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*Chapter Five*

# Implicated Readers

## *Just Storytelling and Violence Against Migrant Women*

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Turkish-British novelist Elif Shafak begins *Honour* with an epigraph:

> When I was seven years old, we lived in a green house. One of our neighbors, a talented tailor, would often beat his wife. In the evenings, we listened to the shouts, the cries, the swearing. In the morning, we went on with our lives as usual. The entire neighborhood pretended not to have heard, not to have seen.
>
> This novel is dedicated to those who hear, those who see.

The epigraph does at least three things. First, it acknowledges implication, inviting the reader to do the same. A neighbor, especially a seven-year-old neighbor, cannot be guilty of the wife beating described here, if guilt means to "bear direct moral and often legal responsibility for a wrong or a crime" (Young 76). As a child, the speaker cannot even be said to participate in patriarchal norms that might, by perpetuating structural inequalities, help enable violence against women. Nevertheless, the speaker implies that all those who "pretended not to have heard, not to have seen" bear some responsibility for the continuation of abuse. Second, the epigraph situates the terror and bodily mutilation of regular beatings in the humdrum world of green houses and talented tailors. The first paragraph encloses the wife beating, structurally, between an opening image that could come from a children's book and a closing one in which everyone goes on with life "as usual." The ambiguous "we" going on with life might include the wife, for whom abusive husbands are life as usual, or merely the neighborhood bystanders. In either case, the

opening and closing images communicate the sense that the enactment of and silence about abuse are both normal. Third, the epigraph provides readers a way to transform implication into political responsibility; we readers could be among "those who hear, those who see."

This essay takes these connected ideas—implication, the everyday pervasiveness of violence, and the question of visibility—as starting points for theorizing what I am calling "the implicated reader." The term "implicated reader" derives from Michael Rothberg's 2019 book, *Implicated Subjects: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Implicated subjects "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege" in harmful systems "without being . . . direct agents of harm" (1). These positions may relate to our inheritance of privilege based on violent histories such as slavery or colonialism (83) or to our ongoing beneficiary status in systems grounded in inequality (54). Acknowledging and theorizing implication cannot, alone, move any reader toward the enactment of social justice or even toward more just forms of storytelling, but because effecting justice is always a question of actions we take in our embodied relation to other people, a literary theory that serves the goals of social or political justice must clarify the relationship between ethical forms of reading and ethical actions in the world. The concept of the "implicated reader," like Rothberg's implicated subject exists to clarify paths through which, as readers in specific historical subject positions, we can disentangle ourselves from some forms of implication and make visible ongoing abuses that literature so compellingly portrays.

Rothberg mentions the uneven distribution of "political violence, economic exploitation, and ecological devastation" (200). To this might be added the uneven distribution of political and aesthetic visibility. While historical or ongoing violence in particular forms and from particular contexts receives near constant media attention, other forms and contexts do not obtain the same degree of visibility. Novels may draw readers' attention to our implicated-ness in any of these forms of inequality through techniques like direct address or by using a transitional figure for the reader. They may also layer narrative perspective in such a way that readers' advantage over a character as a safe outside observer dovetails with a real-world position of greater socio-economic advantage or protection from violence. In such a case, an author can implicate readers for having had the desire to read a story of someone else's suffering. But as Rothberg says of implicated subjects, the goal of that sort of narrative move is not to provoke any self-indulgent feelings of guilt, but to prompt readers to question our own motivations for reading and to question what might constitute the most just means of narrating abuse.

This chapter explores implicated reading in relation to novels portraying human rights abuses. The argument applies generally to novels portraying all forms of ongoing rights abuses, but here I focus on two novels portraying

domestic, gender-based violence. In both cases the violence in the home connects to and is enabled by international failures of human rights protection. Elif Shafak's novel *Honour* (2012) centers on a son's attempt to murder his mother for an alleged affair, but that violence is framed by subplots related to human smuggling, labor abuse, sectarian violence, and colonialism. Vu Tran's 2015 novel *Dragonfish* begins as a work of detective fiction focused on domestic abuse but opens onto the Vietnamese refugee crisis of the late-1970s. In both novels, readers are implicated through transitional figures for the reader, both of whom have different cultural backgrounds than the families and who desire to rescue the novels' female victims. Additionally, and this will be my focus, both novels use letters that either never reach their intended audience or are never revealed to readers, raising questions about who has a right to access and retell stories of rights abuses.

Just as there are diverse forms of implication in terms of one's subject position, there are diverse formal means through which a novel might lead readers to contemplate our implicated-ness. These often include irresponsible storytelling within the narrative frame or positioning the reader in close proximity to a character's violence or vulnerability. *Honor* and *Dragonfish* include both of these tactics. They each use letters to symbolize an intimate and controlled manner of personal storytelling, which allows the just or unjust treatment of letters to stand in for just or unjust story-keeping more broadly. Letters are written as though one's inner voice speaks directly to the intended recipient. Consequently, when a letter is read by someone other than the intended recipient, that unintended reader obtains exploitable proximity to the writer's inner voice, eavesdropping, as it were, on someone's unspoken communication. Although reading someone else's letter does not harm another's body and therefore might appear a minor injustice compared to the rape and murder these novels portray, it is an action that bridges represented and lived realities readily because novel readers perform our intrusive letter reading within the frame of our embodied life.

## A THEORY OF READERLY IMPLICATION

Due to globalized media, readers carry a passive knowledge of widespread human rights abuses connected to displacement, political violence, or gender-based violence, but that does not mean we have actively considered it or actively considered what it might have to do with us (provided we read as someone who has never been a perpetrator or a victim of these abuses). Joseph Slaughter, whose publication of *Human Rights, Inc*. in 2007 helped define the field of literature and human rights, used the term "implicated reader" prior to the scholarly turn to implication in the 2010s. Responding

to a history of understanding readers as abstracted from the political present of their reading—as implied (Iser) but not implicated—he emphasizes that the implicated reader is "no de-ideologized ideal or imaginary reader as reader-response narratologists might have it." Rather, an implicated readership must be theorized to account for "what the reader refuses or resists acknowledging." This section does some of that theoretical work, using Rothberg's work, Iris Marion Young's description of responsibility via social connection, and a phenomenological conception of the subject as witness. The chapter then turns to a brief interpretation of the function of letters in *Honour* and *Dragonfish*. One can read these two novels for their aesthetic accomplishments alone, but to do so is to "resist acknowledging" the reality of everyday life for some neighbors near and far.

Rothberg inherits a rich philosophical, legal, and political discourse about shared responsibility, with post–World War Two thinkers like Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, and Primo Levi laying the groundwork for thinking about "the difficult-to-locate position between victims and perpetrators that makes implicated subjects useful to power" (55). Other scholars have also used lessons of collective responsibility during the Holocaust to think about modes of implication in the present. Simona Forti's *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today* (2014), for example, includes sections on "mediocre demons," who support the consolidation of violent power through compliance (314), and "poor devils," whose desire for life would permit the destruction of others to save themselves or their families (308). The full title of the chapter addressing this last is "Poor Devils Who 'Worship' Life: Us." Bruce Robbins makes a similarly inclusive rhetorical move in his 2017 book *The Beneficiary*. "Who is a beneficiary?" he asks. "You are, probably. If you had not benefitted from some ambitious higher education, it seems unlikely that you would be dipping into a book with so earnest and unpromising a title as this one" (6). Robbins's main idea is that "your fate is causally linked, however obscurely, with the fates of distant and sometimes suffering others" whose poverty and vulnerability to abuse is the condition enabling the first-world acquisition of wealth and security in the current global order (3). The idea of implicated readers is not only the subject of Forti's and Robbins's thinking; it also informs their expectations for the reading act enough that they use second-person address to drive home the fact that "you" or rather me and us readers do our thinking and reading from the position of implication.

The practice of charting "promiscuous" economic, political and I would add readerly "relations" (McRuer, 2019) is re-emerging as an interdisciplinary field of what might be called "responsibility studies." My thinking about implicated reading draws on this larger discourse, but Rothberg's "implicated subject," in my mind, usefully consolidates this discourse and best facilitates thinking about the ways that fiction based on historic and ongoing human

embeds us in webs of difuse but real political responsibility.

rights abuses ~~make us more responsible for those relations.~~ Rothberg's idea of "complex implication" (200) is flexible enough to include our joint implication in political orders and economic systems, as well as interpersonal relationships. A person may be, like the child in Shafak's epigraph, relatively powerless in any of these three realms of dynamic power relations and still retain some margin of agency with regard to others' suffering. As a relation of responsibility for justice and injustice, there is nowhere implication does not reach.

Being implicated in abuses we do not perform but could have a hand in exposing or preventing calls for an understanding of responsibility that is not based on guilt as a feeling or legal category. Such an understanding does not look to the past to clarify acts taken that led to a detrimental outcome. Rather, it looks to the past as containing intentional and unintentional acts by ourselves and millions of other people that led to the positions in which each reader finds themselves today. In her final book *Responsibility for Justice* (2011), Iris Marion Young develops what she calls a "social-connection model" (95–122) of responsibility that accounts for complex implication. In Young's thinking, responsibility is future-oriented (109), shared (110), and detachable from a "liability model" of responsibility that focuses only on blame (105). She recognizes that there are situations in which one may be blame-able but emphasizes that the dichotomies of guilty or not guilty, blame-worthy or blame-free conceal the responsibility bystanders often bear. Young's concept of responsibility is as essential to understanding implicated reading as Rothberg's implicated subject; it makes visible the way the act of reading about human rights abuses draws us further into a network of implication. Because readers are also citizens or stateless people, are comparatively rich or poor, because our nation might act in our name in ways that harm or help others—in short, because we are implicated prior to picking up a novel, our reading also is implicated. But reading a novel about ongoing rights abuses offers an engaged reader a new form of knowing about that abuse. There is much to be said about the relation between this disclosure and the actual experiences of rights abuse victims, but undoubtedly, after hours thinking with and through a novel, a reader will have ways of seeing extra-textual examples of rights abuses that differ, however subtly from her perception prior to reading the novel.

To conclude the definition of an implicated reader, I want to couple the concept of implication with the figure of the witness. Seeing a reader as a witness zeroes in on one node within systems of social connection—one reader and one reading event—but without neglecting the ways that networks of power position each of us as readers and storytellers. The way in which our particular implication is conditioned is to a large extent outside of our control, but we can control our response. Most readers will be familiar with the

classic example of "bystander syndrome." Around 3am on a March morning in 1964, neighbors listened to twenty-eight-year-old Kitty Genovese as she was stabbed and mugged by Winston Moseley. She briefly escaped before being attacked again, stabbed to death and raped. In subsequent experiments to determine how neighbors could fail to take even the minimal action of calling the cops, psychologists have determined that individuals ignore their own responsibility in proportion to the number of others around who could also be responsible. Conversely, if one person leads in trying to help, others follow. Everyone who heard Genovese's cries became a witness as an accident of spatial and temporal proximity. But when they found themselves involved in her moment of crisis, they *chose* to stand by. Contrast their actions with that of Darnella Frazier, the seventeen-year-old who stopped on her trip to the grocery store with her younger cousin to film police officer Derek Chauvin killing George Floyd in May 2020. Like Genevese's neighbors, Frazier *found* herself a witness; she *chose* not to be a bystander. Frazier was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in the Special Citations and Awards category for her video, which the Pulitzer committee credits with "spurr[ing] protests against police brutality around the world, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice" (Pulitzer Prizes 2021).

As implicated subjects and implicated readers, our responsibility is not chosen, but given. As Kelly Oliver (2001) writes, subject positions "are determined by history and circumstance." Our position is inscribed in "the finite world" and consequently changes constantly (17). Jean-Luc Marion (2013) describes this spatially, with respect to the ways our spatiotemporal limitations inevitably restrict our view: "The witness cannot avail himself of a viewpoint that dominates the intuition which submerges him" (217). What we see happening always began, somehow, before we came upon it and is always seen imperfectly. For both of these thinkers, the subject-as-witness comes to herself through social positioning and inter-personal relationships that always precede and enfold us. "Response-ability," as Oliver terms it, depends on what we can know and what we can do. If I know my neighbor beats his wife, I have more responsibility than a neighbor who does not. Whether I do something or nothing, I respond. If I teach, I have more responsibility for what my students have and have not read than someone who does not teach. Whether I engage that responsibility proactively or not, I cannot choose not to have it.

In addition to being placed by events we encounter in shared space and time with others, we are also placed by reading. Reading about violent histories, we cannot call for help the way someone might have done for Genovese or immediately shape the story as Frazier did. Nevertheless, the knowledge gained from a novel imparts greater responsibility than we had prior to reading and imparts it in a way particular to the novel, particular to the reading event, and particular to the reader's subject position. As with events

in-person, the event of reading "that comes upon us" cannot "be constituted into an object" subsumed under a stable concept and tucked away under our control. Rather, "it leaves the durable trace of its enclosure" in the "witness constituted despite itself by what it receives" (Marion, 2013, 217). This trace includes knowledge, but like all event-based knowledge, it is what Marion calls "negatively certain" (2015). Just as there is a dynamic hermeneutic process at play during the reading event, a similar process works after the fact to discover what we have learned and how that knowledge will shape our further reception of information. A reader's encounter with histories that shaped the present to her benefit and someone else's detriment initiates a double hermeneutic—a rethinking of one's present position in light of historical atrocity and an other-directed thinking about the singularity of lives lost, the webs of kinship severed, the stages of life skipped over.

The gender-based violence that occurs in the private spheres of both *Honour* and *Dragonfish* is enabled by the public injustices of being forced into refugee status by war or pressured to migrate due to the internationally unequitable distribution of jobs that pay a living wage. No reader will be totally unaware of increasing refugee flows and global inequalities in labor markets, but the vastness of these problems seems to belittle any individual hope to impact them. Certainly, policy level changes can do more than any citizen, but if legal scholar Seyla Benhabib (2008) is right that we are in the midst of a transition from a post-WWII emphasis on international norms of justice that "arise through treaty obligations and bilateral or multilateral agreements among states" to "cosmopolitan norms of justice," which "accrue to individuals as moral and legal persons in a worldwide civil society" (16), then literary encounters with human rights abuses can be an important factor in creating more just political norms by exposing "individuals and moral and legal persons" to new ways of thinking.

## IMPLICATION IN AND THROUGH *HONOUR* AND *DRAGONFISH*

The second half of the essay contrasts two contemporary novels' emphasis on the loss or inaccessibility of victims' self-expression. In both novels, undeliverable letters concretize and stand in for victims' narration of their own stories more generally. In the case of *Dragonfish,* Hong, who came to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam*,* ~~there are~~ produces two sets of letters—one addressed to her dead first husband documenting her escape from Vietnam as a refugee in the late 1970s and one offering a more holistic account of her life, including the recent years with her abusive second husband, ~~to her~~ addressed estranged daughter. Both sets of letters are burned without reaching their intended readers. In *Honour*, Pembe, the

mother to a family of three who has moved with her husband to Istanbul from a Kurdish village and then to London, moves back to her home village after her eldest son Iskander tries to kill her for being seen on the street with a man who is not her husband. From the village, Pembe writes letters to her daughter Esma, who still lives in London, describing the life she lives away from her children and imploring Esma to forgive her Iskander. In contrast to *Dragonfish*, the letters in *Honour* reach their intended reader, Esma, but they remain a family secret, with only one being reproduced and translated for the reader. In foregrounding the dynamics of translation, of masculine domination in the public sphere these two immigrant women inhabit, and of conflicts between private and public needs regarding victims' stories, the novels contribute to ongoing debates about what just public storytelling might mean.

Both novels disclose a global problem of gender-based violence, particularly against migrant women. Often being invisible in the public sphere of their adoptive homelands, migrant women are easy targets for the violent frustrations of their husbands and sons. This is true beyond the fictional portrayals of rural Kurdistan, Oakland, Las Vegas, Istanbul, and London. Although researchers have not been able to compile comprehensive statistics regarding violence against migrant women, the limited data available is startling. Globally, one in three women has been a victim of gender-based or intimate partner violence. Among women refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean, nine in ten have been raped (UN Women, 2021, 2). With nearly one hundred million people now on the move, including around forty million internationally displaced, the number of women and girls affected by these startling proportions is set to increase ("Refugee Data Finder"). Violence does not just occur along the route or once women become minorities in their destination countries; it also drives migration. For Hong, the central character of *Dragonfish*, abuse begins in the United States, but in *Honour*, prior to the family's departure from Turkey, one woman is forced to suicide for fleeing her abusive husband; another kidnapped to advance a family feud. Data for the 1970s, when Hong would have left Vietnam, is not available, but as of 2019, 63 percent of married women in Vietnam have experienced violence at the hands of their husbands (MOLISA, GSO and UNFPA). In Turkey in 2019, femicides had jumped to from 307 in 2018 to 474, with many of these reportedly linked to men's protection of family "honor" (Hackman). Four in ten women in Turkey reported being abused (*Human Rights Watch* "Combatting Domestic Violence in Turkey").

Fleeing to the United States or United Kingdom does not guarantee security. In 2019, in the United States, 2991 women were killed. In 63 percent of recent cases, the murderers were husbands, ex-husbands or current boyfriends (Hackman 2021). Per capita, that is twice as high as Turkey. In the United States, members of ethnic minorities are much more likely to be abused or

killed by their intimate partners. Asian American women continue to be neglected in this research, but an overview of the small number of existing studies estimates that 50 percent of Vietnamese American immigrant women have been abused during their lifetimes (Taft, et al. 2008, 172). Accurate statistics for the United Kingdom are even more difficult to find, not least of all because 30 percent of migrant women who report domestic abuse are deported (Smith 2019). These statistics should shock anyone who hopes for the equal protection of human rights among men and women, but in their quantitative facticity, they elide qualitative truths of life experience. In statistics every abusive relationship is equal and identical to every other. Novels make that illusion hard to sustain.

The multi-generational story of *Honour* begins in "a village by the Euphrates" in 1945 (5) and ends in London in 1992 (1). Following three generations, it tracks a line of Kurdish women. Naze, who longs for a boy, dies giving birth to her eighth girl. The eldest of these girls, Hayde, raises the others, including the young twins Pembe and Jamila, but she is forced to kill herself when her husband abandons her. At the age of only seventeen, Pembe has the son her mother longed for, Iskander. Readers follow Pembe as she moves to Istanbul, where her non-Kurdish husband, Adem, was raised and where she has had another child, Esma. Readers also learn of Adem's mother's suicide attempt (40) and eventual departure from his abusive father (52–57). The family moves to London while Iskander and Esma are small, in the hope that Adem can make a new start, free from the gambling habit he has struggled to shake in Istanbul. By 1992, when the novel ends, Esma is married and has her own twin girls, Leyla and Jamila. Although the girl does not know it, this Jamila is named after her great aunt, Pembe's mirror twin, who had remained in their home village by the Euphrates, unmarried and working as a much-respected midwife and healer for most of her life. When Jamila learns that Pembe's marriage is in shambles, she follows a smuggling route out of Kurdistan and eventually to London, where Iskander fatally stabs her, mistaking her for Pembe, who he suspects is having an affair. Assuming her twin's identity, Pembe escapes back to the village where she dies fourteen years later. After fifteen years in prison, the now thirty-one-year-old Iskander walks free.

Throughout the novel, the focalization shifts among characters and late in the novel it is made clear that this is no mobile third person narrator, but Esma. Having given up her aspirations to be "a writer as well as a human-rights activist," she decides that the only story she must write is her mother's (328). Since that is a story of "many characters" and she considers herself "not even a major character" (328–29), Esma imaginatively inhabits different characters' positions, inviting readers to do the same. Sometimes, such as when she assures readers that "my father Adem Toprak did not beat

his wife or his children," Esma will use personal pronouns, but as the phrase "his wife or his children" (as opposed to "us") reveals, she often writes as though outside the scene, even when referring to events she witnessed (79). Of the fifty unnumbered short chapters, only six are focalized through Esma.[1] She submerges her voice in the voices of others. Out of modesty, out of humble recognition of what she does not know, or perhaps out of complicity with a patriarchal culture's control of female speech acts, she also submerges her mother's voice. Pembe has only four chapters in which she is the main focalizer. In two of these, she is a child or teenager (9–16, 17–25). Of her two chapters as an adult, one centers on seeing her twin Jamila killed and one on the period immediately following her escape. In other words, the adult Pembe's own view of her life is privileged only when she becomes a victim.

Like many contemporary human rights novels, *Honour* implicates readers, in part by representing exploitive real-world processes of nonfiction narration. A journalist visits Iskander in prison and interviews him. "Please rest assured," she tells him, "I only want to understand the story, and increase awareness in society by writing about it" (136). He finds her intention "noble," but is disgusted after reading the article itself: "'This is a typical case of Middle Eastern patriarchal tradition,' blah, blah, blah. I was so irritated I never spoke to a journalist again . . . All they want is to fit you into a story that's already in their minds" (136). Readers are implicated in so far as we are unquestioning consumers of publicly circulated narratives that account for violence through ethnic prejudice or oversimplified tales of traumatized victims turned perpetrator. But the narrative perspective, which is affiliated with Iskander in this section, encourages readers to identify with the misrepresented criminal more than the newspaper consumer of criminal tales.

A more complicated instance of implication arises through the private storytelling that Pembe performs after she has returned to the village. She sends letters to Esma, as Esma reflects, telling her "more about herself than she ever had" (341). The importance of this observation emerges more clearly when related to the novel's complex use of language and multi-perspective narration. Within Esma's narration, there are fifteen letters quoted. Nine are written by Iskender while in prison. We read two from Pembe to her twin, Jamilla (90–91, 194–95) and one from Jamilla to Pembe (92, 94). Within Iskender's letters, two shorter notes are also quoted—a suicide note from his first cellmate, Trippy (161), and a postcard Esma had sent him, disowning him as a brother (106). Pembe's letters to Jamilla move between Kurdish and Turkish, we are told (92), but in the novel, they appear only in English. We learn from Iskender that Pembe "didn't trust English in general" (134). Her distrust of language, in his eyes, extended to Turkish and Kurdish as well. "Words caused trouble, she believed. They made people misunderstand one another" (134). But the way letters function in the novel generally contradicts

Iskander's impression on this last point. Jamila receives her twin's letters as treasures (32), reading them multiple times (89). Jamila feels self-conscious about her own letters to Pembe. She sticks to Kurdish (92), feels she hasn't much to say (32), but for Pembe, there is no one else in the world who she can express herself to. "Jamila, my dear sister," she writes, "I cannot confide in anyone but you" (194). For Esma, reading her mother's letters and writing her own becomes a cherished ritual (341). Characters' letter-writing and letter-reading belies the distrust of language Iskander projects onto his mother. In contrast with journalism's penchant for confirming an already-decided version of the story, Shafak presents letter-writing as a gesture of intimacy made in the secure knowledge that a story will be received as a treasure, to be read, re-read and acted upon.

Shafak has Esma share only Pembe's final letter with readers (341). In it, Pembe implores her to forgive her brother. Esma tells readers that Pembe never wrote about the struggles of where she lived, only the pleasures (340). Esma's reluctance to forgive her brother balances her commitment to imagining the story from multiple perspectives. To understand all is not necessarily to forgive all in the perspective that Shafak creates. Using Esma as a transitional figure for the reader positions us within the family but stages the story in a way that bids us to withhold judgment. Iskander is not yet forgiven, and his forgiveness is not ours to give. Esma's clear control over who gets to read the letters—she tells Iskander he will read some of them (334)—suggests that readers' access to this story must be earned. The story needs to be told. Neighbors need to hear, need to see, as the epigraph emphasizes, but access to victim's self-narratives, real or imagined, can feed a voyeurism that Denis Kennedy has called "a fundamental humanitarian dilemma" (1). In order to shake readers or viewers out of their apathy or compassion fatigue, humanitarian story tellers often highlight the most innocent victims and most lurid of crimes, while victims themselves disappear in the clamor of humanitarian organizations to witness *for* them. "Now humanitarians speak in the same voice, as if they too were survivors," and whereas the survivor "remembers soberly and recoils from affect" because of his personal suffering, "the humanitarian uses suffering instrumentally to gain support for his cause, publicizing victim's pain" (Dean 632).

Shafak's choice of Esma, who is orphaned by her brother's act, as the narrating intermediary for Pembe's story complicates any attempt to treat her as an outsider humanitarian witness. However, there is something of the humanitarian dilemma in any human rights novel. Shafak's presentation of Pembe's positive outlook in her letters aligns with historian Carolyn Dean's findings that victims remember "soberly"; both Pembe and Esma avoid veering toward voyeuristic exploitation of a traumatic topic. In witnessing Esma's struggle to tell her mother's story, readers are implicated for participating in

a public sphere that consumes oversimplified stories of abuse, one that forbids Pembe her own voice because of her limited mastery of English and her confinement in a family dominated by violent men. One means of mitigating the implication the novel invites readers to recognize is to acknowledge that within that public sphere, there also exists a private one, in which Pembe can express herself in her chosen language and in terms she sets for herself. Esma attentively, gratefully receives her mother's story, actively wonders about the most just means for re-presenting it, and models for novel readers a means of taking others' subjectivity and subject positions into account when trying to think through their experiences. Returning to the epigraph, one of the novel's most challenging invitations to readers, is the invitation to recognize that gender-based violence might not only be a matter of public storytelling about a global problem, but might happen right next door.

*Dragonfish* juxtaposes not only private and public storytelling but also private, domestic violence and public political violence. The public/private dynamic is manifested by having two narrators and two plots. The novel follows the dual narrative structure of classic detective fiction (Todorov 2010). One plot uncovers a mystery; the other details the crime. Typically, a story of detection encloses and mollifies the threat of violence at the heart of a crime narrative. However, in *Dragonfish*, the crime ostensibly being solved—a case of domestic abuse—opens onto the crime of negligence on a global scale when the abuse victim and her abuser are both revealed to be Vietnamese refugees. Solving the mystery of these characters' pasts does nothing to neutralize the violence and injustice exposed. The novel also uses two narrative voices. The first is Robert Ruen, a California cop. The other is Hong, Robert's ex-wife, who now lives in Las Vegas with Sonny. She and Sonny escaped Vietnam at the same time and met as recently widowed single parents in a Malaysian refugee camp. He now controls a smuggling operation. Hong is, again, fleeing for her life, but Robert and the reader learn that only gradually. Her victimization on a global political stage leaves her vulnerable to further abuse in the privacy of her supposed home. Both Robert, a figure associated with American law, and Sonny, associated with Vietnamese paternalism, abuse her.

The novel recognizes mechanisms that silence Hong and emphasizes how important it is that she has control over her own story. Robert is portrayed as wanting to control the plot of her life, her means of expression, and to some extent her identity. He wants to be the agent of justice in rescuing her from her current, even more abusive husband, but Tran emphasizes that Hong had to "earn" this protection by sacrificing her sense of who she is. Ruen calls her "Suzie," the name of his "first girlfriend in high school" (24). When they argue, she speaks Vietnamese (30), knowing he cannot understand her, but feeling "it is the only language, the only world in which" she can

"truly exist" (91). It is her "flaunting" his failure to understand Vietnamese that prompts him to hit her until she "bowed her head like she was going to vomit . . . childish all of a sudden, disbelieving" (31). A white, male, agent of the law, armed with the physical and social power to either dominate Hong or acknowledge the inexpressible uniqueness that makes her his existential equal, Robert abuses his power both in his assault and in calling her expectation to be treated like his beloved, or even a fellow human being "childish." The private power dynamic of native/migrant, lawman/petitioner before the law mirrors the public refugee/country of refuge dynamic.

Hong divorces him, only to enter the domination of a Vietnamese crime ring that, in being outside the reach of law, reverses and mirrors the lawless space through which both she and Sonny, her current husband, escaped Vietnam. In an early scene, Robert is led to a basement hidden beneath a Vietnamese restaurant and ushered into a room constructed within a giant aquarium. With no way of communicating his whereabouts, he is at the mercy of Sonny's enforcers, surrounded by sea. He's an anonymous outsider to all the people he just saw upstairs, so in this miniature de-nationalized space, he's in a basement-sized version of a camp. In shifting Robert from agent of violence to its victim, Tran dissociates vulnerability from ethnicity enough to emphasize that a shift in power dynamics can render anyone a refugee; it is not an ontological status. From this point, Hong's escape from Vietnam in the interleaved italicized sections, mirrors both her present attempt to escape Sonny and Robert's separate attempt to escape while aiding her. As the novel ends, Hong disappears into the American landscape, sustained by stolen cash and anonymity, and Ruen makes it back to California. The novel posits freedom and resources to make her own way as Hong's happy ending, but in gaining it, she loses her only friend, her language, and her name.

For all that, *Dragonfish* is optimistic, at least in the role it suggests novels can have in making stories like Hong's visible without creating an expectation for voyeuristic refugee self-exposure. After a particularly grizzly episode in which Sonny throws Hong down the stairs, she begins checking herself into a hotel room for a few hours every Thursday. There, she writes letters in Vietnamese to Mai, the daughter she abandoned when they arrived in the United States. It is a sampling of these letters that readers encounter translated into English in three italicized sections that are ~~interleaved~~ interwoven with Robert's more dominant narration. Hong writes about meeting and marrying her first husband, Mai's father, in Vietnam, about his departure to the army, his return and "re-education," his cancer diagnosis, his insistence that she leave by boat with Mai, then four years old. She describes the boat journey, the death of two women on board, and the refugee camp in which she and Mai meet Sonny and Jonathan, his boy. In addition to these letters, Hong has kept a red leather journal from the camp, and in it she writes "letters to someone who

would never read them" (289) her now-dead first husband. Near the end of the novel, we see Jonathan burn the journal before anyone can read it (289). He says to Robert as he does so that the journal never belonged to Sonny nor to him nor to Robert (289). Through this exchange, Tran posits very clearly that no one has a right to demand to know someone else's story, a stance that has implications for readers seeking thrills in other people's tragedies and also for the legal system of resettlement, which demands access to refugee's stories. The fate of the letters to Mai is less certain. We know Hong put them in a shoebox and gave them to her best friend, who swore never to read them (256); we know a stack of shoeboxes burns in the house when Sonny attacks this friend (281). The novel reader thereby becomes the only sure recipient of Hong's story. But we know that story was never for us. We read as eaves-droppers on her most private correspondence and in that way, Tran preserves the sense that although the story needs to be read, we don't have a right to it. Keeping her story is almost the only way in which Hong retained her right of self-determination.

## CONCLUSION

If readers, by virtue of also being citizens or consumers, are implicated, then that does not predetermine the novel reading we might do or should do, but it does combine with the uneven distribution of visibility to pose an ethical question: if the goal of recognizing implication is to "transfigure" it into active political responsibility (Rothberg 201), how could the distribution of visibility accomplished by novel reading be engaged in a politically responsible way? By "novel reading," I mean not only the practice of one reader engaged with one book, but also informal processes that influence the circulation of novels to be read, such as given, teaching, and recommending novels. Reading a novel that addresses human rights abuses does nothing to alleviate victims of that abuse and nothing to prevent further abuses from occurring, but in inviting readers to imagine themselves as perpetrator, victim or witness, in compelling us to admit that what we read in the case of domestic abuse or refugee struggles is not all fiction, these novels invest us with the responsibility to recognize and address our own implication. And more than that, we finish these novels with a means of raising visibility in our hands (the book) and in our minds (the story) that we know we have. "Implication derives," Rothberg argues, "from one form of acting in concert: the kind we undertake without being conscious of our actions' impact or that we perform while engaging in more active forms of disavowal" (200). Since human rights novels like *Honour* and *Dragonfish* document the processes by which victims' stories are suppressed or ignored, we find ourselves implicated in

maintaining that silence if we fail to share the story further. What might have been a passive willingness to remain ignorant about, for example, the domestic abuse of women immigrants, after reading, requires an active and conscientious disavowal. Implicated readers therefore become responsible for the ethical preservation of public storytelling without necessarily having a personal connection to contemporary and historical rights abuses.

Like a witness in person, the reader of these novels lives through an event shaped by temporality; by one's mood; stage of life; and physical, emotional, and historical proximity to the event. The reader, like the witness in person, comes away with experience-based knowledge that will shape future decisions in unseen ways. But unlike the witness in person, the reader shopped around for this experience. We can close the book and set aside the experience if today is not a good day. Nothing in the book threatens us. The responsibility bestowed on the reader as witness is therefore fundamentally different than that bestowed on the witness in person. Nevertheless, I would argue that responsibility *is* bestowed on the reader. It falls on us as voters, givers, neighbors, teachers, as storykeepers and storytellers. As Robbins writes, stories themselves can "bear responsibility for inciting or justifying large-scale loss of life" (2). If, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," then telling stories justly is everyone's responsibility. The recognition of injustice anywhere relies on stories of abuse being told and heard, but the power to speak one's experience and be heard is unequally distributed according to global and local operations of power over the public sphere. The position of an implicated reader imparts an ethics, not a normative ethics, but one arising circumstantially in relation to our subject position. Teachers encourage students to be active readers. What would change if 10 percent of the global readership of novels about violent histories became active story-shapers however we are placed? If we opted not to do nothing.

## NOTE

1. Pages 73–79, 180–85, 209–11, 278–81, 317–19, 324–35.

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