḥadiṣan?*' 'What is the newly independent nation like?' The critical interweaving of the postcolonial theory and migration studies (Mains et al., 2013, p. 2) offers a unique opportunity to reflect and ground the understanding of mobility in more complicated and (hopefully) sensitive ways.

In the context of postcolonialism, migration, and literature, Bugeja (2025, p. 129) states that the core of the migration movement in the post-independence period, as well as the longer postcolonial period, is the recognition of the reality that, as Nashis Andy (as cited in Bugeja, 2025, p. 129) says, "colonialism never seems to end with formal political freedom". Weiner (2025, p. 227) argues that novels concerning migration, as material archival spaces, retrieve and revive traces of postcolonial melancholy. Their explorations address past injustices to create possible futures. However, the strange, spectral, and melancholic spaces of the archive permeate the characters so that even as they construct alternative archives for the future, they are shaped by loss and tinged with atrophy and erasure.

It is from this perspective—that migration is a long-term colonial influence and that new authorities behave in a colonial manner—that the authors examine how *Ragwah Sauda's* novel narrates the vulnerability of Eritrean migrants. The vulnerabilities may arise at each specific stage of the migration process (OHCHR & GMG, 2017). They result from many factors, including the migrants' reasons for leaving their country of origin. They may also arise due to circumstances encountered in transit. Once at their destination, migrants may also face new vulnerabilities (IOM, 2019, p. 15).

As far as current research shows, discussions on Eritrean Arabic literature remain very limited. This study, therefore, contributes by introducing Eritrean Arabic literature to scholars of modern Arabic literature more broadly. Information on this subject is still mostly available as essays on websites rather than in academic publications such as scholarly journals. Nevertheless, several works have addressed Eritrean Arabic literature, including *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions* (Hassan, 2017), which contains a chapter on Eritrea, and *Who Needs Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (Cantalupo & Negash, 2005), which presents English translations of Eritrean poetry in those three languages. Accordingly, this study is expected to provide further insight and encourage broader discussions on Eritrean Arabic literature, including future studies on Arabic-language works by other Eritrean authors.

Within postcolonial and migration studies, Eritrean Arabic literature thematically offers important perspectives, as these literary works emerge from both the experience of European colonialism and the revolutionary struggle for independence from neighboring Ethiopia. This study also contributes to modern Arabic literary studies, particularly postcolonial and migration studies, by highlighting Eritreans' historical and linguistic identity within the Arab world. Existing studies on

Arabic postcolonial and migration literature have rarely addressed Eritrea within the context of the Arab world.

Discussions of Eritrean Arabic literature so far focus mainly on two novels: *Ragwah Saudā'* (Al-Qibthiyah, 2024) and *Titanikāt Afrīqiyyah* (Derek, 2019; Mechri, 2025; Wilson, 2017). In "Penderitaan Imigran Eritrea dalam Novel *Ragwatun Sauda'u karya Haji Jābir: Analisis Sosiologi Sastra* (The Suffering of Eritrea Immigrants in Hajji Jābir's *Ragwah Sauda'* novel: An Analysis of Literature Sociology)," Al-Qibthiyah (2024) emphasizes the suffering that Eritrean migrants experienced from the period before the war with Ethiopia until after the conflict. This suffering includes humanitarian crises in their homeland, attempts to protect themselves while fleeing, deep trauma, oppression after leaving their country, and humiliation.

However, the study of Al-Qibthiyah (2024) does not relate migrant suffering to broader conceptual frameworks. In this article, vulnerability, including aspects that overlap with what the previous study describes as suffering, is examined through a Postcolonial Theory, using the concepts of biopolitics, identity, and otherness. Through this approach, the study seeks to enrich understanding of how the *Ragwah Saudā'* novel narrates Eritrean migrants' journey to Israel.

Another Eritrean novel that has also received scholarly attention is *Titanikāt Afrīqiyyah* by Abu Bakr Khaal. First, Wilson (2017), in "Narratives of Flight and Arrival: Abu Bakr Khaal's *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015)," focuses on the challenges of reading narratives by and about refugees, particularly due to their emotional and affective dimensions within the context of contemporary refugee crises. Drawing on Judith Butler's theories of precarity and the "grievability of life," the study examines the frameworks used to mobilize readers' affective and ethical responses. Second, Derek (2019), in "In the Wake: Postcolonial Migrations from the Horn of Africa," employs Christina Sharpe's concept of the "wake" to examine how migrant subjectivities and communities are shaped by various forms of racial violence experienced during transnational mobility. Third, Mechri (2025), in "'Mixed Migration': Cursed Journeys and Dystopian Narratives in Abu Bakr Khaal's *African Titanics* and Walid Amri's *Les Papillons de Lampedusa: Traverseurs Clandestins*," examines the concept of "mixed migration" through trauma studies and Patricia McManus's idea of "negative commitment to the present." The study highlights contemporary dystopian conditions deeply connected to past legacies. The analysis further demonstrates the close relationship between migration and broader systemic issues, such as war, conflict, dictatorship, terrorism, poverty, climate change, and the unequal global distribution of wealth between the Global North and the Global South.

Overall, existing searches indicate that scholarly discussions of Eritrean Arabic novels among Arabic literature scholars remain limited. In quantitative terms, the *Ragwah Saudā'* novel, the focus of this study, has been examined in only one previous study. Therefore, this research is expected to specifically contribute to discussions of *Ragwah Saudā'* and, more generally, to Eritrean Arabic literature.

METHOD

The discussion of the method used in this research will include material objects, formal objects, data sources, data collection, and data analysis. The material object in this research is Jābir's *Ragwah Saudā'*'s novel (2018), while the formal object is Eritrean migrant vulnerability. The data sources include the novel itself and any information related to Eritrean migrants' vulnerability in a postcolonial context.

The research method involves data collection and data analysis. The data collection method is based on the literature study approach, using both online and offline sources. Data from the novel are obtained through close reading. It involves carefully analyzing the speech, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of the characters, at the level of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in the novel, which show the vulnerability of Eritrean migrants, both during the migration journey and during their stay in the country of destination, based on the postcolonial literary perspective. The authors collected data from other sources by reading and observing important points related to the formal object in the postcolonial context.

The data collected from the novel were classified according to the different forms of vulnerability experienced by Eritrean migrants, namely biopolitics, religious identity, and otherness.

From these classifications, a broader understanding was developed within each category. For example, in the discussion of biopolitics, the analysis identifies the causes of biopolitical control, the ways authorities implement it, and its effects on society. The same analytical process was applied to the other categories. The analysis is guided by postcolonial perspectives concerning the effects of colonialism on Eritrea as a country that experienced colonial domination, underwent a revolutionary struggle to free itself from Ethiopian rule, and later lived under a new authoritarian regime. Textual evidence was selected based on its relevance and representativeness in illustrating the central issues discussed in each analytical category.

The next stage is data analysis. Data analysis refers to a set of research methods or techniques that function as an extension of the human mind (Faruk, 2012, p. 25). This study employs an interpretive method of analysis, namely, assigning meaning to data classified into the categories of biopolitics, religious identity, and otherness within a postcolonial framework. In this interpretation, the analysis is supported by secondary sources, including social, historical, and political data on Eritrea and Israel in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

ANALYSIS

Eritrea as the Migrants' Country of Origin

As a small, impoverished nation in the Horn of Africa, Eritrea is one of the most closed and repressive countries on the planet, ruled with an iron fist for 30 years. It officially became a nation in May 1993, two years after breaking away from Ethiopian rule. Since then, the country has been led by Issaias Afewerki, an independence hero, who established a one-party system without elections, in which any opposition is severely suppressed (Rédaction Africanews, 2024).

Eritrea has been under the rule of other countries, namely Arabs, Turkey, Egypt, Italy, and Britain, several times. It became the object of study in 1943 by the Foreign Office and Research Department, which researched the possibility of establishing Eritrea as a Jewish colony for the Jewish state in Palestine (Kibreab, 2005). As for the migration of Eritreans, it is said that the migration crisis of thousands of Eritreans who flee their country every year has occurred even though Eritrea is not in a state of war (Connell, 2012).

The main causes of this exodus are repressive systems that impose indefinite military conscription, systematic violations of human rights, and suppression of the freedom of expression, religion, and association. The country operates with virtually no constitution, an active parliament, or an independent judicial system, creating oppressive living conditions for its citizens. In addition, Eritrea's political isolation from the international community and limited access to information make citizens feel trapped and hopeless (Connell, 2012).

After Eritrea's independence, the border conflict with Ethiopia continued. On May 6th-7th, 1998, small-scale clashes occurred between the Eritrean military and Ethiopian military or police patrols. The Ethiopian Parliament declared war on May 13, 1998 (Murphy, 2016, pp. 1-2). The issue concerned the disputed town of Badme, which forms the border between the two countries.

Eritrean Migrants' Vulnerability Voices in *Ragwah Saudā`*

The novel *Ragwah Saudā`* highlights the vulnerability of Eritreans as they move to a new place, both on the journey and in the destination country. This vulnerability can be grouped into several sections: biopolitics and flight; borders and bureaucracy; identity; otherness and abandonment; and ethnicity. However, it is also important to note that during their stay in their home country, they also experienced various forms of violence by the authorities and the state, known as biopolitics.

Biopolitics

Biopolitics was first introduced by Foucault (1978, p. 139), who explains that modern power no longer merely represses but also manages life through two main forms. First, anatomo-politics focuses on the individual body as a machine, disciplining it to be productive, docile, and efficient in various systems, such as labor, the military, and education. Second, biopolitics addresses the body as part of the species, regulating births, deaths, health, and life expectancy through policies and interventions. These two dimensions complement each other, shaping a form of power that penetrates the most fundamental aspects of human life.

The Eritrean government regulates its citizens' lives through at least two major mechanisms. First, state power focuses on disciplining citizens' bodies in order to "tame" them, transforming them—borrowing Foucault's term—into "docile bodies" that function as part of a "military machine." All citizens are required to participate in this system as a demonstration of loyalty and obedience to the state. Citizens' bodies are therefore mobilized as instruments to strengthen national military defense, particularly in response to threats from or conflicts with neighboring Ethiopia. Second, the Eritrean regime deprives its citizens of control over their own bodies; health, life, and death are managed according to the interests of state power. Bodies are valued according to their obedience to authority and their usefulness in serving state interests through compulsory national and military service. Within this system of power, obedience is framed as duty, whereas disobedience may result in punishment or even death.

Compulsory military service is portrayed as a "revolutionary school" that all Eritreans, including high school students, are required to attend. There, they are forced to undergo education under strict discipline. The revolutionary school is strictly enforced, with even the slightest infraction being punished. Adal—later known as Dawud—was sentenced to 10 days in solitary confinement (*as-sijn al-infiradi*) for truancy. It was a narrow space, not high enough for Adal to stand, but not wide enough to lie down either. It was so dark that after leaving there, Adal looked thin and pale, even making him get laughed at by the soldiers. However, Dawud actually made a more fatal mistake, namely escaping from the revolutionary school, which led to his forced arrest in his hiding place and then being thrown into 'al-Wadi al-Azraq', a very terrible military punishment camp.

أذكر كيف كانت الثورة تبعث بالخونة والمارقين إليه قبل إعدامهم، وكيف ربيّ شُمتعته على رصيد كاف من الأشلاء وصرخات التوجع والإهانات. الوادي الأزرق كان كالوحش الذي يحكي عنه الجميع دون أن يروه. لم يسبق لي أن رأيتُ عائداً من هناك. ربما لأن من يذهب إليه لا يعود.

(Jābir, 2018, p. 172)

I remembered how the revolution used to send rebels and apostates there for execution, and how he had heard enough of the cries, wails, and curses in that place. The Blue Valley was like a monster everyone spoke of without anyone having seen it. Never had I seen someone return from there. Perhaps because whoever went there never came back.

Schools and education have been the main sources of potential draftees for conscription. As education has become indistinguishable from military training, Sawa, originally a military training camp, was later renamed Warsai Yikealo Secondary School. Within this institution, students must engage in rigorous military exercises and political education alongside their academic studies in preparation for matriculation. The camp clearly illustrates how Eritreans are subjected to systems of discipline, control, and exploitation that target both their physical and mental capacities. The camp has undergone a radical transformation since the introduction of National Service in the early 1990s (Yohannes, 2023, pp. 43-46). The statutory military service of 18 months was indefinitely extended to require all adults under age 40 to work at the state's direction, either in a military or civilian capacity. Despite its harsh conditions, the government has refused to reform this repressive system (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Those undergoing military service, especially young men, who could not stand it, tried to escape. They escaped from Eritrea after experiencing various pressures, violence, and physical torture, both in the 'Madrasah as-Saurah' and in the 'Al-Wadi al-Azraq'. They knew that these actions carried the risk of death, but they had no other choice. Dawud was one of those who fled from his homeland. Despite the country's strict restrictions, many Eritreans still managed to escape arrest.

كانت رحلة بائسة لا تتحمل سوى خاتمتين؛ إما الوصول إلى الوجهة الأخيرة، أو القتل على يد رجال الأمن. ومع هذا فقد أقدم عليها داود حين تساوى عنده الموت والحياة في معسكر التجنيد الإجباري. لذا حين عبر الحدود، برفقة عشرات، كان على خلافهم تماماً، فقد توقف لينظر وراه. أراد أن يستشعر حقيقة النجاح، حقيقة مفارقة الإذلال إلى الأبد.

(Jābir, 2018, p. 52)

It was a desperate journey with only two possible outcomes: either reaching the final destination or being killed by security forces. However, Dawud embarked on it when life and death were one for him in the forced-conscription camp. So, when he crossed the border, accompanied by dozens of others, he was completely different from them. He stopped to look behind him. He wanted to feel the reality of safety, the reality of escaping eternal humiliation.

The post-independence government imposed compulsory military service as a coercive measure to build military strength and consolidate loyalty to the nation-state, especially given Eritrea's diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. After gaining independence from Ethiopia, the Eritrean state remained highly alert to the possibility of a renewed conflict with its former ruler. In the novel, when the character Adal arrives in Ethiopia during his escape, he does not observe the level of military preparedness he had been led to expect, prompting him to question the authority that forced him into military service. Ultimately, compulsory conscription drives many Eritreans, especially young people, to flee the country.

Eritrean refugees flee their country primarily due to ongoing issues, such as open-ended military service and dire socioeconomic conditions. The situation has worsened since the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018, which initially led to an influx of over 60,000 Eritrean refugees into Ethiopia. However, many continue to arrive each month, facing harsh living conditions that necessitate urgent humanitarian assistance, including food, water, and shelter (Lucht & Mengiste, 2020). They move about far more freely and easily than they ever did at home, in possession of temporary residence permits and left on their own to do as they wish. In an ironic twist, the safest place for them right now may be the country their government insists is their archenemy, namely Ethiopia (Connell, 2012).

Religious Identity

Identities (Hall & du Gay, 1996, p. 4) seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond. Identities actually concern questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves." Hall (1990, p. 222) also states that cultural identity is not a fixed or completed entity. Rather, it is a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and constantly being formed and transformed. Thus, identity is dynamic and continuously negotiated through history, culture, and relations of power.

Throughout the migration process and upon arrival at their destination, Eritrean migrants are depicted grappling with identity-related issues. This identity issue is the most important vulnerability. Adapting to the situation and their needs, Eritrean migrants try to change their identities to achieve their goals and ensure their safety, even while experiencing uncertainty about their own identities. The changing identities of these Eritrean migrants are primarily related to religion, as evidenced by the name changes (Dawud-David-Dawit) undertaken by the character who faces the threat of being returned to his homeland, a prospect feared, given the punishment awaiting him there. Initially, the character calls himself 'Dawud', identifying himself as a Muslim. However, while in the UNHCR-managed refugee camp in Indagabuna in Ethiopia, Dawud changes his name to 'David', identifying himself as a Christian to gain the opportunity to pass the interview to live in Europe. He wears a cross necklace as a sign of his Christian identity and recounts his romance with his lover, Aisyah. Circulating among them "Do not admit that you are Muslim" (Jābir, 2018, p. 53), "Do as I did. I got rid of my identity papers and chose a Christian name." (Jābir, 2018, p. 54), "It's not a big change, there is almost no difference between David and Dawud... that's only if we get rid of the old name."

قبل الحكاية يجب أن يبدو شكلك مقنعًا؛ سترتدي صليبيًا كبيرًا تتحسسه أثناء المقابلة، وقبل الإجابة على كل سؤال. عليك أن تبدو منكسرًا، خافض الرأس، يخرج صوتك مخنوقًا متحشرجًا، ثم وفي نقطة ما لا بد أن تبكي، بجرقة وألم (Jābir, 2018, p. 75)

“Before the story, your appearance must look convincing; you will wear a large cross, touching it during the interview and before answering each question. You must appear broken, with your head lowered, your voice coming out choked and trembling, and at some point you must cry, with burning grief and pain.”

قبيل الغروب، كان داود يقف أمام مكتب التسجيل، ينفض ما علق بملابسه، وهو يستمع إلى السؤال الموجّه له. أطرق يتأمل الخانة الخالية، والقلم الأزرق المصوّب عليها، رفع نظره قليلاً إلى اليد السمراء النافذة العروق، ومنها إلى الوجه الغاضب الذي ينتظر الإجابة. كرر الموظف سؤاله بحدّة، فيما داود يتمرّغ يده من جديد. على السوار الصوّبيّ الذي يتعاقد فيه اللونان الأبيض والأسود، قبل أن يملأ الموظف خانة الاسم وفق ما سمعه: «دفيد».

(Jābir, 2018, pp. 54-55)

Just before sunset, Dawud stood before the registration office, brushing off his clothes as he listened to the question directed at him. He lowered his gaze, contemplating the empty box and the blue pen pointed at it. He then glanced briefly at the dark hand with protruding veins, and from there to the angry face waiting for an answer. The clerk repeated his question sharply, while Dawud nervously fidgeted with his hand again. On the woolen bracelet woven in black and white, the clerk filled in the name box as he had heard it: "David."

Despite attempting to change his name and appearance to reflect Christianity, Dawud failed the interview. His failure to secure a place in Europe forced him to flee to the Gandar settlement, which left him with only two options: placement in other camps in Ethiopia or being returned to his home country, Eritrea. Gandar was where the Jewish community was concentrated, awaiting their departure to Israel. To enter Gandar, he had to pay bribes to intermediaries who orchestrated a scheme with the Jewish rabbis in the Gandar camp. In Gandar, he changed his name to "Dawit," embracing his Jewish identity.

Before the interview with the rabbis, Dawit had constructed a narrative about the history of percussion and the kidnapping of his parents on his way to Gandar, hoping to gain sympathy and be accepted into the settlement. Because the entire process was a fabrication (unknown to Dawit) due to the bribery he had received through the intermediary, he passed the interview and was accepted on the condition that he prove his Jewish identity and fulfill Jewish obligations. Dawit underwent a circumcision examination, learned Hebrew, and was baptized in the Gandar settlement.

"انتفض داويت رافعاً رأسه وهو يسعل وينثر الماء عن فمه وأنفه بعد أن بلغ تحمّله منتهاه. ضحك الحاخامات قبل أن يكمل رجل الدين صلاته على عجل، ويُشرّه بانتهاء «البيكيفيه» وبداية عودته إلى دين الأسلاف بعد سنوات التيه."

(Jābir, 2018, p. 41)

"Dawit jolted, lifting his head as he coughed and splashed water from his mouth and nose, having reached the limit of his endurance. The rabbis laughed before the clergyman hurriedly finished his prayer and announced to him the end of the 'baptism' and the beginning of his return to the faith of his ancestors after years of wandering."

As someone who has been officially declared a Jew, Dawit has an official Jewish identity. The identity document is an official piece of documentation issued by the competent authority of a State designed to prove the identity of the person carrying it (UNDESA, 1998, p. 10). In the context of migration, documents are crucial because they serve as official proof of a person's identity. This anxiety, for example, arises when undergoing security checks at airports.

بيد مرتعشة، أخرج الرجل الذي كان يجلس جوار النافذة في المقعد سبعة وثلاثين من الحافلة الرابعة، ورقة من جيب بنطاله تحمل بياناته المذيلة بصمات أصابعه، والممهوره بختم الحكومة الفيدرالية الإقليم تغراي، إلى جانب ختم الجمعية الأمريكية لليهود الإثيوبيين والوكالة اليهودية للهجرة تحسس الأختام

(Jābir, 2018, p. 19)

With a trembling hand, the man sitting next to the window in seat 37 of the fourth bus took out a piece of paper from his trouser pocket bearing his fingerprinted data and the seal of the

federal government of the Tigray region, along with the seal of the American Association of Ethiopian Jews and the Jewish Agency for Immigration. He felt the seals.

The identity issues faced in the destination country are more related to physical identity, called ethnicity, in this context, related to skin color. The title *Ragwah Saudā`* 'Black Foam' is a very significant sign of this issue. The word *ragwah* (foam) is floating, and *saudā`* (black) refers to the skin color of Africans in general, including Eritreans. Waves easily sway this floating sea foam, making it unstable; its movement is highly dependent on the surrounding conditions, including wind and wave size. The identity of this Eritrean migrant is also alike, changing according to the conditions he faces: the interviewer, the desired destination. This identity, as it moves towards 'stable'—when it has decided to be Christian or Jewish—is disrupted by changes and developments in the situation. Every time the foam is about to settle or move towards stability, a sudden wave comes and lifts it back to the surface.

Otherness

The 'other' is anyone separate from oneself. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation between the colonizer and the colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and worldview (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 154-155). Meanwhile, Spivak coined the term 'othering' for the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others' (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 156).

This Eritrean migrant experienced 'othering' at almost every stage of his migration journey, namely in refugee camps in Ethiopia, both in Indagabuna and Gandar, and also after arriving in a new place, Israel. Dawud, the character, was always the other, considered not to be part of a particular group/community. The Indagabuna camp, managed by the UN, was under the control of arrogant Ethiopian soldiers who regularly carried out violence, insults, and threats against the heads of Eritrean migrants. Among the initial violence he received and witnessed were whips from Ethiopian soldiers for those who were not orderly in marching to the UNHCR officer's registration desk and threats with inhumane words, "Watch yourself, or you'll end up lying on the ground like a dog!" (Jābir, 2018, p. 59). Nevertheless, Dawud admitted that the Indagabuna camp was a paradise compared to the punishment and torture during his time in the revolutionary school and the 'Blue Valley'.

على مدخل انداغابونا كانت ثمة حاجة أخرى للنجاة، هذه المرة من جندي إثيوبي يرشد القادمين بسوطه للاصطفاف بطريقة صحيحة

(Jābir, 2018, p. 53)

'At the entrance to Indagabuna, there was another need for escape, this time from an Ethiopian soldier guiding the arrivals with his whip to line up correctly.'

These Eritrean migrants are politically "enemies" of Ethiopia, given the long-standing hostility between the two countries, which led to Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in a long war and independence in 1993. Thus, Ethiopia, as an extension of its former colonial power, views itself as "self", while these Eritrean migrants are viewed as "other." Colonialism remains deeply entrenched in the minds of Ethiopians. Besides Indagabuna, Eritrean migrants also experience being 'other' in the Gandar settlement. While in Gondar, Eritrean migrants are not readily accepted by the local community, even among fellow migrants. Various othernesses are perpetrated by gatekeepers, Jewish rabbis, and residents outside the settlement. Among those othernesses is the rabbi's questioning of Dawit's Jewish identity, which involves checking whether he is circumcised.

قبل أن ينصاع أخيراً ويخضع سرواله الداخلي وهو يغطي بيده ما بين فخذه. مجدداً أراد أن يغمز نفسه في الماء كي يُداري عريه، لكنّ رجل الدين أوقفه، وهو يأمره برفق بيده. كان واضحاً أنه يريد رؤيته ما يجتهد في محاولة إخفائه. رفع يده ببطء بعد أن أغمض عينيه.

"حسنًا... سبق لهُ الخِتانُ".

نطقَ بها بنبرةٍ ساخرة، وهو يلتفتُ صوبَ البقيّةِ خلفَ البستارِ قبلَ أن يتمتمَ آخرُ بإشفاقٍ:

"لا بأس، المهمُّ أنّه عاد إلى ملّته أخيرًا"

(Jābir, 2018, pp. 40-41)

Before he finally complied and took off his underwear, covering his crotch with his hand. Once again, he wanted to submerge himself in the water to cover his nakedness, but the cleric stopped him, ordering him gently with his hand. It was clear that he wanted to see what he was trying so hard to hide. He slowly raised his hand after closing his eyes. "Well... he's already been circumcised." He said it sarcastically, turning to the others behind the curtain before another muttered with pity, "It's okay, the important thing is that he's finally returned to his faith."

Policymakers in Gandar, including Jewish religious leaders, inhumanely treat Eritrean migrants seeking recognition as part of the Falasa Jewish community. They perceive Eritrean migrants as "others," rather than as equal members of the Jewish community, because they are considered to be exploiting the history of Falasa Jews as an opportunity to gain entry into Israel as part of the Jewish group known as Beta Israel. They are aware that many African Jews strongly desire to live in Israel, a situation that has encouraged widespread bribery of rabbis in Gandar through various intermediaries. At the same time, these Eritrean migrants in Gandar are not particularly concerned with their Jewish identity. It is evident in Dawit's lack of enthusiasm for Jewish religious lessons, despite his serious commitment to learning Hebrew. Their main hope is to reach Israel as quickly as possible, escape the control of their homeland and its authorities, and build a new and freer life. Ironically, it is in Israel that they experience the greatest degree of otherness. Their hope for a safer and better life is ultimately denied. Instead, Eritrean migrants in Israel encounter forms of exclusion and otherness rooted in xenophobia.

Xenophobia is attitudes, prejudices, and behavior that reject, exclude, and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society, or national identity (Kulik, 2025). It is evident in many ways: some Israelis who refuse Dawit and other Eritrean and Sudanese migrants' arrival upon landing at the airport, health officials who treat them like "a disease," and Israeli police and soldiers who are always suspicious, because they are considered troublemakers. Among the actions that demonstrate this is the medical examination migrants undergo at the hospital after leaving the airport. Authorities must ensure that migrants do not transmit diseases to the native population.

صرخت الممرضة فزعاً، وابتعدت مسرعة حين كادت تصطدم بدَاوَيْتٍ عند نقطة تقاطع الممرات، وهي تتمتم بكلمة التقطها

أذن داوَيْت:

«عبد قدر».

التفت إليها الممرضة وهو ينصحها بأن ترتدي القفازات والأقنعة، لأنها ستجد الكبير «منهم» في الممرات، قبل أن يعود ببصره إلى داوَيْت ليعرف إن كان قد فهم شيئاً من كلامه.

(Jābir, 2018, pp. 71-72)

The nurse screamed in fear and hurried away when she almost collided with Dawit at the intersection of the corridors, murmuring a word that his ear caught:

"Slave of fate."

The male nurse turned toward her, advising her to wear gloves and masks, since she would find the "great one among them" in the corridors, before turning his gaze back to Dawit to see whether he had understood anything from his words.

Migrants are treated like a "disease" that is feared of infecting the local population. The gestures and choice of words used by medical personnel demonstrate xenophobia: they must be careful when passing people, must wear masks and gloves, even when not examining them. For the

authorities, the arrival of Eritrean migrants raises not only demographic, employment, and security issues, but also health concerns. In terms of security, Eritrean (and Sudanese) migrants are often seen as the cause of unrest—drugs, prostitution, and fighting—resulting in frequent police arrests. Police patrols frequently target people of color, including checking their identity documents. This targeting can even result in shootings that lead to death.

اخترقت رصاصة صدره، فسقط على ظهره. .. أغمض عينيه، وقد شعر بروحه رغوة تطفو على السطح.

(Jābir, 2018, pp. 248-249)

A bullet pierced his chest, and he fell on his back. He closed his eyes, feeling his soul foaming at the surface.

This otherness is related to migrations and minorities, who are seen as a danger to living standards, lifestyles, and social cohesion. Extreme-right parties have grown and flourished through anti-immigrant campaigns. The dysfunctions of the Israeli asylum system are so systematic that they amount to an intentional policy to deny recognition to refugees. Israel is unwilling to recognize the protection needs of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers. It conducts the sweeping claim that they are economic migrants who could be deported from the country (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 10).

Even after obtaining recognition as Beta Israel Jews, Eritrean migrants continue to receive discriminatory treatment from established Jewish communities, including from Africans who already hold positions of authority, such as police officers and soldiers in Israel. They are not fully accepted as part of the dominant white Jewish community that occupies higher social, economic, and political positions. As a result, they remain marginalized and vulnerable, with discrimination that sometimes even leads to death.

CONCLUSION

Migration in the postcolonial world has become a global phenomenon, giving rise to complex relationships between the parties involved in the migration process. In such situations, migrants are always vulnerable, both to the factors driving migration and during the journey and in the destination country. In the context of Eritrean migrants to Israel, their vulnerability is linked to the authoritarian government, which mandates compulsory military service and other forms of oppression—what Foucault calls biopolitics. During the journey and in the destination country, migrants experience vulnerabilities related to religious identity and otherness. This vulnerability can even culminate in death in the destination country.

Eritrean Arabic literature has shown significant development in the production of Arabic literary works, both in prose and poetry. It is an interesting phenomenon, considering that Eritrea is not a member of the Arab League. Therefore, further research into other Eritrean Arabic literary works, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks, is both warranted and encouraged.

REFERENCES

- Al-Qibthiyah, A. M. (2024). *Penderitaan imigran Eritrea dalam novel Ragwatun Sauda`u karya Haji Jabir: Analisis sosiologi sastra* [Undergraduate thesis, Universitas Gadjah Mada]. UGM ETD Repository. <https://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/penelitian/detail/241331>
- Amnesty International. (2018). *Forced and unlawful: Israel's deportation of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers to Uganda*. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Israel-deportation.pdf>
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Bugeja, N. (2025). Postcolonial studies, migration, and literature: Positions, perspectives, and debates. In G. Adair, R. Fasselt, & C. McLaughlin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to migration literature* (pp. 129–138). Routledge.

- Cantalupo, C., & Negash, G. (2005). *Who needs a story? Contemporary Eritrean poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic*. Hdri Publishers.
- Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (1998). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (2nd ed.). Macmillan Press.
- Connell, D. (2012). Escaping Eritrea: Why they flee and what they face. *Middle East Report*, 264. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283595430>
- Duncan, D. (2020). In the wake: Postcolonial migrations from the Horn of Africa. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 56(1), 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqz055>
- Faruk. (2012). *Metode penelitian sastra: Sebuah penjelajahan awal*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1976).
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. Sage Publications.
- Hassan, W. S. (Ed.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of Arab novelistic traditions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199349791.001.0001>
- Human Rights Watch. (2023, February 9). *Eritrea: Crackdown on draft evaders' families: Collective punishment over forced conscription campaign*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/09/eritrea-crackdown-draft-evaders-families>
- International Organization for Migration. (2019). *IOM handbook on protection and assistance for migrants vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse*. <https://publications.iom.int/books/iom-handbook-migrants-vulnerable-violence-exploitation-and-abuse>
- Jābir, Ḥ. (2018). *Ragwah Saudā`*. Dār at-Tanwīr li aṭ-Ṭibā`ah wa an-Nasyr.
- Kibreab, G. (1990). Ethnicity, religion and British policy on the disposal of Eritrea, 1941–1952. *Africa*, 60(2), 159–200. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40761791>
- Kulik, R. M. (2025, March 10). Xenophobia. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/science/xenophobia>
- Lucht, H., & Mengiste, T. A. (2020). *Peace and plight: Eritrean refugees struggle after the peace agreement with Ethiopia* [DIIS Policy Brief]. Danish Institute for International Studies. https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/3785153/DIIS_PB_Eritrean_Refugees_web.pdf
- Mains, S. P., Gilmartin, M., Cullen, D., Mohammad, R., Tolia-Kelly, D. P., Raghuram, P., & Winders, J. (2013). Commentary: Postcolonial migrations. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14(2), 131–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.753468>
- Matz, J. (2016). *Tatawwur al-riwāyah al-ḥadīthah* [The development of the modern novel] (L. al-Dulaimi, Trans.). Al-Mada for Media, Culture, and Art. (Original work published 2004).
- Mechri, S. (2025). “Mixed migration”: Cursed journeys and dystopian narratives in Abu Bakr Khaal’s *African Titanics* and Walid Amri’s *Les Papillons de Lampedusa: Traversers clandestins*. *Journal of Migration & Culture*, 16(1–2), 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc_00112_1
- Murphy, S. D. (2016). *The Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998–2000)* [GWU Law School Public Law Research Paper No. 2016-52; GWU Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2016-52]. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2856670>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, & Global Migration Group. (2017). *Principles and guidelines, supported by practical guidance, on the human rights protection of migrants in vulnerable situations*. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/PrinciplesAndGuidelines.pdf>
- Rédaction Africanews. (2024, August 13). *Eritrea, authoritarian regime in the Horn of Africa*. Africanews. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/23/eritrea-authoritarian-regime-in-the-horn-of-africa/>
- Scholten, P. (2022). *Introduction to migration studies: An interactive guide to the literature on migration and diversity*. Springer.

- Tataru, G. F. (2019). Migration: An overview on terminology, causes and effects. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Law*, 7(2), 10–29. <https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenlaw/24>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. (1998). *Recommendations on statistics of international migration: Revision 1* (Statistical Papers Series M, No. 58, Rev. 1). United Nations.
- Weiner, S. (2025). Migration novels as archival spaces: Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and Amitava Kumar's *Immigrant, Montana*. In G. Adair, R. Fasselt, & C. McLaughlin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to migration literature* (pp. 226–238). Routledge.
- White, P. (1995). Geography, literature, and migration. In R. King, J. Connell, & P. White (Eds.), *Writing across worlds: Literature and migration* (pp. 1–19). Routledge.
- Wilson, J. M. (2017). Narratives of flight and arrival: Abu Bakr Khaal's *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015). *Postcolonial Text*, 12(3–4), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.63260/pt.v12i3&4.2313>
- Yohannes, H. T. (2023). Refugee trafficking in a carceral age: A case study of the Sinai trafficking. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1885005>