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Crossing Borders: Between Juba and Portland in Terry Farish's *The Good Braider*

Cruzando fronteras: entre Juba y Portland en *The Good Braider* de Terry Farish

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Abstract: Terry Farish's *The Good Braider* (2012) explores the migration of a Sudanese adolescent, Viola, and the influence of her migration on her identity. Set during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), the novel examines how displacement—spatial, cultural and temporal—shapes identity through cultural displacement. Drawing on Marc Augé's notion of "non-places" (1997), refugee camps and spaces of transit become central to Viola's fragmented belonging. Her braids symbolise the weaving of gendered, racialised and diasporic identities. The tension with her mother, Thereza, reveals the intergenerational impact of forced migration. Ultimately, Farish's narrative redefines refugee literature by foregrounding the emotional and structural dimensions of uprootedness.
Keywords: Identity; forced migration; diaspora; refugee camp; Terry Farish.
Summary: Introduction: *The Good Braider* and Refugee Literature. Escaping from Juba: The Migrant Experience and the Disruption of Belonging. Transitional Journeys: Necropolitics and Non-Places. Viola's Settlement in Maine: The Reconstruction of Identity and the Role of Braiding. Conclusion.

Resumen: *The Good Braider* (2012), de Terry Farish, explora la migración de una adolescente sudanesa, Viola, y la influencia de la migración en la construcción de su identidad. Ambientada durante la Segunda Guerra Civil Sudanesa (1983–2005), la novela analiza cómo el desplazamiento—espacial, cultural y temporal—configura la identidad a través del desplazamiento cultural. A partir de la noción de "no lugares" de Marc Augé (1997), los campos

de refugiados y los espacios de tránsito se convierten en elementos centrales del sentido fragmentado de pertenencia de Viola. Sus trenzas simbolizan la integración de diversos aspectos de su identidad, que abarcan dimensiones de género, raciales y diaspóricas. La tensión con su madre, Thereza, refleja el impacto intergeneracional que causa la migración forzada. Finalmente, la narrativa de Farish contribuye a la literatura sobre refugiados centrándose en cómo el desarraigo afecta tanto a la esfera emocional como a la vida estructural de los refugiados.
Palabras clave: identidad; migración forzada; diáspora; campo de refugiados; Terry Farish.
Sumario: Introducción: *The Good Braider* y la literatura de refugiados. Huida de Juba: la experiencia del inmigrante y la ruptura del sentido de pertenencia. Viajes transicionales: necropolítica y no-lugares. Asentamiento de Viola en Maine: la reconstrucción de la identidad y el significado de las trenzas. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION: *THE GOOD BRAIDER* AND REFUGEE LITERATURE

From the era of Olaudah Equiano to the ongoing displacement of Palestinians under settler-colonial occupation, forced migration has been driven repeatedly by imperial expansion and colonial violence. During the period of colonial expansion overseas—particularly from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries—European imperial powers forcibly reconfigured territorial boundaries and resource distribution, which led to the displacement of Sudanese communities and the restructuring of their social and political structures. In the Sudanese context, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, administered jointly by Great Britain and Egypt, governed both North Sudan and South Sudan between 1898 and 1956 under a unified colonial administration (Sharkey 2003, 4). After achieving independence in 1956, Sudan was immediately beset by internal strife, culminating in the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) (Poggo 1). The disparities between the North and South of Sudan, especially regarding religion, culture, and political systems, led to the eruption of a second civil war (1983–2005).[1] Such conflict pitted the Arab-Islamic North, with its unified vision of culture and history, against the African South. In contrast, the South encompassed various ethnic groups with distinct tribal polities and land-use systems (Kasabian 5). As Rolandsen notes, "[u]nderlying factors such

[1]This divide, rooted in both religious and ethno-cultural identities, was deepened by colonial administrative practices and uneven development. The North's closer ties to Arab and Islamic identity often stood in contrast to the South's alignment with sub-Saharan African cultural and Christian traditions, reinforcing marginalization and internal displacement. Similar patterns of identity-driven displacement can be observed in other geopolitical contexts, such as in Palestine, where Ilan Pappé describes the use of ethnic and cultural differentiation as a mechanism of control and expulsion (Pappé 30–31).

as civil war legacies, neo-patrimonialism and a weak state made a new civil war in South Sudan possible, if not unavoidable" (171). The war forced many people to leave their homes and resettlement programs dispersed Sudanese refugees all across the world, including American cities like Portland, Maine (Kasabian 5).

Terry Farish's *The Good Braider* (2012), a moving young adult verse novel, explores the intertwined themes of forced migration and personal transformation. Drawing on her experience working with refugee communities, Farish portrays the psychological and cultural challenges Viola faces as she travels from war-torn Juba, South Sudan, to a temporary refuge in Cairo, Egypt, and eventually to Portland, Maine. In this new environment, Viola must navigate the complexities of American society while rebuilding her sense of self. Told from the perspective of the adolescent protagonist, Viola, the novel intimately captures her inner world, alongside that of her mother, Thereza, and her younger brother, Francis, as they flee their homeland. Through Viola's eyes, the story addresses adolescence, cultural displacement, and the lingering effects of trauma. Written in free verse, it traces the family's struggles during their journey and their efforts to adapt and find a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar world. The disruption of their social environment and the redefinition of "home" become central to the evolving sense of self in Viola's family. For this reason, this article focuses on the protagonist and explores how the intersection of place and identity formation reveals that refugees are shaped not only by cultural and social factors but also by their relationship to land and environment—that is, through encounters with new spatial contexts, institutional structures, and interpersonal relations. As is the case with many refugee narratives, *The Good Braider* underscores the inextricable link between the physical journey and the psychological transformation that arises from displacement, particularly for adolescent migrants who must navigate the simultaneous processes of cultural adaptation and identity formation.

Within this framework, this article examines how displacement reshapes identity through spatial and relational dynamics in *The Good Braider*. It is true that most migration narratives vary greatly according to the experiences they represent; however, as John McLeod highlights, critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Avtar Brah have contributed significantly to understanding "the new possibilities and problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life" (McLeod, *Beginning* 238). In line with this diversity, *The Good Braider* represents a

significant contribution to refugee literature insofar as it reflects on the realities of contemporary forced migration. Refugee literature, in this sense, invites a rethinking of the world by portraying identities as fluid, non-static and no longer anchored to a single nation-state (Chiang 29). Traditionally, however, migratory movements have often been represented through reductive frameworks such as "unidirectional 'stories of flight'" (Coundouriotis 78) or purely "humanitarian narratives" (Bakara 289) that foreground victimhood and rescue, while neglecting displaced individuals' agency and complexity. These simplified representations and monolithic narratives erase the intricate social, cultural and psychological realities of displacement and contribute to the construction of what Behrman terms the" romanticised figure of the literary exile" (Behrman 38), ultimately silencing different refugee voices. In this context, classical reflections on identity also illuminate the instability of diasporic subjectivities. Heraclitus's metaphor of identity as a river in constant transformation anticipates contemporary understandings of identity as processual rather than fixed (Kahn 53), while Sayad conceptualises migrant identity as shaped by history, culture, language, and social structures (3–4). This theoretical framework provides a useful lens through which *The Good Braider* can be read as a narrative that challenges reductive models of displacement by foregrounding identity as dynamic, relational, and continually reconfigured through forced migration.

Many contemporary literary and cultural theorists, particularly those working with Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies, emphasised that the concept of identity cannot be tied to a single place (McLeod, "Diaspora" 3). This approach is reflected in refugee literature, where identities are often portrayed as "broken mirrors" (Rushdie 11), reflecting the fragmentation and multiplicity produced by displacement (Rupp 35). As Avtar Brah claims, diasporic identities are sustained and "created out of the 'confluence of narratives' of different journeys and links to the 'old country' which create the sense of a shared history" (Brah 183).

Migrant collective belonging and the liminal zones that arise from being situated neither fully in the place of origin nor entirely in the host society are particularly relevant in this context. In fact, Bhabha's notion of "in-between" spaces (1) facilitates the recognition and legitimization of diasporic identities that have historically been excluded from dominant, canonical frameworks of identity. As Bhabha says, 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" so that "these 'in-between' spaces . . . initiate new signs of identity" (1) that reflect refugees' realities. Liminal spaces reimagine identity as not limited by borders or static national allegiances but instead forged through dynamic interactions with the environment. Refugee literature, therefore, plays a pivotal role in reshaping our understanding of identity and space.

Although Farish is not herself a migrant, she explicitly acknowledges the responsibility involved in representing migratory experience. In an interview, she emphasises the need to understand displacement as a lived, embodied, and multifaceted experience shaped by differing positionalities rather than a distant, abstract or reductive condition, stating "I wrote *The Good Braider* about a family, in particular a young girl who survives genocide in Sudan... I absolutely found it necessary to understand this experience and talk to people, who had come to Portland, about their experience" (Farish, "Author" 2:12). Farish's position as a non-migrant author nevertheless prompts an examination of how refugee experience is narratively shaped and mediated. While Farish does not share the lived experience of exile depicted in the novel, *The Good Braider* mitigates these risks by centring Viola's interior consciousness and by resisting a totalising or explanatory stance. The narrative does not claim to speak for refugee communities as a homogeneous whole; rather, it foregrounds one situated, adolescent perspective marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and ongoing negotiation. In doing so, the text complicates the ethical terrain of outsider authorship without collapsing into paternalistic mediation. This article acknowledges the novel's production context without reducing it to a Western "rescue" narrative. Rather than rendering a reductive framework of salvation or assimilation, *The Good Braider* centres Viola's interior consciousness, relational tensions, and the enduring aftereffects of displacement.

Within this context, this paper focuses on Viola's multifaceted journey, where her physical displacement, particularly from her homeland, plays a crucial role in shaping her identity. For that reason, it is my contention that *The Good Braider* sheds light on the profound impact of forced migration on identity formation, emphasising the spatial dimensions of this process. This article argues that *The Good Braider* reveals how forced migration destabilises identity through displacement, tracing Viola's trajectory from internal displacement in Juba to her resettlement in Maine, where her sense of self is reconfigured through

spatial, relational, and power dynamics. While Maine unsettles her sense of self, it also becomes a site of resilience and communal belonging, where braiding comes to symbolise both the struggles and the strengths that shape her identity. Ultimately, the novel reveals how Viola's forced (dis)placement not only (de)stabilises her sense of self but also becomes the very condition through which her identity is continually redefined.

2. Escaping from Juba: The Migrant Experience and the Disruption of Belonging

In *The Good Braider*, the forced displacement arising from the war between South Sudan and North Sudan and the war itself and act as the catalyst for the disruption of Viola's sense of stability, safety, and identity. Set in Juba, the capital of South Sudan and the protagonist's hometown, the story illustrates how conflict reshapes both individuals and communities. The characters are forced into a constant process of self-redefinition as violence destroys the familiar world around them, pushing them into exile and compelling them to negotiate their identities within an unfamiliar social and cultural landscape. Before the war, Viola's town is depicted as a peaceful, almost idyllic place "surrounded by nature" (Farish, *Good* 40), highlighting a sense of harmony between the people and their natural landscape. War, however, turns Juba into a barren terrain, where "even the trees and birds don't find life in Juba" (40). This environmental devastation signals not only the destruction of physical space, but also the erosion of the cultural and emotional bonds that tie individuals to their homeland (Hodel and le Polain de Waroux 974).

Natural elements, particularly water, also play a pivotal role in shaping Viola's identity and affecting her displacement. The Nile River, symbolically evoked by the blue in the South Sudanese flag, symbolises both life and interconnectedness with Viola and her past (Roozenbeek 17–18). For Viola, however, displacement severs her access not only to the river but to the wider natural and communal landscape it sustains, leaving memory as the only channel through which this environment can be recalled. It is through this act of recollection that the river continues to reinforce a collective sense of community and identity tied to the land (Nowicka 72). In fact, this loss is deeply felt by the characters on a personal and embodied level. As Viola narrates, "she misses the trees that surrounded Juba / when she was young, the tamarind, the acacias, / the dense forest, the shoebill bird in the swamp. / She misses weavers in the

wood" (Farish, *Good* 40). This nostalgic recollection underscores how nature once anchored their sense of belonging, identity, and memory.

From the outset of the armed conflict, systemic oppression and entrapment reshape Viola's sense of home, which she describes as "like a prison" (Farish, *Good* 21). The threat of northern "soldiers breaking into [her] house" (27) turns domestic space into one of vulnerability, collapsing the boundary between interior and exterior. In "Last Offer," the presence of a soldier in the courtyard—once a protected space—recasts it as a site of intrusion and control. The lines "Vomit rises in my throat. / we freeze" and "We lower our heads" (48) reveal how fear gives way to enforced submission. Even basic survival becomes transactional, as Viola recognises, "If we take the sugar, he will own us" (49). This dynamic reflects broader structures of violence, including sexual violence, as Viola's rape by a soldier exemplifies how "rape is an act of war" (Farish, *Good* 186), embedded in systemic gendered oppression (Beyani 31). At the same time, resource scarcity in Juba underscores the harsh conditions shaping this dislocation. From a political ecology perspective, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" (2) reveals how environmental degradation operates as a gradual yet devastating form of power. In *The Good Braider*, ecological collapse and political abandonment converge, limiting life chances and marginalising refugees both in Juba and during migration. The lack of food and water becomes another weapon of war, as shown when Viola and her grandmother wait in long lines for rations (Farish, *Good* 44). Ultimately, the depletion of natural resources reflects a broader social collapse, where survival itself is undermined by forced separation from the land that once sustained them.

The erosion of safety, security, and agency at home can have profound psychological consequences. As Fox asserts, "home becomes a place of danger" (590). This is further evidenced by the protagonist's claim that she would "rather escape than eat" (Farish, *Good* 21). As Watson and Austerberry explain, the word home conjures images of "personal warmth, comfort, stability, and security" (8), all of which are stripped away through the armed conflict and the act of displacement itself. The loss of home safety is compounded by the inability to use household objects—such as the pot in which asida is prepared, the quinine kept in the house to treat malaria, the stored groundnuts intended for daily sustenance, the comb used to part and plait hair, and the elephant's bone preserved within the home as a relic—that are central to identity formation.

In South Sudan, women's identity has been traditionally and socially bound to the domestic sphere, particularly within the patriarchal household structures that assign gendered roles to everyday labour, where a woman's "job is to cook" (Farish, *Good* 27). Viola's observation that she has "never seen a boy cook before" (113) reflects this culturally embedded and gendered division of roles within the South Sudanese context. In this setting, the kitchen functions not merely as a neutral domestic space but as a site where women's agency is both confined and regulated. Because domestic labour has historically been linked to subordinated and racialised forms of work, including enslaved labour (Cade 299), the kitchen acquires symbolic weight in the novel as a marker of women's limited agency within the patriarchal structure of South Sudanese society, as suggested by Fathi (983). When Viola's home is lost, so is the one place where women had some authority, further disrupting their sense of identity. As Fathi notes, objects and rituals within the domestic sphere become inscribed in our bodies and shape how we construct ourselves (988). When Viola and her family flee Juba, they carry only a few possessions—some food and a book—which represent the scant resources they have to sustain both their bodies and minds (Farish, *Good* 46). Leaving behind their belongings therefore entails more than material loss; it also signifies the rupture of the embodied routines and cultural practices through which identity was enacted. For Viola, exile does not mean liberation from domestic responsibility but the loss of the spatial and cultural framework that had previously given coherence to her role and sense of self. In *The Good Braider*, Farish shows how the war transforms Juba from a lush, life-filled city into a barren and resource-poor place. Therefore, it severs Viola's ties to the land, her community and her cultural memory. This environmental destruction, coupled with gendered violence and forced displacement, undermines her sense of self. In this context, memory and personal possessions become vital anchors for identity. The novel highlights how home and environment are deeply connected to a sense of belonging and agency, and how their loss exposes the fragility of individual identity in the face of conflict.

3. Transitional Journeys: Necropolitics and Non-Places

The journey from Juba to Portland reveals how war and displacement force Viola and her family to move from one place to another. Their survival depends on enduring prolonged periods in temporary spaces and on facing

conditions that determine who is allowed to live and who is not, as Southerners were considered to be disposable. This practice reflects Mbembe's coined term "necropolitics," which evidences the tyrannising "power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" ("Necropolitics" 11). As Viola explains, there is a clear division between the South Sudanese population who "don't want to be Muslim, [they are] people of the south" (Farish, *Good* 151) and northerners. As a result, Viola points out how many people died after Northerners killed without scruple. In a conversation with Andrew, Viola says:

> We don't want to be Muslim, we people of the south.
> He waits.
> I stare at the side of his neck he calls a rugby neck.
> "So many died," I tell him. "You cannot imagine
> how they throw people away." He waits.
> "Millions of my people."
> He keeps looking forward so I cannot see his eyes.
> I keep talking.
> "If they did not kill you, they did other very bad things.
> Things like torture. And kidnap. And rape." (151–52)

In this way, necropolitical power enacts a controlled production of "(un)living" subjects.

Beyond the dynamics of necropolitics and its implications, spaces themselves operate as instruments of social valuation. For instance, in Africa—both in Cairo and Wadi Halfa—Francis 'well-being is disregarded (62) and he ends up dying (65). As Viola states:

> I am surging toward Cairo.
> But Francis seems like he is somewhere else.
> His eyes sink deeper and deeper
> into his head. He cannot eat. No one
> has medicine. Other children around us sicken, too.
> They soil themselves unstopping.
> "Bad water," people say. Bad water in Wadi Halfa. [...]
> I do not want to go on. I want to go back
> to Habuba. She would give Francis clean water
> and some herb to stop his cramps.
> My mother holds Francis.
> We huddle under blankets to ward off the cold air.

> Maybe we are both thinking,
> *What if we had continued on the road*
> *south to Kenya?*
> *Would Francis be healthy then?*
> *Or would we all have died?*
> My mother says, "We cannot know
> if we could have gotten to Kenya,
> and if we had, which would be worse, here or there?" (*Good* 63)

The novel distributes vulnerability unevenly across age and gender. Francis is figured primarily through corporeal decline—illness, hunger, and physical exhaustion—rather than sustained interior reflection. Unlike spectacular violence, his deterioration results from infrastructural abandonment—contaminated water, lack of medicine, and the absence of institutional protection. Here necropolitics operates through exposure because it relegates certain populations to what Mbembe calls "death-worlds" or spaces in which people are subjected to "conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" ("Necropolitics" 40). Viola, by contrast, is positioned as an adolescent female subject whose body is likewise exposed to precarity, even if the narrative does not foreground her physical suffering in the same way. Rather than centring bodily decline, the text highlights the gendered risks that shape her experience and grants readers access to her interior perspective. While Francis's suffering remains largely externalised and material, Viola's is rendered as both bodily and psychological, revealing how displacement is lived differently along generational and gendered lines. This differential exposure to vulnerability becomes even more visible once the family is resettled in the United States. By contrast, Viola is struck by the difference in Maine, where the police—"who to me [Viola] are like soldiers" (102)—act not as enforcers of violence, as soldiers did in Juba (15), but as protectors, explicitly demonstrating concern for human life by insisting that Viola fasten her seatbelt to avoid death or being injured (102).

After their displacement from their homeland—driven by necropolitics—the characters are forced into the aforementioned transient spaces that embody what Marc Augé calls "non-places". These spaces, like checkpoints, means of transport, borders and refugee camps, are characterised by a lack of permanence during an uncertain period, further destabilising the characters' sense of belonging and identity. The sense of a stable identity is disrupted as they enter non-places, where, as Marc Augé

suggests, human beings are left in a state of liminality, neither fully present nor absent, suspended in an indefinite waiting (34). These infrastructures have the power to subject people to a social hierarchy that enables those in authority to either preserve or eradicate lives considered precarious in border spaces (Butler, *Force* 55). While Mbembe's framework identifies the sovereign power to decide over life and death, Butler's notion of precarity helps explain how such spaces produce differential exposure to harm, rendering certain refugee lives less recognizable as deserving of protection. As they pass through these liminal spaces, the characters are uprooted not just physically but also psychologically, struggling to maintain a sense of self. Viola's memories of her life in Juba—now replaced by barren camps and unfamiliar landscapes—show that home was more than just a place: it provided identity, culture and security. The refugee camp near Khartoum, described as an endless stretch of plastic shelters (Farish, *Good* 59), reflects the loss of rootedness and the breakdown of the physical and social structures that once anchored Viola and her family. Therefore, Marc Augé describes non-places, like refugee camps, as places of "accelerated circulation" where the instability of their environment constantly reshapes identity (Augé 34). Such camps function as necropolitical spaces in which life is administered at its bare minimum, while also producing conditions of extreme precarity in which survival remains unevenly distributed. Refugees are neither fully abandoned nor fully protected; rather, they are contained within a system that reduces life to biological endurance. These spaces demonstrate how power can be exercised through containment and regulated scarcity rather than overt violence. Within this environment of containment, displacement also reshapes subjectivity. In line with Caren Kaplan's assertion that travel produces the self through "spectatorship and comparison with otherness" (36), Viola's forced movement from her home to the refugee camp prompts a continuous comparison between her previous life and her present one. This ongoing act of measuring the familiar against the unfamiliar becomes a central mechanism through which her sense of self is renegotiated, and survival itself is reframed across displacement—from Juba, through liminal non-places, to Maine.

In addition, means of transport also function as non-places. Such transitory zones are defined as impersonal spaces where individuals are reduced to cargo and stripped both of agency and dignity (Augé 34). 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" (34). In fact, the degrading conditions of their journey mirror the dehumanising transport of livestock, as refugees "sit / on the plane's floor, packed with hundreds of others" (42), reflecting how, as Mbembe (*Critique* 11) notes, African bodies are often reduced to objects or commodities. When travelling, this objectification is further echoed when Viola describes having "the rations strapped / to [her] stomach" (Farish, *Good* 48), recalling the burdens carried by pack animals. In fact, she is treated more like freight than a person (Farish, *Good* 48), highlighting the dehumanising nature of these liminal experiences. Moreover, the metaphor of freight is not merely figurative but is literalised in the bus journey. Viola notes, "The bus is like a truck. We squat, / holding on to the side" (60), collapsing the distinction between passengers and freight. Their bodies are reorganised for transport rather than comfort, as "our bodies lean / into one another as we sleep" (60). The chaos of travel is underscored by imagery of migrants whose movements recall those of peddlers hauling plastic furniture, rugs, cooking pots, and even goats aboard (61) since they are told to "get ready / [and] pack everything on [their] body" (46). The act of being perpetually in transit further denies them the ability to (re)establish a connection with any particular land or community, thereby hindering any sense of stability.

Moreover, bureaucratic structures in the asylum process exert a powerful influence over refugees' lives by limiting their autonomy and destabilising their sense of self. Viola's forced migration and the bureaucratic barriers she faces—such as the need for visas and legal documents—further limit her ability to exert agency over her own life (McConnachie 398). As Butler argues, governmentality and bureaucracy enact a form of power that regulates the population, constraining their movement and, by extension, their lives and identities (*Precarious* 52). While organizations like the UNHCR provide some relief, the asylum process also leaves migrants with little control over their futures. For Viola, waiting years for a "blue card" marks a prolonged period of uncertainty as it is the official confirmation of her eligibility for resettlement (Farish, *Good* 87). Yet the blue card does more than permit movement because it reorganises existence through administrative recognition. Viola reflects, "Inside I see it. The blue card that means / we are eligible for resettlement. I catch my breath" (87), revealing how identity becomes contingent upon eligibility. This bureaucratic

confirmation also reshapes relational perception. She wonders, "Is this woman my mother? This woman—smiling! . . . it's as if I am just seeing her now" (87). The moment culminates in the intimate recognition, "It is as if we breathe the same breath… / She is myself" (87). Bureaucratic validation thus produces a paradoxical re-coherence of identity, even as belonging remains structurally conditional. Travelling through a succession of temporary and impersonal spaces not only prevents her from achieving stability but also exposes her to forms of power that continuously displace and reposition her.

Furthermore, the desperation produced by waiting in long queues for vital resources intensifies over time through what can be understood as a suspension of time. This condition aligns with Friday et al.'s (2025) notion of "temporicide," whereby enforced waiting erodes lived time and confines subjects within bureaucratic and spatial constraints. In Viola's journey, waiting is not a passive interval but a form of temporal dispossession that prevents her from fully inhabiting either present or future. Control is exercised through restricted access to essentials since Viola and her grandmother "*wait* in the food line / in the sun to collect rations" (44; emphasis added) and water (26) while trying not to be killed (44). Water scarcity also acquires a gendered dimension, as women are typically responsible for securing it, exposing them to militarised spaces where resource control becomes domination. Scarcity thus functions as a necropolitical instrument, regulating access to life-sustaining resources and determining whose survival is precarious. Environmental degradation and gendered labour intersect, shaping unequal exposure to risk. Waiting continues throughout their journey, reinforcing uncertainty (64). After they "wait through the dry season / [and they] wait till the rains begin" (Farish, *Good* 56), they travel from Juba to Khartoum (57), then "wait from one day to the next for the / [first] bus to come" (59), and Viola eventually "lose[s] count / of the days it takes" for the second bus (60). Even water transport offers no certainty, as the steamer "will come in a week, / maybe, maybe not. Maybe two. / [They] wait" (60). Ultimately, Viola and her family exist in a constant state of waiting that produces liminal, dehumanising conditions. Prolonged delays, bureaucratic control, and necropolitical violence make survival dependent on externally controlled time, demonstrating that displacement disrupts not only physical space but also the social and personal foundations of life.

4. Viola's Settlement in Maine: The Reconstruction of Identity and the Role of Braiding

Displacement and migration reshape identity and reconfigure personal, familial, and cultural bonds, especially in Viola's adolescence, where border crossing intensifies self-negotiation (Teague 38). These changes are symbolised by her braids, which represent ties to family, homeland, and cultural heritage. In the United States, Viola and her mother, Thereza, both renegotiate their identities, but in different ways. Thereza, as a first-generation refugee, remains attached to her past and resists full immersion in American culture, frequently comparing her present life with Africa (Slatebreakers). From the perspective of migrant motherhood, this resistance operates as a protective strategy shaped by intergenerational trauma and the desire to preserve cultural continuity. This reflects a broader first-generation dynamic in which preservation and adaptation produce unequal forms of belonging within the same family. By contrast, Viola fits Rubén Rumbaut's notion of the "1.5 Generation" (983), showing greater adaptability as her identity shifts between Sudanese and American influences under the pressures of resettlement. This ongoing negotiation creates tension between mother and daughter. As Abdelmalek Sayad argues, diasporic identity is not fixed but formed through continuous negotiation with "one's history . . . traditions . . . language . . . religion . . . or, in a word, with one's culture" (3–4). As a result, a growing sense of alienation emerges, particularly as Thereza struggles with "adjusting to the changed condition" (UNHCR 10). For her, America remains foreign, reflected in her limited use of English, "[only] spoken when useful" (Farish, *Good* 126). Viola, in contrast, embraces English and cultural fluidity as strategies of adaptation and survival. Their differing responses highlight both a generational divide and distinct coping mechanisms, with language functioning as both a barrier and a bridge in their relationship (Kasabian 29).

However, even though Viola is able to embrace cultural fluidity more easily than her mother, she also has difficulties, which are reflected in her braids. Historically, braids in African culture have been deeply tied to identity, community, and social status (Byrd and Tharps 9). Although Africa is home to a wide variety of hairstyles (Sieber and Herreman 56), hair can also signify social and emotional conditions. In Viola's case, her displacement and the mourning for her lost home and brother prevent her

from braiding her hair since "mourning is often expressed by deliberately abandoning the usually carefully coiffed hair" (57). Viola's hair, which is a physical manifestation of her African heritage, becomes a powerful symbol of her fragmented identity. For Viola, the act of braiding transforms into a lost ritual, reflecting her unravelling self amid the trauma of displacement. As her sense of belonging disintegrates, so does her connection to this intimate cultural practice. For that reason, Viola states, "I no longer braid my hair since it is broken. / I used to braid girls' hair in our courtyard in Juba. / I used to give my cousin little twists with bright beads. / We are all separated now, those children and me" (Farish, *Good* 81). Conversely, she contrasts this with the girls she sees in Cairo as she states, "I see girls on Cairo streets who braid extensions into their own hair… But I don't touch my hair. I don't tell him how it hurts, remembering the feel of Habuba's fingers braiding my hair" (81). As a result of such displacement, Viola not only is unable to braid her hair but also chooses to shave her head. In the colonial era, slave traders sought to dehumanise enslaved African people by shaving their hair (Byrd and Tharps, 9). Hairstyles functioned as both social and identity markers, revealing an individual's place of origin, status, or the language they spoke (9). Consequently, when people were unable to express their identity through their hair, their means of communication were limited, "since shaving someone's head equated to erasing their identity" (Nyela, 16). Viola reenacts this symbolic erasure when she chooses to shave her head during moments when she struggles to understand the complexities of her identity (Farish, *Good* 101).

Furthermore, Viola's difficulty—or refusal—to braid her hair reflects not only her connection to cultural traditions but also her ties to family relationships. This is most powerfully expressed in her metaphor of the braid after Viola's brother, Francis, dies. Viola states, "We were three, like three strands. / We lay, three of us, on the steamer, warming each other. / Without the third, I don't know what to do" (82), referring to herself, her mother, and her little brother. The braid thus becomes a visual and tactile metaphor for familial cohesion, displacement and longing. After her brother's death, she is left in a state of despair (67). The loss of Francis, compounded by the experience of displacement, not only fractures her family but also destabilises her inner sense of self, reflected in her refusal to braid her hair. As Viola admits, "I don't do the Sudanese braids in my hair we all do in my culture. Why don't I? I don't know" (185), capturing

the lingering confusion and detachment experienced by many displaced individuals.

In relation to cultural expression, braids in the novel function as a complex form of cultural expression that can both strengthen and complicate a sense of community. On the one hand, they symbolise continuity and connection to homeland, as "[b]raids are from our [their] culture" (Farish, *Good* 83), linking them to African traditions (Bhopal 202). In this sense, braiding fosters belonging amid displacement and operates as a social practice that reinforces bonds among family and friends. It also carries deeper cultural meanings, since "hair in the hands of an enemy, could be incorporated into a dangerous charm or 'medicine' that would injure the owner" (Sieber and Herreman 67). Traditionally passed from mothers to daughters, braiding is central to motherhood and creates spaces of interaction and reconciliation (Babou 4), particularly between Viola and Thereza. In exile, this practice gains further significance as an embodied ritual through which care and cultural memory are preserved, even when other forms of stability collapse. For Viola, allowing her hair to be braided becomes a way of repairing relational bonds and reconnecting with community. At the same time, cultural expression through braiding intersects with tension and control. Thereza initially restricts Viola's integration into American culture, forbidding her relationship with Andrew and maintaining boundaries that exclude outsiders (Farish, *Good* 136). However, this control can also be read as protective, shaped by trauma and heightened maternal vigilance in the aftermath of violence. Thus, her boundary-making reflects both care and fear, even as it creates distance between them. Gradually, though, through the shared act of braiding (203), Thereza softens and begins to acknowledge Viola's need to construct an identity that blends both African and American influences.

The contrast between Africa and America, often shown through natural imagery, also helps to reveal the importance of braiding in Viola's sense of self. This condition can be further understood through Bhabha's concept of "in-between" spaces, which describe identities formed not through fixed origins but through ongoing processes of cultural negotiation (1). In Viola's case, this does not produce a harmonious synthesis but rather a persistent tension between belonging and displacement. Her identity develops in the space between these two worlds, shaped by the continuous negotiation of different cultural influences. This is reflected in

the following symbolic parallels. In America, "a star formation . . . / is called the Elephant's Trunk" (208), while Khartoum "means Elephant's Trunk, / [which is] the shape the two rivers make / when they meet" (209), "when the Blue Nile and the White Nile / come together" (209). These images of convergence—constellations and rivers—mirror Viola's identity as constituted by the meeting of Juba and Maine, Africa and America. Ultimately, Viola starts to understand herself better when she sees how Africa and America connect in her life. At first, she struggles with a sense of incompleteness: "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). Over time, she articulates this complexity more clearly: "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). Her identity thus remains fluid and paradoxically defined through its instability, reflecting the "not American enough" positionality (Teague 38). Ultimately, she embraces this duality: "I'm an American girl in Portland, Maine. But I am also a girl from Juba" (213), recognising that her identity emerges from the coexistence of and connection between both worlds.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The Good Braider*, the formation of migrant identity begins with the violent rupture of displacement, which unsettles not only geographical belonging but also cultural and emotional continuity. After the Second Sudanese Civil War, Viola and her family are forced to leave their home and gradually lose their connection to Juba and the sense of stability it once offered. The loss of familiar objects, rituals and family bonds shows that displacement starts not at a border but within the home itself. Such elements that once sustained her identity are stripped away, and survival becomes the priority.

This rupture continues through their journey. The novel highlights how necropolitical forces and transient spaces shape who survives and who does not. Their displacement is marked by encounters with checkpoints, borders, refugee camps, and modes of transport that exemplify Marc Aug'és notion of non-places: transient, impersonal zones that deprive individuals of rootedness and recognition. The characters 'identities are

further destabilised by the dehumanising nature of transport—where they are treated like freight—and by bureaucratic structures that demand legal justifications of their existence, such as the coveted "blue card." In these liminal conditions, survival depends less on agency than on endurance, as waiting—whether for rations, travel, or legal approval—becomes the defining rhythm of their lives. These prolonged periods of uncertainty and waiting reveal the fragility of identity in transit—a constant balance between past and future that makes it hard to hold onto a stable sense of self.

Even though generational tensions still play a role, it is not until Viola reaches Portland that the possibility of reshaping her identity becomes clearer. Settling into a new place does not eliminate the effects of displacement but instead reshapes them. This process demands continuous negotiation and adjustment. While Thereza holds tightly to cultural traditions and resists integrating, Viola, as part of the "1.5 generation," takes a more flexible approach, blending her Sudanese heritage with American influences. Crucially, these contrasting orientations reflect different ways of negotiating displacement: Thereza's preservation seeks continuity after rupture, whereas Viola's adaptation becomes a means of social survival in the host context. In this sense, braiding becomes a key metaphor for identity and repair. Choosing not to braid represents disconnection and cultural loss, while the act of braiding acts as a ritual of reconciliation, linking family members and allowing Viola to embrace who she is. It thus functions not only as a marker of cultural identity but also as a way of restoring connection between mother and daughter. As a metaphor, it extends beyond the personal into natural imagery—stars, rivers, and ecosystems—that highlights the interconnectedness of her identity. Just as strands come together to form a braid, Viola's sense of self is woven from multiple cultural threads, constantly evolving and adapting to new surroundings.

By following Viola's journey from Juba to Portland, the novel shows that migrant identity is not something fixed or inherited; it is a continual process of negotiation and redefinition. Displacement dismantles familiar structures of belonging, while necropolitics and non-places suspend individuals in liminality and resettlement compels a reweaving of cultural elements across generations. Viola's eventual embrace of braiding as both practice and metaphor illuminates how identity can be reconstructed out

of rupture, threading together Sudanese and American influences into a dynamic whole.

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