

Constructions of Home and Belonging Indian Diaspora Centre
University of Mumbai
Report on the lecture by Professor Dr. Janet Wilson
on
Feats of Survival: Refugee Writing and the Ethics of Representation



CoHaB IDC had organised a lecture entitled 'Feats of Survival: Refugee Writing and the Ethics of Representation' by Professor Dr. Janet Wilson, Northampton University, U.K. Janet Wilson is Professor of English and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Northampton, UK. Her research interests are in the writing and cinema of the white settler societies of New Zealand and Australia including diasporic writers, in particular Katherine Mansfield. She has also published on slum narratives, refugee writing, right wing rhetoric and fundamentalism. A recent publication is the coedited Routledge *Diaspora Studies Reader*. She is currently chair of 'Challenging Precarity: A Global Network', vice-chair of the Katherine Mansfield Society, and co-editor of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, and of the Ibidem book series 'Studies in World Literature'.

The lecture sought to examine questions concerning the politics of representation and reception involved in the reading and interpretation of refugee narratives. Professor Wilson argued that the construction of readers in the text and the inclusion of real life audiences in its paratexts help reposition

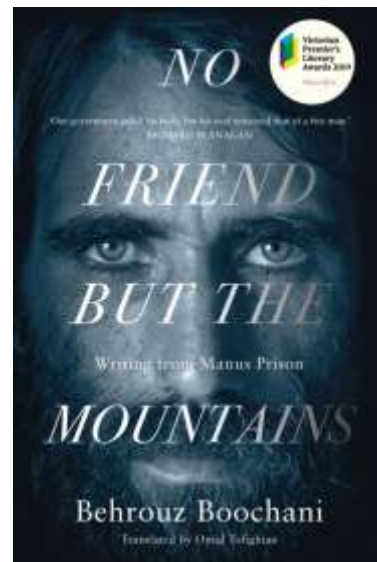
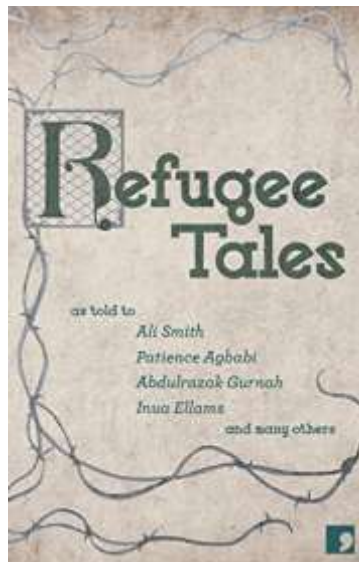
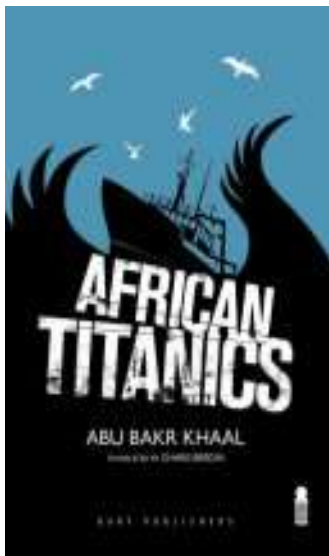
refugee narratives beyond the genres of documentary and auto/biography, thus widening the horizons of readers' expectations.

She cited Agnes Woolly's *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) wherein the latter touches upon the representation of refugees in literature which is either invisible or there is too much representation. As a result, refugees share an ambivalent relationship with any art form that chooses to represent them.

Professor Wilson further quoted from Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2016 [2009]). She spoke of how Butler questions whether refugee lives that are already displaced are in fact disposable and/or inauthentic. Butler questions whether the lives of refugees actually matter and worth grieving over compared to those who are citizens?

Here, Dr. Wilson quoted Sukhmani Thorani who in her essay 'Balancing the Quotidian and the Political Beyond Empathy in Australian Multi-Platform Refugee Narratives' who believes that the refugee narrative at times depoliticizes systemic issues and the narrative focusses on the feelings of the ethical citizens and not on those in positions of power.

Professor Wilson cited three texts: *African Titanics* by Abu Bakr Khaal, *Refugee Tales* edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus and *No Friend but the Mountain: Writing from Manus Prison* by Behrouz Boochani that represent refugee narratives.



Professor Wilson gave examples of how Khaal in *African Titanics* uses prose as promise while the poetry in the book is used to remember and memorise the past. The book is the untold story of the African people and their exodus to the Mediterranean. The book moves between the past and the present in both prose and poetry and follows the journey of a migrant.

Refugee Tales is a collection of stories told by Ali Smith, Patience Agbabi, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Inua Ellams and others. These writers retell the stories/experiences of migrants and offer an intimate sight into the sufferings/experiences of the refugees. The tales are a modern day equivalent of the pilgrims' stories in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

The third book that Professor Wilson discussed was Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountain: Writing from Manus Prison*. The book is an autobiographical story of Boochani who is held prisoner in an immigration detention facility on Manus Island. The book is a description of the author's journey, his detention on Manus Island and the subsequent life that he and his fellow inmates had to live all the while reflecting on the system that led to their condition.

This was followed by discussion on the books and the overall representation of refugees in literature. The exchange of ideas definitely prompted further research in refugee tales in the members of the audience.



Professor Wilson ended the talk by opening it up for discussion, comments and questions from the audience. The talk was attended by students, research scholars and faculty of the Department of English.