

ENGLISH MIGRATION LITERATURE: VOICES OF TRANSITION, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

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Abstract: This article examines English migration literature as a distinct sub-genre defined not merely by authorial biography but by the thematic centrality of displacement, identity fragmentation, and the negotiation of belonging. Drawing on a comparative analysis of recent scholarship including Sandra Vlasta's thematic approach to migration motifs, Ujjwal Biswas's work on fragmented diasporic identities, and the structural distinctions proposed by Fariha Shaikh, the discussion identifies recurrent preoccupations with language acquisition, culinary memory, and the varied conditions of mobility. The article argues that these works demand a critical vocabulary attentive to both shared human questions and the specific structural dynamics that differentiate the settler, the refugee, and the exile. It further considers the metaphor of the English language itself as a migrant, highlighting how migration literature operates within a doubly displaced linguistic space to offer a profound meditation on self-hood in a world of shifting ground.

Keywords: migration literature, diaspora, identity fragmentation, displacement, structural mobility, World Englishes, belonging

In the study of contemporary literature, few themes carry as much urgency or emotional weight as migration. The movement of people across borders, whether voluntary or forced, hopeful or desperate has reshaped societies and, consequently, the stories we tell. English migration literature, a term I use to describe literary works written in English that take migration as their central subject or are authored by writers who have themselves migrated, has emerged as a vital field of scholarly inquiry. It is a literature that speaks in many voices: the refugee, the settler, the exile, the labour migrant, the child of diaspora. As I will argue in this article, drawing on recent scholarship, migration literature is not merely a thematic category but a distinct mode of writing characterised by recurring preoccupations with fragmented identity, linguistic negotiation, and the structural conditions that shape human mobility.

Defining what constitutes migration literature has been a foundational task for scholars in the field. Sandra Vlasta, in her comparative study of migration writing in Austria and Great Britain, proposes a deceptively simple definition that has proven remarkably productive: migration literature is "literature on the topic of migration". This formulation deliberately sidesteps the question of authorial biography, focusing instead on the presence of migration as a central theme. Vlasta's approach allows her to identify a shared repertoire of motifs across different linguistic traditions, examining writers such as Monica Ali, Caryl Phillips, and Timothy Mo alongside their German-language counterparts. She finds striking parallels in how these writers treat "language and language learning, identity and the search for identity (expressed for instance by cooking, eating and food), or depictions of the new homeland". The recurrence of food as a vehicle for exploring identity is particularly illuminating: in narratives of migration, the preparation and consumption of familiar dishes become acts of memory, resistance, and

cultural preservation, tangible connections to a homeland that exists increasingly in the imagination.

This thematic coherence across national and linguistic boundaries suggests that migration literature functions as what Vlasta terms “a sub-genre that exists in both various bodies of literature as well as various languages”.¹ Yet the very existence of such a sub-genre raises questions about the relationship between lived experience and literary production. The Bloomsbury Handbook of Anglophone Literature and Migration, an expansive forthcoming volume edited by Nicoletta Vallorani, Simona Bertacco, and William Boelhower, addresses this relationship by investigating “the role of literature in producing new modes of representing and understanding migration in a global context”. The Handbook’s chronological scope is significant: it covers the period from 1946 to 2016, a seventy-year window described as “a climactic phase of displacement” that spans from the establishment of international frameworks for managing migration to the year global displacement figures reached levels unseen since the Second World War.² This periodisation underscores the scale of the phenomenon migration literature seeks to represent.

A persistent concern in the scholarship is the question of identity how it fractures, reforms, and negotiates its place under the pressures of displacement. In a recent study published in the International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences, Ujjwal Biswas examines what he terms “Fragmented identities: Migration and the quest for belonging in contemporary diasporic narratives”. The very architecture of this title discloses a central argument: migration produces fragmentation, and narrative becomes a means of seeking what has been lost or rendered incomplete. Biswas’s work sits within a broader current of diasporic criticism that understands identity not as a fixed essence but as a continuous process of negotiation, shaped by the interplay of memory, place, and the gaze of the receiving society.

Language itself cannot be separated from these negotiations of identity. Indeed, as Nwaugo Goodseed Ochulor and his colleagues argue in a provocative 2025 article, the English language itself can be understood through the metaphor of migration. They contend that “diaspora and migration are historically embedded in the evolution of the English language,” noting that the “experiences in its migration, mixing and mingling with other languages of the world, which gave rise to the concept of Englishes, reflect similar diasporic experiences such as displacement, diaspora, hybridity, loss of cultural identity and alienation”. Drawing on Braj Kachru’s *Three Circles Model of World Englishes*, these scholars trace how English “encountered the challenges of duality, hybridity, loss of cultural identity, displacement and alienation” and, through its “malleable nature,” ultimately triumphed as a global language. The metaphor is striking: if English itself is a migrant, then migration literature written in English operates in a doubly migrant space, a literature of displacement composed in a displaced tongue. The study concludes with a recommendation that may resonate with readers of migration narratives: that “migrants have an agenda and focus more on their agenda” and cultivate “malleability” as “a

¹ 5.Vlasta, S. (2016). *Migration Literature in Austria and Great Britain: A Comparative Thematic Approach*. Ulyseus Science.

² 4.Vlasta, S. (2016). *Migration Literature in Austria and Great Britain: A Comparative Thematic Approach*. Ulyseus Science.

tool to transcend diasporic hiccups”.³ Whether literary characters achieve such transcendence, or whether their narratives derive their power precisely from its impossibility, is a question that animates much of the fiction itself.

Yet we must be careful not to collapse all experiences of migration into a single undifferentiated category. Fariha Shaikh, in her study of nineteenth-century settler emigration in British literature and art, issues a necessary caution against conflating distinct forms of mobility. She insists on “the pressing need to draw out the distinctions between different structures of mobility, the literatures they produce, and the critical framework with which to analyse them”. The experiences of “nineteenth-century settler emigrants, post-1950 diasporic migrants, and contemporary refugees and asylum seekers”, Shaikh argues, “are all determined by very different structural dynamics”. This attention to structural specificity is an important corrective to readings that might treat migration as a universal experience with universal meanings. The settler emigrant, who moves within the framework of imperial expansion and often participates in the displacement of indigenous peoples, occupies a fundamentally different position from the contemporary asylum seeker fleeing persecution. Shaikh’s work reminds us that “attending to the structural specificities” of different migrations “requires a different set of critical vocabulary”. Her acknowledgment of “the ethical and political difficulties” involved in this work, particularly “the question of how to examine the cultural work of emigration literature without privileging the voice of the settler emigration over that of indigenous peoples” models the kind of reflexive scholarly practice the field demands.⁴

The Bloomsbury Handbook’s structure reflects this attentiveness to diversity of experience and form. Its contributors consider “how traditional literary genres have morphed and hybridized to become suitable expressive tools for the new stories of migration” and “reflect on how the movement across borders and countries creates migrant identities that are not only linguistic but invests all aspects of one’s life and worldview”. The inclusion of authors’ voices alongside critical essays a feature noted in the Handbook’s table of contents signals an interest in dialogue between creative practice and scholarly interpretation, between those who live migration and those who study its textual traces.

What emerges from this body of scholarship is a sense of migration literature as a field constituted by productive tensions: between the specific and the universal, the local and the global, the experience of displacement and the search for belonging. The recurring motifs that Vlasta identifies language acquisition, culinary memory, the ambivalent gaze upon the new homeland are recognisable across diverse texts and contexts, yet they take on different meanings depending on the structural conditions of the migration being narrated. A refugee’s relationship to language acquisition is qualitatively different from that of a cosmopolitan elite migrant. A settler’s depiction of a new homeland carries implications absent from the exile’s nostalgic glance backward.

For scholars of migration literature, the task is to read with attention to both pattern and particularity. The field’s richness lies in its refusal of easy generalisation. It demands that we attend to the specificities of different mobilities while recognising the shared human questions

³ 2. Ochulor, N. G., Arikpo, P. E., & Otuaga, M. (2025). *English Language Identity and Diasporic Negotiations: Voices in Transition*. *Journal of Arts, Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*, 14(3).

⁴ 3. Shaikh, F. (2021). Conclusion: Structures of Mobility. In *Nineteenth-Century Settler Emigration in British Literature and Art*. Edinburgh University Press.

as - “Who am I, here?”, “How do I belong?”, “What does language make possible, and what does it foreclose?”, that run through these narratives. As global displacement continues to characterise our era, the stories we tell about migration, and the critical frameworks we develop to understand them, will only grow in significance. The scholarship surveyed here suggests that English migration literature, in all its formal and thematic variety, offers not merely a record of movement but a profound meditation on what it means to make a life, and a self, in a world of shifting ground.

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