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Refugee Life Narratives
— The Disturbing Potential of a Genre
and the Case of Mende Nazer

ABSTRACT:

This article offers a close reading of *Slave: The True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and her Fight for Survival* (2004), a recently published testimony about the life of the Sudanese refugee woman Mende Nazer who became an unpaid maid in the home of a Sudanese diplomat in London. After her escape from abusive treatment there, the launching of her book stirred huge public pressure, eventually saving her from being sent back to Sudan. In this respect, the story of Nazer's book shows how literature sometimes reaches beyond its usual sphere to interact directly with politics. Taking the text and the extratextual facts into consideration, this essay raises questions about the currency of refugee narratives, the need to perform refugee identities, and the risk involved of essentializing 'refugeehood'. Nazer's testimony as a 'refugee life narrative' prompts us to see literature, with its intertwined historico-political and cultural-aesthetic dimensions, as both a distinct layer within, and agent of, modernity.

Introduction

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROJECTS have always been intriguingly creative grounds for artists. It is within these life writings that performers, artists, and writers courageously invest in various forms of

self-invention and self-formation.¹ In their efforts to narrate their lives, authors recover unrecorded pasts and almost forgotten stories while becoming aware that factual and fictional realms are so neatly intertwined in the representation of memory and history that it is at times hard to distinguish between them. Accordingly, one major challenge for all autobiographical projects can be seen in their endeavours to make sense of historical facts, partial memorization and imagination. Narration together with re-memorization thus is understood as a means to sketch reality. Another word for this process is fabrication² that views unreliable narration³ as a constitutive narrative device of all (auto)biographical works. This exciting venture becomes a complex, political act when authors invest in the bestowal of agency.⁴

My illustrative reading echoes these issues, especially as Mende Nazer's award-winning book *Slave: True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and Her Fight for Survival* (2004) tells, or so the cover claims, "the true story of a girl's

¹ In this article, I follow Mary Besemeres and Maureen Perkins' notion of life writing when I use 'life writing' as an umbrella term for autobiographical and biographical texts, see their editorial comments in the launching issue of the journal *LifeWriting* 1.1 (2004): vii–xii.

² Wolfgang Iser uses the term 'Fingieren' (fabrication) to denote and analyse the connection between the imaginary and the real. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between anthropology and imagination from a hermeneutical, poststructuralist perspective, see the chapter "Die Funktionale Differenzierung der Akte: Selektion – Kombination – Selbst-anzeige," in Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* (1991; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993): 24–51.

³ The study of unreliable narration has a long tradition in English and American literary studies, gaining particular importance as a narratological approach through Wayne C. Booth's groundbreaking structuralist study *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961). While Booth's classic understanding of unreliable narration has become increasingly disputed, more and more critics argue for a cognitive approach to unreliable narration; see Tamar Yacobi, "Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem," *Poetics Today* 8 (1987): 335–72, and Kathleen Wall, "The Remains of the Day and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 24 (1994): 18–42. Interestingly enough, James Phelan and Mary Martin's taxonomy of unreliability aims to reinforce Booth's definition: see, for example, "The Lesson of 'Weymouth': Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethnicity, and *The Remains of the Day*," in *Narratologies*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999): 88–109. Departing from the 'classic' understanding of unreliable narration, this article suggests reading unreliable narration as a cultural practice and as an important aesthetic dimension of transcultural literature in times of globalized modernity. For a detailed discussion of the theory of transcultural unreliable narration, see Sissy Helff's "Orchestrating Transcultural Aesthetics through Narrative Unreliability," in *Proceedings of the Conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English* 29 (Trier: WVT, 2007): 277–87.

⁴ In *The Use of Autobiography*, the editor Julia Swindells points out that it is imperative to note that autobiographical projects present means of gaining agency for artists by turning their voices from the 'subjects of discourse' into the 'subjects in discourse' (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995): 4–5.