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**Promoting Intercultural Competence in the Norwegian EFL Classroom through an Understanding of Agency and Choice in Border-Crossing Literature**

Exploring agency in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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## Abstract

This thesis, *Promoting Intercultural Competence in the Norwegian EFL Classroom through an Understanding of Agency in Border-Crossing Literature*, aims to bridge the connection between integrating border-crossing literature in the classroom and developing intercultural competence. This is done through highlighting agency and choice within the border-crossing literature. In light of LK20, the National Reform of School Curriculums, intercultural competence is highlighted as a crucial skill that must be developed and integrated in students. Still, there are not many concrete suggestions or guidance as to how teachers should achieve this. This thesis highlights the value of border-crossing literature as a suggested answer to this conundrum, by offering a close analysis and emphasis on agency and choice in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. These two novels represent two contrasting border-crossing narratives that provide different insights into issues of migration, agency, identity, and choice. By emphasizing the importance of agency and choice in these novels, the reader must be willing to engage with topics such as privilege and prejudice through a scope of understanding. This is crucial in developing intercultural competence and is a central discussion throughout this thesis. By highlighting the importance of using border-crossing literature in combination with in-depth discussion and teaching of both historical and cultural context, this thesis hopes to present those interested with new ways of integrating literature in the classroom.

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This thesis marks the end of my teacher's education at The Arctic University of Tromsø, and it is with deep gratitude I look back at these incredible years. While this thesis marks my education as complete, it certainly does not mean my research is finished. The topic of my thesis is close to my heart, and I hope to continue learning about it for years to come.

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# 1 Introduction

*No local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other (Appiah, 2006, p. xvi).*

This thesis will look at the potential of using the border-crossing narratives found in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003/2013) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) as a way of promoting intercultural competence and agency in the Norwegian EFL (English Foreign Language) classroom. Intercultural competence is an important topic in the new Norwegian National Curriculum and requires the development of critical thinking, prejudice reduction, and communication. This thesis aims to highlight the connection between promoting intercultural competence and reading border-crossing literature that highlights the complex notions of age(ncy). My hypothesis is that reading literature helps develop a narrative imagination that enables intercultural competence, and border-crossing narratives are especially suited to develop this intercultural competence by presenting the reader with complex and unfamiliar experiences that must be understood through cultural and historical context.

In the last decade, global communication and dependency across borders has grown significantly. In the world of literature, border-crossing narratives have been around for centuries. From authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatly, Eva Hoffman, and Dinaw Mengestu, time continues to show that narratives surrounding border-crossings are relevant and important to acknowledge. However, the world has also never been as accessible as it is today. This is a fact that comes with both opportunities and challenges. James A. Banks writes: "Never before in the history of the world has the movement of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups within and across nations been as numerous and rapid or raised such complex and difficult questions about the rights of immigrant or ethnic groups [...]" (2016, p. 23). This also shapes how border-crossing narratives are constructed and written. Border-crossing literature will display a huge variety of narratives, as no individual will go through the same experience when migrating.

Whether this migration happens between physical and/or emotional borders, border-crossing narratives include powerful stories of individuals who see themselves in transit. This is the case of both *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika

Unigwe. *The Kite Runner* is a border-crossing narrative concerning an Afghan immigrant named Amir, and his life both before and after immigrating to the United States. Amir is a young man when his father takes him to America, in his new destination country he is able to escape his past. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a story of four women who leave their African homeland voluntarily for the promise of wealthy lives in Europe. While both novels are considered border-crossing narratives, the many differences between them are central to this thesis. *The Kite Runner* is a border-crossing narrative focused on the experience of legal immigration, and our protagonist Amir is male. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a story of illegal immigration, where the border-crossings are experienced by female characters. Sisi, Joyce, Efe, and Ama are all women whose reality is shaped by their migrant status and gender.

Focusing on the difference in precarity between each novel is central to understanding intercultural competence and agency. Agency, a key term in this thesis, can be understood and defined as such:

Migrants' understanding of agency and vulnerability are embedded within existential priorities and needs that evolve alongside their migration trajectory and emerge from a dynamic evaluation of 'past experiences and a desire to achieve some improvement in the future'. Within this dynamic evaluation, what used to be a risk can sometimes become an opportunity and vice-versa as migrants decide, implicitly or explicitly, to endure different opportunities of protection, autonomy and control according to where they are in relation to their desired life trajectory. (Mai, 2014, as cited in Skalle & Gjesdal, 2021, p. 36)

From this definition of agency, there is an adamant focus on agency as something fluid and complex. Agency is not to be understood as absolute, meaning it must be seen in relation to both context and available opportunity. Sometimes agency means choosing something that is difficult, and many readers might find these choices hard to relate to. However, intercultural competence and agency are closely linked through an understanding of choice as limited, fluid, and privileged. It means an understanding of agency as something everyone has, but often in different degrees and with different implications.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, agency is understood in relation to opportunity, gender, and immigration status. Sisi, Joyce, Efe, and Ama must all navigate their agency within a



limitation that is largely dependent on their status as illegal immigrants and women in an exploiting situation. Intersectionality, a theory by Kimberly Crenshaw, explains this best; different aspects of identity such as gender, race, sexuality, and class, all combine to create different experiences of discrimination. By recognizing both the possibilities and limitations this entails, we are better suited at understanding the agency and possibilities of both fictional and real-life migrants. While there are similarities between *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, such as family relations and the search for belonging, there is a large difference between being legal and illegal immigrants, being male or female migrants, and between female and male sexuality. By understanding how these categories of identity combine, and how this affects agency, the reader must also acknowledge how their own identities enable them to make choices. Amir is a male, legal immigrant who is granted education, possibilities, and a larger scope of agency in America. Sisi, Joyce, Efe, and Ama are female, illegal immigrants whose experience in their destination country is shaped by external control of their lives and exploitation of their sexuality. Sisi's attempt at securing her freedom is punished with death, a harsh reminder of how little freedom and control illegal migrants have in a country where they have no legal ties. This thesis argues that comparing two novels that contain different issues of opportunity and belonging is an effective way of presenting the complex issues of border-crossings, agency, and freedom. Understanding these complexities is key to teaching intercultural competence, which is highlighted as an important aspect of the Norwegian National Curriculum Renewal.

The increase in globalization and migration was one of the main reasons for the renewal of the Norwegian National Curriculum in 2016. In the rapport that announced "Fagfornyelsen", which became the new curriculum that will be referred to as LK20 going forward, it was stated that: "Our society's growing diversity and new forms of communication challenge the educational institution in different ways. One of the most important aspects of globalization is that countries become more dependent on each other – financially and politically" (Author's translation, Meld. St.28, p. 6). Through this message, the Norwegian government both acknowledged that globalization is shaping our world and the need for our educational institution to engage with the opportunities and challenges that accompanies this development. The Norwegian government then goes on to recognize the changes our national society faces through an increase in migration and border-crossings: "Individuals who migrate contribute to more complex connections across national borders and

culture, and also contribute to a more diverse Norwegian society” (Author’s translation, Meld. St.28, p. 6). Migration is therefore directly mentioned in the request for a new subject curriculum. As this message acknowledged the importance of recognizing different migrant cultures, and the diversity this accompanies, LK20 highlighted the importance of developing intercultural competence through three, new interdisciplinary topics: *health and life skills*, *democracy and citizenship*, and *sustainable development*.

The new interdisciplinary topics began their integration into Norwegian schools along with the new curriculum in 2020. All subjects were to aim towards these interdisciplinary topics when teaching, and they can be understood as general goals of completed education. The Directorate of Education writes: “These three interdisciplinary topics in the curriculum are based on prevailing societal challenges which demand engagement and effort from individuals and local communities, nationally and globally” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019a, p. 13). Despite all subjects aiming to bring these topics into their teaching, each subject is tasked with different priorities that will help students reach this awareness. In the English subject, which is the focus of this thesis, there is a unique responsibility tied to developing students’ ability to communicate with different cultures and nationalities, but also their ability to understand, empathize and reflect on cultural differences (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019b, p. 3). In other words, the English subject *must* help students develop intercultural competence. Developing intercultural competence requires that students’ worldview is challenged and to make them aware that their perspectives are culturally dependent. This thesis suggests that one method of achieving this goal is by allowing our students to engage with literature that presents them with said cultural differences.

Border-crossing narratives can present students with literature that challenges their perception of the world and different cultures. The agency displayed in each narrative will allow students to contemplate choices made by individuals that they might find uncomfortable. In teaching such narratives, the teacher must help students process, engage, and reflect on what is written to ensure that intercultural competence is being developed. Using literature to present students with unfamiliar experiences is not a new idea. Martha Nussbaum highlighted this theory in her book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, published in 1997. Nussbaum’s main claim can be understood as the need for literature in producing citizens of the world, by allowing literature to function

as a substitute for experiences that are foreign to us (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 105-6). In the context of LK20 and the Norwegian EFL classroom, reading literature is heavily encouraged through the core values and curriculum goals of the English subject. Literature is a way for students to engage with issues they have not faced themselves, and it can increase awareness of cultural differences and ideas: “The world citizen needs knowledge of history and social fact. We have begun to see how those requirements can be met by curricula of different types. [...] Here the arts play a vital role, cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 105-7). Using literature as a way of promoting intercultural competence has been present in the educational institution for a long time but might not be utilized to its full potential in the Norwegian EFL classroom. This thesis considers literature that is taught only through literary analysis, but that fails to include both the cultural and historical context of the novels, as underutilized. This is seen through the scope of intercultural competence, which requires both students and teachers to recognize potential reasons for differences in culture, opportunity, agency, and experiences when reading literature. This is central to my thesis and will be discussed further at a later stage in chapter 2.2.

While acknowledging that literature can be a useful tool in developing intercultural competence, teachers must also acknowledge that not all literature is suited for this purpose. James A. Banks, a renowned American educator focused on promoting multicultural education, writes: “A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and must help students develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and can implement their decisions in effective, personal, social and civic action” (Banks, 2016, p. 190). Banks presents the concept of the *transformative curriculum*, which can be understood as a curriculum that helps students develop intercultural competence. This will be central to this thesis and will be presented in more detail in chapter 2.1. However, following the central idea that students must be challenged by literature that differs from their understanding of the world, the question becomes; what kind of literature will suit this purpose? While there are certainly many other genres that fit this description, this thesis argues that border-crossing literature meets all the requirements presented by Banks, and can therefore aid in developing intercultural competence in Norwegian students.

Border-crossing literature belongs in the field of border studies, which can be defined to encompass the “dynamic phenomena of bordering, encompassing interdisciplinary perspectives from for example geography, politics, and sociology, and increasingly from cultural, literary and medial studies” (Border Studies). Border-crossing literature centered around the narratives of border-crossing individuals, who find themselves migrating by force or at their own will. However, border-crossing literature also shows that there are many gray areas around “voluntary” and “involuntary”, and the decision to migrate is often much more complex than this. Dohra Ahmad writes: “Besides the qualities of being global and multidirectional, an essential element to note about migration is that it exists in a continuum of involuntary to voluntary” (Ahmad, 2019, p. 6). This is an important aspect of border-crossing literature, as it showcases the many aspects of migration and agency. In the Norwegian EFL classroom, prejudice prevention and stereotype reduction are important aspects of forming intercultural competence. By exposing students to literature that details the complex aspects of migration and immigration, they are forced to imagine and confront their privilege and how different our experiences are from each other.

The connection between intercultural competence, the English subject, and literature is no coincidence. The English subject has a unique responsibility to develop the necessary tools needed for global communication and understanding between cultures within students (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019b, p. 3). While cultural understanding is highlighted as an important goal in various other subjects as well, the importance of the English subject is the student’s ability to understand and communicate *despite* cultural differences. While this poses an important linguistic aspect that teachers must deal with, it also demands that the English subject helps students develop understanding attitudes and the ability to reflect critically on issues concerning our society and the world society. Communication is not only important for our ability to understand languages, but also for our ability to understand the perspective of those we communicate with. This importance is highlighted in the core element of the English subject concerning “working with texts in English”. Here, Utdanningsdirektoratet writes: “The pupils will develop intercultural competence enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns. They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others’ identities in a multilingual and multicultural context” (2019b, p. 3). This citation is highlighting the importance authentic, English texts have in establishing intercultural competence, multicultural understanding, and empathy. In other

words, reading and processing texts written in English is essential for the development of intercultural competence. It is with this citation in mind that this thesis will progress further, by examining how intercultural competence can be developed through reading literature and the role of border-crossing narratives in the Norwegian EFL classroom.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

This thesis takes the form of a literary review, which makes pre-existing literature the theoretical framework. This means that this thesis is based on published literature that surveys the same topic, which in this case revolves around agency, border-crossing theory, intercultural competence, and controversial subjects. The theoretical framework of this thesis is divided into three parts. The first part is concerned with intercultural competence and the transformative curriculum, two terms best described through the detailed research of American educator James A. Banks. His two books *Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected Essays* (2020), and *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching* (2016) are central to the further discussion surrounding intercultural competence, the importance of school curriculums, and the role of the teacher. In the second part, Martha Nussbaum is central in terms of her previously mentioned theory, which concerns itself with developing cultural awareness through reading literature. Her published piece *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997) is vital to this thesis, and her ideas surrounding the “citizen of the world” and the “narrative imagination” are explained in further detail later on. While James A. Banks and Martha Nussbaum discuss many subjects that are similar to each other, they differ in how they approach these subjects. Nussbaum is concerned with higher education and the world citizen, but she does not offer any concrete suggestions as to how literature should be integrated into the classroom. On the other hand, Banks provides many suggestions but is mainly focused on the American educational institution whereas Nussbaum offers a more universal argument. Both theorists provide valuable insight into the discussion going forward, and as such they will both be a central part of the analysis. The third and final part of the theoretical framework concerns itself with border theory, which is especially important for terminology that this thesis uses extensively going forward, namely *agency*. Important

literature for this part is mainly centered around Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe's *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections* (2017), and is used in the analysis to further explain different concepts tied to the notion of agency and border-crossings. To aid in a more nuanced analysis of agency and migration, I also integrate Skalle and Gjesdal's book *Transnational Narratives of Migration and Exile – Perspectives from the Humanities* (2021). This theoretical supplement is highly focused on the migratory subject's ability to speak and be seen, which is important when discussing agency.

## **2.1 Intercultural Competence and the Transformative Curriculum**

One of the main motivations behind this thesis is to investigate how the educational institution should confront, integrate, and teach about the rapid changes our society faces by factors such as global migration. A similar motivation is found behind James A. Banks' research on multicultural education, which is a central theme in many of his published works. The link between multicultural education and intercultural competence is closely intertwined. Investigating Banks' meaning of multicultural education is central to understanding the importance of intercultural competence in the educational institution. In *Cultural Diversity and Education – Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*, Banks writes:

The school will help all students develop an understanding of their cultural group identifications, objectively examine their cultural groups, better understand the relationship between their cultural groups and other cultural groups, and learn the personal and public implications of their cultural group identifications and attachments. (2016, p. 28)

Here, Banks introduces the importance of multicultural education. There are strong similarities between how Banks defines multicultural education, as seen in this citation, and what the Directorate of Education considers to be the primary goal of the English subject, which was introduced in the introduction. Interpreting Banks' definition of multicultural education can be understood as a call for intercultural competence in the classroom. By encouraging students and teachers to investigate and teach beyond that which is familiar, multicultural education helps prepare different individuals to interact in the "real" world. This

involves using the classroom to confront prejudice, stereotypes, and our belief system in a constructive and productive manner.

Banks firmly believes that it is the educational institution's responsibility to educate citizens of the world. By consciously teaching about diversity, students will become more competent and adept at discussing the changes our society faces. This type of education transcends knowledge of school subjects and tests. It entails a personal education centered around self-reflection, empathy, and critical thinking. Banks writes: "An effective and transformative citizenship education helps students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their cultural community, nation-state, region, and the global community" (2020, p. 129). What Banks hopes to achieve through citizenship education is intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is at the heart of both multicultural education and citizenship education, as it includes integrating, reflecting, and teaching about different cultures in the educational institution. Helping students navigate diverse cultural communities can be achieved through teaching intercultural competence, which makes it a central part of Banks' citizenship education. This is also a vital part of LK20 and the Norwegian government's plans for our educational institution.

Intercultural competence within the Norwegian EFL classroom must be regarded as a goal achieved through citizenship education. The Norwegian word "dannelse" is a term encompassing the formation of the human subject; their journey through self-discovery, the ability to reflect on their position in the world, and the ability to understand how the world functions. Banks term "citizenship education" and the Norwegian term "dannelse" can therefore be said to encompass the same meaning. The term "citizenship education" seems to support the type of personal education that the Norwegian term "dannelse" aims for, and I will continue using the English term throughout this thesis without fearing that anything crucial will get lost in translation. Citizenship education is not only encouraged and expected to be taught by teachers, but it is also constituted in the Norwegian Education Act. Norwegian law states that citizenship education is the *main* purpose of receiving an education (Formålet med opplæringa pars. 1-7). However, citizenship education requires more than just traditional teaching styles and meeting curriculum goals. It must actively engage and include students in their learning, and it must confront and challenge them on their own beliefs.

It is with this in mind that Banks presents the *transformative curriculum*. The transformative curriculum is the integration of content that challenges mainstream and dominant attitudes, and that must be taught by teachers in a constructive and thought-provoking manner (Banks, 2016, p. 189-190). Furthermore, the transformative curriculum requires teachers to look beyond what is considered “acceptable” by the dominant culture, to also include content that is valued by minority groups. In the transformative curriculum literature is considered to be important. Banks writes: “The transformative curriculum can teach students to think by encouraging them – when they are reading or listening to resources – to consider the author’s purpose for writing and speaking” (2016, p. 190). In other words, teachers *should* include literature that is challenging and uncomfortable to read, but they must also ensure that the resources for constructive discussion are in place. This can be achieved by inviting students to reflect on the author’s reasons for writing the text, which Banks highlights in the previous citation, and to include literature when teaching about global challenges. As suggested by this thesis, working with globalization and migration requires students to investigate more than just mainstream media and their own opinions. It also requires them to investigate historical and cultural context to better understand the circumstances of each novel. This will enable them to investigate the perspectives of others in depth. Border-crossing literature, I argue, will allow students this opportunity. Literature is a central part of citizenship education, and its unique possibilities to teach about human experiences is something Martha Nussbaum has dedicated much of her research on.

## **2.2 Citizens of the World and the Narrative Imagination**

Martha Nussbaum is well-known for her work within Greek and Roman philosophy, much of which forms the basis of her research on the formation of the human subject. In her published work *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* from 1997, Nussbaum argues in favor of multiculturalism, claiming that increased diversity in different areas of higher education will lead to critical, self-reflective, and compassionate world citizens (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 27-35). Nussbaum, much like Banks, is focused on how the educational institution can arrange for more diversity to reach these goals. Intercultural competence can be understood as an important aspect of this process. This is based on the qualities that are highlighted as vital for the development of the world citizen, such as critical



thinking, reflection, and empathy. Nussbaum argues strongly in favor of using literature as a method of curating these qualities: “Arts play a vital role, cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship. The arts cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes” (1997, p. 105). While the arts as a general subject is highlighted in this citation, it is important to note that Nussbaum’s main argument revolves around the qualities found in literature especially. These qualities are centered around the formation of the subject, and how exposure to these subjects impacts our imagination, judgment, and opinion of the world. She then goes on to highlight exactly how literature fits this description: “In a curriculum for world citizenship, literature, with its ability to represent specific circumstances and problems of people of many different sorts, makes an especially rich contribution” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 105). Based on this, literature is considered by Nussbaum as the ultimate method for cultivating humanity and to produce world citizens. Literature allows for unique, shared experiences, despite oneself lacking said experience. It allows us to imagine situations we will never encounter, which again allows for the development of intercultural competence by encouraging critical thinking and reflection. However, to fully understand the potential of literature in the classroom, it is important to understand the necessary steps required to cultivate a world citizen.

Martha Nussbaum argues that to understand cultural differences, we must examine our own beliefs by exposing ourselves to contrasting opinions. According to her research, this can be achieved through developing a “narrative imagination” (1997, p. 30) that allows us to imagine the experiences of others. The narrative imagination is what Nussbaum centers her argument of implementing literature in the educational institution on. To use literature as a method of cultivating world citizens is to focus on the development of the narrative imagination. This is the last step of “cultivating humanity”, a process that Nussbaum describes in three parts. First, individuals must develop the ability to critically reflect on their own beliefs and their own culture. Second, individuals must begin to consider themselves to be citizens of the world, as opposed to just citizens of one nation. Third, individuals must develop empathy to understand different perspectives and situations that they have no experience with, which Nussbaum calls the narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 29-31). By examining Nussbaum’s argument for cultivating humanity, there appear to be many arguments that are closely related to James A. Banks’ research on multicultural education, and both theorists acknowledge the development of intercultural competence as important

within the educational institution. This includes challenging our own beliefs and opinions of the world.

Nussbaum argues in favor of examining our cultural understandings closely, and to challenge these beliefs by investigating different cultures and understandings of the world. Nussbaum makes it clear that intercultural competence is a vital part of citizenship education, and she firmly states that literature is an important method to achieve this goal. She writes: “It is well to become acquainted with the facts of cultural variety, and this can be done very easily, for through myths and stories that invite identification with people who’s form of life is different from one’s own” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 81-2). For Nussbaum, intercultural competence and the process of cultivating humanity is essential to becoming a *World Citizen*. The world citizen is a product of the cultivated humanity Nussbaum writes about and is closely related to the type of citizen that Banks wishes to produce from his ideas on transformative citizenship education. Both scholars wish to produce empathic, contemplative, and culturally aware citizens that engage with global issues. While Banks calls his method the transformative curriculum, it echoes Nussbaums ideas. The different between the two is that Banks presents direct and concrete suggestions, while Nussbaum presents ideas that need further follow up. Hence, they are both important to integrate in this thesis.

Nussbaum advocates for literature that is foreign, challenging, and unfamiliar by criticizing how cultural aspects often stick to that which we know: “In ethics, in historical knowledge, in knowledge of politics, in literary, artistic and musical learning, we are all inclined to be parochial, taking our own habits for that which defines humanity” (1997, p. 81-2). Nussbaum wishes to oppose the trends of “familiar” literature that does not challenge our own perception of the world. She goes on to clarify that to become world citizens, we must all extort a willingness to both doubt our own norms, political opinions and “goodness of one’s ways” to possibly justify or argue in favor for what once was unjustifiable (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 82-3). In other words, all citizens must be willing to critically reflect on their own opinions and beliefs. In order to do so, the literature chosen must be able to evoke feelings and imagination that enables intercultural competence. As this thesis has argued previously, the genre of border-crossing literature is uniquely qualified to achieve these goals. Border-crossing literature is able to present thought-provoking and unfamiliar narratives that challenge many student’s perception of the world. However, border-crossing narratives also

deal with many complex situations, such as the conflicts between voluntary and involuntary migration, agency and subjection, as well as belonging and “otherness”. These are all relevant issues that must be considered when implementing border-crossing narratives in the classroom and are frequent topics of discussion in border theory.

### **2.3 Border Theory, Narratives, and Agency**

Border studies today focuses on borders as dynamic phenomena of bordering, encompassing interdisciplinary perspectives from for example geography, politics, and sociology, and increasingly from cultural, literary and medial studies. Borders are increasingly seen as zones of negotiation, zones of articulation of belonging and of inscription, with cultural practices as an active part of this process. (Border Studies)

Border theory, or border studies, is concerned with the dynamic relationships that intertwine when someone crosses a border. These relationships, as noted in the above quote, include both geographical, political and social aspects. When discussing border theory in the educational institution, many will instinctively consider the geographical aspects of a border. This is perhaps conjured by images of maps; geographical lines that show where one nation ends, and another begins. In addition to this, typing the words “border crossings” into Google conjures images of migrants and refugees in tattered clothing while flooding gates and climbing fences. This victimization of migrants is a common conception and a popular narrative, especially in dominant cultures. This is also a central issue in Skalle and Gjesdal’s book *Transnational Narratives of Migration and Exile – Perspectives from the Humanities* (2021), where they write: “How can the voices of migrants, refugees, and exiles be analyzed in their diversity, and with respect to their agency, without falling victim to paternalism, reductionism or commodification?” (2021, p. 13). Indeed, border theory includes many difficult topics and the fear of continuing the same oppressive discourse that many migrants are subjected to is a real concern that must be acknowledged. However, border theory is an important part of border-crossing literature and should be included in more depth in the educational institution. By shedding light on the many concerns of border theory, it can hopefully encourage healthy discussion, which can promote intercultural competence. Both Banks and Nussbaum highlight the importance of teaching that which is uncomfortable, and

this applies to both teachers and students. This involves investigating differences in privilege, the impact of dominant cultures' opinion and the different aspects of border-crossing narratives.

The term border-crossing narratives can be defined as the stories that emerge from subjects who are crossing borders. Borders can be national or transnational, and involves willing and/or unwilling participation from the migratory subjects that are involved in these crossings. In *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections*, Rosello and Wolfe highlight the border-crossing narratives that “manifest in travel writing, exploration narratives, captivity narratives, autobiographical writing, migration literature, etc” as narratives where nations, borders and the subject are renegotiated through performative narration (2017, p. 2). Rosello and Wolfe also write that the border must be seen as “a product of symbolic differences, even if it is also a spatial dimension” (2017, p. 2). In other words, while we can understand borders as geographical separations between nations and land, there is also a symbolic difference where borders are representational of different experiences, possibilities, and attitudes. These factors combine and intertwine to create unique experiences of border-crossings.

Understanding that no border-crossing experience is similar is a vital part of teaching border-crossing narratives. The position and privilege of each subject, which includes the characters in the novels, the reader, and the author are all important discussions to acknowledge. Subject position and privilege are different and shapes the experiences of different individuals: “The border is a product of symbolic differences, even if it is also a spatial dimension” (Rosello & Wolfe, 2017, p. 7). In a Norwegian EFL classroom, presenting borders as obstacles and discriminatory practices will most likely be a foreign idea for most. Rosello and Wolfe write: “The contingencies of birth will have determined to some extent at least whether a subject internalizes national borders as serious, dangerous or non-existent obstacles” (2017, p. 1). However, this is the reality of many migrants, and an important aspect of many border-crossing narratives. By acknowledging that privilege is often something we are born with, we must also recognize that different opportunities and advantages are often not something we can earn through hard work and determination. Everyone must make choices based on the situation they find themselves in, and this will vastly differ between subjects. Some are greatly privileged and can make choices based on their own hopes and dreams, while others make choices that are more restricted, and which might seem

disagreeable for others. This is a central part of understanding agency, and how agency shapes and impacts border-crossing narratives and the stories they share.

Agency is the ability to act independently and the freedom to make choices. In dominant cultures, migrants, immigrants, and refugees are often depicted as lacking in agency. This stems from a portrayal of migrants as passive victims of their situations, having no say in what happens to them or any decision revolving around them (Gatt et al., 2016, p. 8-9). It also includes a continued construction of migrants as “other”, someone whom the dominant culture cannot relate to or begin to understand. This is an issue of visibility, and how migrant subjects are often considered either worthy of acknowledgement or something to be disregarded (Brambilla & Pötzsch, 2017, p. 74-5). To be worthy of acknowledgement, many migrants admit that they focus on their pain and suffering when appealing to administrative faculties, for instance when seeking asylum (Canut, 2021, p. 18). This is not because migrants feel as if these stories best represent who they are as a person, or what they have experienced. It is because they often find these stories most beneficial when appealing to the dominant culture. Migrants’ real-life stories, the ones that include active agency and choice, are reserved for other situations with people willing to listen and understand (Canut, 2021, p. 18-9). In the novels selected for this thesis, this is a central part of Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. The women in the novel share their stories with each other after realizing they are irregular migrants in a country where no one else cares about them. This shows that agency is not only related to the choice of destination country, but also how stories are shared. This is a central part of the discussion in section 4.4. Connecting agency with these novels is an important aspect of teaching and reading border-crossing literature. If the goal is to use border-crossing narratives to aid in the development of intercultural competence, the focus on choice and decision-making must be central in the process.

Connecting the discussion of intercultural competence and agency can be a challenging process. The English subject curriculum from LK20 states: “By reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of culture and society” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019b, p. 3). The Norwegian educational institution is expected to integrate literature into their curriculum, but there are no clear guidelines as to what literature the teachers should include in the classroom. Therefore, literature can be selected based on the goals stated in the English subject

curriculum. This includes goals that encompass intercultural competence, different types of cultures and ways of living. However, students are not blank subjects that can be molded to fit perfectly into these curriculum goals. The process of teaching literature is not limited to simply reading a novel or analyzing its themes and characters. Many students have preconceived opinions, as do their teachers. These opinions are shaped by where we were born and how we grew up. Essentially, students are already shaped by their own culture and society, and simply exposing them to literature that shows different cultures is not enough to gain intercultural competence. Nussbaum writes:

The narrative imagination is not uncritical, for we always bring ourselves and our own judgments to the encounter with another; and when we identify with a character in a novel, or with a distant person whose life story we imagine, we inevitably will not merely identify; we will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations. (1997, p. 30)

Based on this citation, Nussbaum is highlighting that every student will read and interpret a story based on their already existing beliefs and predispositions. The goal of connecting intercultural competence and agency through literature is not to convince students that some choices are better than others. It is a learning process which recognizes that choice is based on subject position, and for some individuals these choices are more limited than for others. Regardless, choice is still a subjective right, and should be respected even if one cannot relate to it. By understanding subject position and agency, the bridge towards attaining intercultural competence can begin to form. While there are no requirements as to what type of literature students and teachers should read in the Norwegian EFL classroom, the concept of border-crossing literature and theory is not unfamiliar in LK20.

LK20 highlights students' ability to "compare how political, geographical and historical relationships affect living conditions, settlement patterns and demographics in different parts of the world" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019c, p. 11) as one of their goals for completing lower secondary school. While this particular competence aim is found within social sciences, one of the English secondary school competence goals is the ability to "explore and describe ways of living, ways of thinking, communication patterns and diversity in the English-speaking world" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019b, p. 9). For the completion of

upper secondary school, the English subject aims to help the students “explore and reflect on diversity and social conditions in the English-speaking world based on historical contexts” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2019b, p. 11-12). While border theory is clearly present in the Norwegian educational institution, as evident from these different competence goals, it is not presented as a specific discipline or theory in lower secondary or upper secondary schools. It could be beneficial to make some of the concepts and concerns surrounding border theory more present in the classroom, to aid in the development of intercultural competence. This could also help when presenting a framework of historical and cultural context. Most important, border theory can aid in the analysis of border-crossing literature, to make students more aware of the challenges and opportunities of the characters they engage with.

There are many benefits to learning literary analysis, and this thesis does by no means suggest that this should be omitted from any curriculums. However, for such encompassing goals as intercultural competence, literary analysis alone is not enough. Implementing concepts that present border theory, as well as cultural and historical context can aid both the teacher and students with attaining intercultural competence. By implementing novels with contrasting experiences surrounding border-crossings, the teacher can refer to both border theory, literary analysis, and cultural and historical context to help students grasp the more difficult aspects of *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Kite Runner*. In this way, literary analysis is supported through theory and context, which can highlight the important messages of both novels.

### **3 Contrasting Migrant Experiences in *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street***

The analysis section of this thesis is mainly focused on a *comparative analysis* between the two chosen works. As mentioned in the introduction, *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street* are both literary works within the genre of border-crossing narratives. However, the novels are stark contrasts to each other, which exemplifies the vast difference between migrant experiences. While there are similar themes found in each book, such as opportunity, family relations, belonging, and freedom, each theme unfolds in very different ways in each

novel. A comparative analysis will highlight these differences in theme and provide interesting contrast that exemplifies how different migrant experiences can be as well. By doing this, the goal is to promote and encourage discussion and close analysis of the novels by highlighting differences in agency and opportunity.

The first theme is concerned with *Contrasting Migrant Experiences*, where the themes of agency and opportunity are discussed further. This entails the different opportunities that are present within *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. This also connects to how Hosseini and Unigwe approach their own novels, which is important when examining the historical and cultural context of each novel. The second theme is focused on *Negotiating Identities*, where the analysis will focus on the moments of border-crossings found in each novel and how this impacts the characters' sense of identity. The third theme looks at *The Land of Opportunity* and how each novel depicts the destination country throughout the story. The fourth theme is concerned with *Reclaiming Agency* and specifically the complexity of reclaiming agency in a country where adaptation means survival. The final theme is concerned with *Controversial Subjects in the Classroom*, where the thesis highlights some of the more controversial aspects of each novel and why they are still important to teach in the classroom.

### **3.1 Agency and Opportunity**

Agency, as defined in the introduction, can be understood as the complexity of choice. This entails a recognition of choice as shaped and controlled by social, political, and even historical implications. Agency is both constrained and dynamic, as it both enables and restricts individual action (Gjesdal, 2021, p. 67). From this definition, we recognize that there is a close link between agency and opportunity. Limited agency equals limited opportunity, as choices become more constrained and restricted. This is depicted in detail in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce all make their own decisions within a limited field of opportunity. Unigwe takes great care to display that these women have agency and are not simply victims in an impossible situation. This also showcases that agency is not always as straightforward as one might think. While the women have a say in their decision to migrate to Europe, they are not completely informed of what this entails or what they are



agreeing to. Chielozona Eze, who published an article regarding the feminism in *On Black Sisters' Street*, writes: “Most of the girls are aware of the type of jobs they will be doing in Europe. Nevertheless, given the economic stress they and their families face in Nigeria, they grudgingly agree to take part. [...] for sending them to Europe, Dele charges them 30,000 Euros each” (2014, p. 92). Dele, who runs an exporting company in Nigeria, is essentially a pimp who preys on Nigerian women he can send to Belgium to make him money. By agreeing to go, the women enter a contract that requires them to earn back the money it cost to send them to Europe by selling their bodies in Antwerp. They have no way of returning home before this debt is paid, as they are illegal immigrants in a country where they cannot seek help. The limited opportunities in their homeland are what causes most of the women to migrate, which is an important aspect of their limited agency. While the decision to become sex workers might be hard to relate to for many readers, Unigwe takes great care to justify this choice and make it understandable. While the women are not eager to become sex workers in Antwerp, it is presented as the only available choice they have to ensure better lives for themselves. This display of agency differs greatly from the opportunities available in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

*The Kite Runner* depicts a different migrant experience from *On Black Sisters' Street*, and is characterized through more opportunities for Amir, the male protagonist. He is a Pashtun living in Afghanistan, granting him a comfortable life with servants and privileges. While Amir considers Hassan, his servant, to be his best friend, he fails to recognize his own privilege and power in this relation: “I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had ‘quelled them with unspeakable violence’” (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 8-9). Amir is aware of the ethnic difference between himself and his servants but fails to question this privilege. To him, it is the natural way of life. This shows the vast differences between Amir and the four female characters in Unigwe's novel; Sisi, Joyce, Efe and Ama. While the women of *On Black Sisters' Street* must constantly question their position and available opportunities to navigate their lives, Amir spends his entire childhood free of this reflection. He does not need to question anything, as he is living comfortably and with everything he needs in Afghanistan. This also displays a great difference in agency, where Amir can make choices that benefit him with little to no consequence. This is not the case for Sisi, Joyce, Ama and Efe, who experience more

restrictions when navigating their agency and who face great consequences from their decisions.

In *The Kite Runner*, agency is characterized through the guilt of making the wrong choice. This is the central conflict of the novel. Amir's greatest mistake, which he considers to be a sin that will haunt him forever, is choosing to run away when Hassan is raped by a boy named Assef. Assef, who is also of a higher social class (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 72-3), will continue to haunt the story as he becomes the one person Amir must confront in order to reclaim his agency. Amir's way of handling his guilt is to run away from it, both in Afghanistan and America. His agency is therefore defined by his ability to run away from his mistakes. However, it is a display of agency that Amir cannot live with, and his reclaiming of his agency begins when he confronts Assef in Afghanistan as an adult. This again exemplifies the difference in agency between Amir and the women of *On Black Sisters' Street*. While Amir makes a terrible choice that leaves him feeling like a coward and a traitor to his friend, he can bury this secret without external consequences. Sure enough, Amir must live with the guilt, but Hassan who is raped has no way of alerting to his sexual assault because of his ethnic status as a Hazara and servant. In this case, Hassan comes closer to representing the limited agency we recognize in Unigwe's novel than Amir. While Hassan is a male, his ethnic status represses his legal rights to fight someone of a higher social class, and he is left to bear the burden of his sexual assault in silence.

The difference in agency is carried on to the destination countries in each novel. Amir is willing and eager to negotiate his identity and is therefore granted more access to American privileges. He is eager to learn English, receives an education and as a result, he can publish his novels in America. Baba, Amir's father, refuses to do this, and is considered more "Other" than Amir despite their close relation. Amir notes: "For two years I tried to get Baba to enroll in ESL classes to improve his broken English. But he scoffed at the idea. [...] A year and a half since we'd stepped off the Boeing from Peshawar, and Baba was still adjusting" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 117-9). Bäche points out that Amir is a literary character in border-crossing narratives that manages to adapt and navigate the dominant culture of the destination country. By learning the language and engaging with the culture, characters such as Amir are granted more opportunities than migrants who are still viewed as "Other" (Bäche, 2019, p. 84). For Amir, America equals freedom. It is a country where he can be himself, escape his sins from

Afghanistan and make a new life for himself. He is also a legal immigrant, which makes his experience in America entirely different from the illegal immigrants represented in Unigwe's novel.

The experiences that stem from legal immigration are a stark contrast to the experiences of illegal immigrants. This contrast is especially noticeable in terms of public in/visibility. Legal immigrants are allowed to exist in public spaces without becoming symbols for political and social discourse regarding migration issues. This concept, best explained by Chiara Brambilla and Holger Pötzsch in *Border Aesthetics, Concepts and Intersections*, investigates the notion of in/visibility surrounding legal and (especially) illegal immigrants. They write:

Public visibility is the precondition for active political participation and citizenship. The *vita activa* foregrounds action and speech within the public sphere, that is civic involvement in politics. Visibility can oscillate between an empowering pole (visibility as recognition) or a disempowering pole (visibility as control). (Brambilla & Pötzsch, 2017, p. 76-7)

Amir's visa, which makes him a legal immigrant in America, also allows him to exist in the public sphere without fear of political interference. While it is important to understand that the character Amir might still face prejudice and discrimination based on other intersections of his identity, such as race and ethnicity, his legal status allows him a platform where he can seek legal help and speak out without fear of being imported. This is not the case for Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce.

The women in *On Black Sisters' Street* are asked to apply for asylum at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as soon as they set foot in Belgium (Unigwe, 2009, p. 172-3). They are instructed to make up horrific stories so that they will be sympathized with and believed, but none of the women are granted asylum. When Sisi hands her denied request to the Madame in charge of making money off the girls, she is told: "This paper is no concern of yours. All you need to know is that you're a persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 182). This shows how the traffickers make a display of having the women realize that they are illegal subjects in a country that requests them to leave immediately. This does not only emphasise how few rights the women have, but also that they are completely at the mercy of their traffickers. All their passports are taken away as a form of control. Ligaga

highlights how common this is among traffickers and their subjects: “The trafficker will also often hold on to the trafficked person’s documentation, such as a passport, to prevent the trafficked person from leaving. [...]. This form of control renders the trafficked body vulnerable in many ways” (Ligaga, 2019, p. 75). It is also an interesting continuation of the subject of in/visibility, as the women are told they do not exist in Belgium. However, night after night, they are displayed with no secrecy in the red-light district. This is directly tied to their status as female, illegal immigrants.

The women in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are illegal immigrants, which makes their in/visibility quite different from Amir’s. In the case of illegal immigrants, Brambilla and Pöttsch write:

Individuals belonging to these groups suffer from a public invisibility that is wedded to natural visibility, i.e. they do not gain a standing or voice in processes of public deliberation while their individual and personal traits at the same time become publicly visible markers of identity, political and juridical position. (2017, p. 77)

This complexity of visibility and invisibility is often displayed by Unigwe. Sisi, Joyce, Ama and Efe are all extremely visible subject in *On Black Sisters’ Street*: “From their glass windows they watch the lives outside, especially the men’s. They look and, disbelieving, take another look. Quickly. And they walk away with embarrassed steps. Not wishing to be tainted by the lives behind the windows” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 178). Behind glass windows, where they are lined up in the Red-Light District of Antwerp, the women are on display for everyone to see and judge. They are presented as tempting objects available for purchase, where their bodies and gender are the main attraction. They are invisible subjects because of their status as illegal immigrants, meaning they are not supposed to exist inside of Antwerp. However, they are also extremely visibly in the public eye, unable to defend themselves or share their stories. They become unwilling representatives of illegal migrants as shameful and crude, something to either purchase for the night or hurry away from to stay clean. This becomes an important aspect to acknowledge when discussing agency: “They are articulated within a particular political discourse rather than being able to enunciate their own position. Public invisibility takes away from the agency of political subjects and reduces them to sets of natural traits that are articulated in a public sphere of appearance” (Brambilla & Pöttsch, 2017, p. 77-8). In the setting of *On*

*Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe tries to actively display agency for border-crossing women engaging in sex work. This setting is often elsewhere portrayed as an exploitive situation where the subjects involved are sole victims, thus completely removing any agency these women have. While recognizing that border-crossings evoke different situations and dangers for women, Unigwe actively writes and reclaims agency for both the women in the novel and the women she interviewed for her book.

### 3.1.1 Situating Agency Through Historical and Cultural Context

When teaching agency in the classroom, it is also beneficial to investigate why the authors themselves have chosen to write these stories. Border-crossing narratives are often founded in real-life experiences, and this is sometimes conveyed by the authors themselves within the novels. Banks writes: “The transformative curriculum can teach students to think by encouraging them – when they are reading or listening to resources – to consider the author’s purposes for writing or speaking” (2016, p. 190). Understanding why the authors have chosen to write about these exact scenarios and characters is key to understanding the cultural and historical backdrop of each novel. Hosseini and Unigwe have very different approaches to portraying the migrant experience. As previously mentioned, the difference in character precarity is a central part of analyzing both *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. However, it is not only a difference in the character’s precarity that stands out when reading these novels. Unigwe and Hosseini showcase different perspectives when writing about border-crossings and migrant experiences. This is especially clear in their critique, or lack of critique, of destination countries, and how they integrate historical and cultural context within their novels.

In *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, the authors choose to acknowledge their stories in the *Foreword* (Hosseini) and *Acknowledgements* (Unigwe) of their novels. In the copy of *The Kite Runner* used in this thesis, the foreword by Khaled Hosseini happens to be a special message dedicated to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publishing *The Kite Runner*. Here, Hosseini writes: “My childhood and Amir’s mirrored each other in many ways, so I’ve long known how life can inform and shape fiction, but in the time since completing *The Kite Runner*, I’ve become more aware, perhaps, of how fiction can affect life – in its readers, and

even in its author” (2003/2013, “Foreword to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition”). Hosseini admits that *The Kite Runner* builds on his own experiences as a border-crosser, which presents the novel as founded in real-life experiences. Much of the novel is based on Hosseini’s childhood and his immigration to the US after the Soviet invasion of 1979. This constitutes the background of *The Kite Runner* as grounded in real, historical events. This is important to convey when teaching literature in the classroom, and traces back to this thesis’ earlier claims on literature being supported by cultural and historical context.

Unigwe’s own thoughts about her novel are mostly present in her *Acknowledgements* at the end of the novel. Here, she writes: “Writing *On Black Sisters’ Street* has been a learning experience for me. I am, in the first place, grateful for those whose story it is: the nameless Nigerian sex workers who allowed me into their lives, answering my questions and laughing at my ignorance” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 297). Unigwe is a Nigerian author currently residing in the US, and she acknowledges that *On Black Sisters’ Street* is not based on her own experiences. Despite being a border-crosser herself, through her migration from Nigeria to Belgium, she does not claim to know the experiences that she writes about. As the main theme of *On Black Sisters’ Street* is focused on the female characters navigating their new lives in Europe as sex workers, Unigwe has made sure to interview subjects who can provide insight where she lacks it herself. In this sense, her acknowledgment effectively achieves the same results as Khaled Hosseini, by making the reader aware that while these are fictional stories, they are grounded in real-life experiences that shape the reality of many different individuals. While the novel does not focus on any major historical events, such as in *The Kite Runner*, there is still historical and cultural context that is beneficial to include in the classroom when working with the text. By investigating this context further, intercultural competence can be achieved through an understanding of the connection between migrant literature, and real-life experiences. By doing so, the teacher can situate the historical and cultural when introducing the novels. This includes both the relevance of the novels in today’s society, any critique that is important to acknowledge when reading these novels, and what cultural and historical differences the students will become familiar with when engaging with the texts.

Integrating two literary works to teach cultural differences in the classroom is beneficial for teaching intercultural competence and agency. By comparing two works,

students are not only taught the difference between themselves and the characters of each novel. They also learn to consider the difference in precarity between the characters of the two texts. Banks writes: “The sense of connectedness that individuals have with their cultural group is often manifested as ‘us’ and ‘them’ feelings, perceptions, and behaviors” (2016, pp. 165). To combat the “us” and “them” mindset it is important to showcase the differences between cultural groups, and how our perception might be influenced already. While it is crucial to acknowledge this as a central discussion of literature in the classroom, it can also be beneficial to investigate how the authors themselves chose to acknowledge this perception in their own writing.

The most recognized work out of the two novels is undoubtedly *The Kite Runner*. The novel has received praise for its ability to provide recognition and insight into Afghan culture and history, and is considered to be a “humanitarian best-seller”. David Jefferess writes: “While [The Kite Runner] is praised for its ethnographic and historical value, it is also commended by reviewers for how it transcends the locality of its setting to provide a universal, and, ultimately, comfortingly familiar narrative” (2009, p. 389). The comfortingly familiar narrative that Jefferess speaks of is the universal hardships of Amir, which more closely resembles a universal story than a uniquely “Afghan story”. While it has Afghan culture embedded into it, it is not so specific that it excludes readers who cannot relate to it. The success of *The Kite Runner* bloomed after 9/11, with many Western readers wanting to read about the perceived “threat” that was Afghanistan. Hosseini’s novel was an American bestseller for five years straight (Jefferess, 2009, p. 389), which displays how widely acknowledged and well-received his work became after publishing it. The appeal of *The Kite Runner* is an interesting source of discussion. While it is often introduced as a novel that uniquely depicts the experiences of border-crossers, it is also praised in America for not becoming a border-crossing “cliché”.

While *The Kite Runner* is undoubtedly a border-crossing narrative, it can be seen as almost eluding the genre to a certain extent. Sure enough, Amir and Baba migrate to the US, and their journey there is described in the story. Despite this, Hosseini places very little actual focus on the process of crossing borders or the experiences of border-crossers. Jefferess highlights how one reviewer praised Hosseini for not making border-crossings the central part of his novel and avoiding the “travails-of-immigrants story” he could have written (“Review”

as cited in Jefferess, 2009, p. 389). This is an interesting review of his work and displays how acceptable Hosseini's novel is to the Western audience. However, this complicates the praise and acknowledgment that *The Kite Runner* has received: "Non-for-profit organisations serving refugees have recommended the book for anyone wishing to better understand the plight of displaced persons" (Edwards, 2009, p. 1). As previously discussed, Amir is not necessarily the best representation of immigration and its challenges. While he is certainly displaced during a large part of the novel, it is not related to his struggles as an immigrant. It is related to Amir's inner conflict and the sin he carries with him. This again displays just how accepted *The Kite Runner* has become in the West, by becoming the token book of migrant experiences. This is a problematic standard to uphold, as *The Kite Runner* has been criticized for trying to appeal to the Western audience by continuing stereotypes of the very people it tries to represent.

Hosseini claims that he wishes to provide Afghans with more agency, and to allow Afghanistan recognition beyond what is portrayed in popular media: "As an Afghan, I am honoured when readers tell me that this book has helped make Afghanistan a real place for them. That it isn't just the caves of Tora Bora and poppy fields and Bin Laden for them anymore" (2003/2013, *Acknowledgements*). However, most of the critique directed towards *The Kite Runner* is by Afghans. Some of this critique claims that Hosseini knowingly portrays Afghan culture and history in a manner he knows will receive attention and acceptance in the West (Edwards, 2009, p. 5). The fact that Hosseini is receiving criticism from the people he wants to represent in his writing is an important aspect of discussing agency in the classroom. If Hosseini is failing to represent Afghanistan in the manner he is seeking, he is perhaps also negatively impacting the agency of Afghans.

The agency of Afghans becomes important in the second wave of criticism directed towards Hossein. This is directly tied to his ethnic status as a Pashtun. Afghans feel as if Hosseini has stripped them, and especially the Hazaras, of their agency. By reproducing scenes of sexual violence against Hazaras by Pashtuns, Hosseini is critiqued for not fully recognizing the historical oppression he is turning into fiction (Edwards, 2009, p. 4). This is one of the main causes of outrage from Afghans. Another aspect of the agency Afghans feel is stripped from them is based on how their critique is received in the West. Any criticism towards *The Kite Runner* that Afghans highlight is immediately called into question by the



West. Afghans are then labeled as intolerant people who cannot understand *The Kite Runner* fully because of their culture and religion (Edwards, 2009, p. 4-6). Failing to listen to the critique and concerns of the actual people Hosseini is trying to represent through his writing is another way of removing the agency of both his characters and the people it is based on. However, Hosseini himself is stuck in a particular situation that might not allow him to sympathize with his own people in fear of risking his acknowledged status in the US. In many ways, Amir and Hosseini mirror each other if this is the case. They have quickly adapted to American culture and are thus receiving acceptance and benefits in return. This is an important trope concerning American immigration that Banks is critical towards.

Banks criticizes the notion of “Americanization” in his writing. He highlights the difficult position many migrants face in the US, by pointing out that being accepted as an American citizen often means the absolute abandonment of their ethnicity (Banks, 2020, p. 102). Thus, assimilation in the US is a difficult process, where many migrants feel as though they are not fully accepted as Americans before they can critique their homelands. By complicating matters further, this is often something that is not explicitly acknowledged by either the US or the migrants in question. Rather, migrants learn that acceptance in the US is the wholehearted adaptation of American values and ideologies. Banks writes:

American society, including the schools, eradicated the cultures and languages of immigrant groups by using shame and hope. The immigrants were taught to disrespect their own cultures but were given hope that once they were no longer ethnic they would gain full inclusion into the nation’s industrialized society and enjoy all the benefits of modernization and industrialization. (2020, p. 102-3).

An important aspect of discussing *The Kite Runner* is to consider whether the novel would have been an equally large success if Hosseini had been very critical of the US involvement in Afghanistan in his work. In his work, Hosseini actively avoids writing negatively about the US, but rather places the blame for Afghanistan’s situation on the Soviets and the Taliban. This is despite the heavy hand the US has had in disrupting the peace in Afghanistan. This thesis does not seek to discredit Hosseini or his novel, but rather to highlight how important it is to acknowledge the limits of reading literature that does not challenge our perception of migration, precarity, or our worldview. *The Kite Runner* has a place in the classroom, but we

must be careful to present it as a controversial novel that will encourage critical thinking, prejudice reduction, and self-reflection without discussing its limitations properly. That includes presenting the challenges of both US involvement in Afghanistan, as well as the more the “Western appeal” that *The Kite Runner* might have.

Unigwe is more comfortable with highlighting the fact that no country is perfect and does not shy away from more controversial opinions. She presents both Nigerian and Belgian culture as flawed, which can be shocking to the Western reader. For Unigwe, no country is ultimately a better choice when crossing borders. All countries can be difficult to gain entry into, and all countries can be exploitive towards those with no voice to fight back. Unigwe showcases the struggles of many immigrants by discussing topics such as poverty and sexual assault, and she does this regardless of the spatial setting. She conveys that limited opportunity is not only an issue Ama, Efe, Sisi, and Joyce face in Nigeria. While the women strongly hope that Belgium will be different, their experiences there prove that this is not the truth. While it is important to understand the women’s position in Nigeria affects their position in Belgium, through intersectional categories, choice, and action, they are not saved the moment they arrive in Europe. Their agency and opportunities are still limited, and in Belgium, they become trapped in a place where they are not granted asylum or free will. Europe seals their fates by removing their options to travel home. They must pay their debts before they can be free. Unigwe’s way of navigating the women’s position in Europe is critical and real, which might be uncomfortable for many to read. If students believe that Europe is a safe haven for all immigrants, *On Black Sisters’ Street* effectively displays that this is not the case.

This embedded knowledge pupils might have of the West is something James A. Banks believes is important to acknowledge and discuss in the classroom. This includes confronting the students about their perceptions of the West, and then presenting them with different knowledge that contrasts this perception (Banks, 2020, p. 33). For many students, it might be surprising to imagine Belgium as flawed. Their conviction of the West being superior and a “perfect” option for immigrants is heavily conveyed by the media they consume. This is also why it is crucial to integrate literature that conflicts with this perception, to challenge and encourage critical thinking. This is also what Nussbaum claims to be most important to developing the narrative imagination:

Narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another's needs, and understands the way circumstance shapes those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy. (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 107-111)

Reading literature that challenges the worldview we are most comfortable with can be a process that is both enjoyable and uncomfortable. Some students might come to care for the characters greatly and thus create the kind of relationship that Nussbaum highlights. However, it is still important to recognize the limits of our empathy and when we should respect the separateness and privacy of another's experiences. Teachers have not failed if their students cannot relate to everything they read. If they are reading literature that has been selected to challenge their worldview, one might argue that they are not even supposed to relate to it all. Incorporating literature that is unfamiliar and unexpected means recognizing the limits of our understanding. It is important to understand the separateness between ourselves and the characters, and what this means for our understanding of how the world functions. By doing this, teachers can promote intercultural competence by encouraging critical thinking, prejudice reduction, and empathy in the classroom. However, this also highlights the importance of reading each novel critically through an examination of the character's precarity and our understanding of it.

Unigwe's effort at highlighting the flaws of Europe, and especially Belgium, is tied to both Antwerp's history and culture. Bastida-Rodriguez writes: "The reality of Antwerp, with its historical, tourist attractions and its legal acceptance of prostitution – but little solidarity with immigrants and sex workers – makes it stand as an unusual European city which deserves being literarily inscribed" (2014, p. 212). This citation highlights both the conflicting imaging many readers might have of Europe, as well as a central aspect of what Unigwe is trying to achieve. Antwerp being a tourist attraction where prostitution is legal showcases just how precarious Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce's situation is. Their bodies become a tourist attraction, where people can visit Antwerp to experience exotic bodies and experiences. Prostitution becomes an exotic experience based on the few places in Europe where this is legal. However, the tourists are free to leave when their curiosity has been satisfied. This is not the case for the illegal immigrants who stand at display. Thus, Unigwe highlights the

hypocrisy that currently exists in Belgium, where the country benefits economically from having sex workers attract tourists but does little to help the people they are willing to exploit. The culture and history of Antwerp thrive on having sex workers visible and accessible to the public but makes them invisible in terms of legal rights and government aid.

Unigwe's claim in her acknowledgments, as previously mentioned, admits that this is not her story, but rather the story of the Nigerian sex workers who shared their story with her (Unigwe, 2009, p. 297). By being critical of the circumstance, rather than solely of the homeland or destination country, Unigwe is allowing their agency to show through. She makes sure that she never presents Europe as the land of salvation and promise. Unigwe does engage with this trope, as most of the characters in the novel consider Europe to be a place where they will get rich and live better lives. This does perhaps match the prejudice that many Western readers might have when engaging with the novel. As the story progresses, Unigwe makes it clear that Europe is not perfect. It is flawed, and what is most important is that the women are still allowed to make decisions for themselves, albeit limited and complex. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a contrasting narrative to *The Kite Runner*, that displays the complexities of migrant experiences. Simply arriving at a destination country is not enough for anyone's life to change, and the difference between legal and illegal immigration highlights this further.

Using literature in historical and cultural context also means investigating how the novels are related to current situations today. Dypedahl and Bøhn writes: "There is good reason to believe that high levels of cultural empathy require good knowledge of other people's background or of the context in which they live" (2020, p. 92). Cultural empathy, as noted by Dypedahl and Bøhn, is dependent on cultural and historical knowledge. By cultivating the narrative imagination presented by Nussbaum, the readers are gaining this insight through the literature they engage with. To ensure that this insight is aiding the promotion of intercultural competence, it is also necessary to integrate historical and cultural context. By understanding the context in which migration takes place, the reader might also be better suited to understanding the agency that each character displays in their decisions.

Acknowledging the historical situation of Afghanistan as being negatively influenced by both Western opinions and actions is a beneficial discussion to have when integrating the

novel in different classrooms. Sarah O'Brien writes: "The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 brought unprecedented attention to a region that had been summarily ignored by conceptions of history formulated by the West, despite the impact that Western politics had had on its development" (2018, p. 1). Considering the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11, and the 2021 US departure of Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* continues to be a relevant source of literature in the Norwegian EFL classroom. The turmoil in Afghanistan needs to be understood in its historical and cultural context so that the readers can engage with it critically and by reflecting on their previous assumptions. This prejudice often stems from a popular portrayal of the West as world saviors, where an attack on the West is considered an attack on "good" morals and laws. This can again be tied to the notion of in/visibility: "The dis-located terrorist in a global war on terror are all deprived of appearance in the public sphere. The concept of hegemonic audio-visual borderscape highlights the form and functioning of an increasingly exclusionary Western politics and economics" (Brambilla & Pörzsch, 2017, p. 78-9). By recognizing that prejudice is often tied to what we are exposed to, such as audio-visual tools that present Western opinions, the reader must also be prepared to examine these notions in a constructive reading and discussion of literature. This discussion becomes especially relevant considering the criticism Afghans highlight about the image being portrayed in *The Kite Runner*.

Acknowledging this in the classroom means visiting the existing prejudice students might have towards Afghanistan and Afghani migrants. Teaching historical context, and especially when discussing *The Kite Runner* can contribute to increased knowledge and critical reflection in students. Magne Dypedahl and Henrik Bøhn writes:

Learning about other social contexts can help learners develop an understanding of reference, such as the collective memory of a people. In order to comprehend people's frames of reference, we may need to know facts that play a role in shaping them. Such facts may be needed in order to understand mindsets, arguments and cultural references in, for example, a news report or in an authentic dialogue. This can be called cultural perspective taking. Such a change of perspective may not simply make it easier to understand cultural backgrounds, it may also make it easier to relate to people constructively. (2020, p. 92)

In other words, teaching the context and history of each novel also includes presenting the actual, societal consequences the literary texts are concerned with. To understand the agency and conflicts emerging in *The Kite Runner* also means understanding the historical situation currently affecting Afghanistan. While *The Kite Runner* is heavily based on historical context and real situations, *On Black Sisters' Street* takes a more general approach in the writing itself, but still carries historical and cultural context that is important to acknowledge.

African migration, and especially Sub-Saharan African migration in which Nigeria is included, is often portrayed to be caused by poverty, environmental factors, or conflict (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 1). This portrayal of African countries is a common trope in Western media, and by continuing the discussion of prejudice when confronted with the “Other”, it becomes important to engage these pre-existing notions when reading literature that involves these subjects. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, poverty and lacking job opportunities are large motivations behind the women’s decision to migrate to Europe. As previously discussed, limited opportunity is both the cause and reason behind the female character’s decision to migrate to Europe. Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce are all limited by their social situations in Nigeria. While they would probably manage to get by, much like their parents, they yearn for something more. Recognizing the reasons behind this yearning is key to understanding the women’s choice.

By situating *On Black Sisters' Street* in the above-mentioned cultural context, it becomes vital that the reader understands the choice behind the migration in question. Philip Connor is especially interested in African migration, and his findings suggest that 74% of Nigerians who were interviewed would move to another country if they had the chance. The rapport highlights high unemployment rates and low wages as the main motivations for migration (Connor, 2018, p. 8-9). This is a quite rational choice for migration and is the reason why many Europeans also migrate across national borders. However, the image that is conveyed of African migration in dominant media is not based on these rational choices:

Representations of extreme poverty, starvation, warfare and environmental degradation amalgamate into an image of African misery. Irregular migration occurring from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb to Europe has also increasingly

been defined as a security problem associated with international crime, trafficking and terrorism. (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 1-2)

This presentation of African migration, in dominant media especially, conveys an image of Africa as a continent in despair. Discussing African migration also includes prejudice reduction. As highlighted by Flahaux and De Haas, many of the pictures and images conveyed in popular media contribute strongly to the victimization of African migrants. For instance, “boat migrants” who risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe are popular images that are used to describe African migration (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 2). This conveys an image of African migrants as illegal and without proper documentation, while the reality is quite different. Most African migration happens between African countries, and many who engage in transnational border-crossings have legal passports and documentation (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 2). Unigwe combats the image of irregular migration as committed by sole victims, giving a voice to those the dominant culture wishes to victimize. Her focus on the agency of sex workers and undocumented migration helps convey these ideas.

In the classroom, the factual basis of African migration is an important backdrop against reading literature: “For better learning it is important to be able to reflect on theoretical concepts and see how knowledge of such concepts can be applied in other circumstances than just a here-and-now task” (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020, p. 93). Being able to connect literary text to issues of migration, prejudice and opportunity would be to utilize intercultural competence to critically reflect and discuss said issues. For students to do this, they must familiarize themselves with the literary texts in question. Moments of border-crossings will be different depending on the subject in transit, and the difference in borders is vast between *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters’ Street*. This difference becomes key in understanding how the character’s identity both shapes and affects their position and opportunities when crossing borders.

### 3.2 Negotiating Identities

*The Kite Runner* by Hosseini begins with a flashback that includes Amir reflecting on the events that have brought him to America. Here, he notes: “I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out” (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 1). Amir, our protagonist, lets the reader know that he was forever shaped by an incident that occurred in the winter of 1975. From this quote, we also learn that Amir has tried to bury his past so he can transform his identity in America. This effort has been unsuccessful, and he is still haunted by memories from his time in Afghanistan. As the readers will come to realize, Amir adapts to the American life almost immediately, if only to find escape from his past. Hosseini writes: “America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins., If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America” (2003/2013, p. 126). This further highlights the difference in agency between Amir and the characters in Unigwe’s novel. Amir is allowed to exist in America and he can reshape his identity as he pleases. The freedom of being allowed to forget one’s past is a luxury that Amir is granted because of his legal status. In this case, his destination country becomes his escape, while the women in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are further trapped in their destination country. The concept of the land of opportunity, which will be discussed further in chapter 3.3, is central to this experience of freedom. If the concept of border-crossing requires migrants to reinvent themselves, it is crucial to understand the limitations each subject experiences during this process.

Like *The Kite Runner*, *On Black Sisters’ Street* also begins the novel by looking back at the journey that has brought the women to Europe. Sisi, our main character, is already in Belgium. Here, she is contemplating her new and improved life: “Humming under her breath, relishing the thought of new beginnings, she thought of how much her life was changing: Luc. Money. A house. She was already becoming someone else. Metamorphosing” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 1). In this scene, Sisi is daydreaming about her new life. A particular word here stands out: Metamorphosing. In this setting, the word can also mean to transform. Essentially, Sisi is transforming her identity into someone more suited for her new life. The reader will come to



understand that Sisi, who's real name is actually Chisom, has been dreaming about the person she would be in Belgium for a long time. To her, this is a person with money, luxuries, and freedom. While the introduction in *On Black Sisters' Street* makes it seem as though Sisi has achieved this goal, the reality is quite different. She has attempted to escape the agreement that brought her to Belgium, and as a result, she will be murdered. However, this scene allows Sisi to daydream and imagine her new life. Houtum and Wolfe write: "Although the b/order is an imagined-and-lived reality, that does not stop the desire for the true Self. The true b/order has no end, for realization of wholeness never align with the fantasy perfectly. The perfect identity is always there, beyond the threshold, beyond the gates of the Law" (2017, p. 138). Sisi has already been rejected at the border. All she has left are her hopes and dreams. Despite the power these hold, Sisi cannot rid herself of the experiences and memories that brought her to this very moment. She is not becoming someone else, but she is desperately wishing that she could. Like Houtum and Wolfe notes, her desire for her true self and the person she is do not combine to fulfill her fantasy. This is also noted by Sisi: "Sisi navigated Keyserlei and imagined everything she could buy with her brand-new wealth. How it would buy her forgetfulness, even from those memories that did not permit silence, making her yell in her sleep so that she woke up restless, wanting to cry" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 1). She is desperately wishing that her new life, despite how temporary it is, will allow her to achieve the dreams she hopes Belgium would provide for her. Instead, she is haunted by memories of her experience that she wishes to bury.

A further investigation of the agency in *On Black Sisters' Street* reveals the complexities of illegal bordering. While Sisi agrees to her own smuggling and has an idea of the work she will perform, she immediately wishes to get out of her situation. While she does manage to escape temporarily, which is depicted in the first scene of the novel, the reader will come to understand that Sisi is living under the illusion that she has transformed and escaped. Her identity as an illegal border-crossing still clings to her, and her escape will result in her death. While Amir can leave his past behind him upon arriving in America, Sisi is unable to rid herself of her identity as an illegal border-crosser in dept. This highlights the complexity of agency between these novels. Amir's reshaped identity results in opportunities and allows him to grow into a man who can seek marriage, education, a job, and the ability to travel back to his homeland. His visa and legal status in America grant him agency that allows more opportunities, rather than confine him within the destination country. Sisi's attempt at

forgetting and leaving her situation is not as easy as it is for Amir. She has no legal status, and she is considered a belonging to those who have granted her passage to Europe. If she cannot pay her debt, she must pay with her life. While Sisi can imagine her freedom during the first scene of the novel, it is a fleeting moment before reality catches up to her. The reader is informed that while Sisi has gained wealth and money, which will later be described as her main motivation for migrating, it has not come without cost. She is affected and forever changed by her experiences in Belgium. The moments of border-crossing, the times where the characters in both novels decide to migrate, are essential in understanding both why their agency differs, and how their identities create such a contrasting image of bordering.

### **3.2.1 The Process of Bordering and The Gendered Subject**

There are two main motivations for choosing to cross borders in *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. As previously discussed in chapter 3.1.1, it is a lack of opportunities and a yearning for a better life that drives Ama, Sisi, and Efe to cross the border. Joyce's circumstances are more peculiar and will be discussed in chapter 3.4. The women want to be able to care for themselves and their families. They are struggling with their lack of opportunity in Nigeria. In *The Kite Runner*, it is the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979 that is the main motivation for Amir and Baba to migrate. Baba makes the decision to immigrate to America because he does not want to risk living in Afghanistan after the war breaks out. There is therefore a noticeable contrast between the border-crossings in each novel. In *The Kite Runner*, the decision to migrate is much more sudden. Baba and Amir are wealthy and privileged in Afghanistan, and they do not necessarily have any previous desire to migrate. This desire is evoked when they no longer feel safe in Afghanistan, and Baba makes the decision to migrate. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the decision to migrate is based on a slow, burning need to escape. While the opportunity presents itself suddenly, Ama, Sisi and Efe have all dreamt of a different life for a long time. Their dreams of a more comfortable life abroad are what drives them to accept Dele's offer. They are still given time to decide if they want to accept, which is another way for Unigwe to display their active agency in agreeing to their circumstances.

The first border-crossing moment that takes place in *The Kite Runner* happens after the war in Afghanistan has gotten so bad it is no longer safe to reside there. Amir is eighteen years old at this point, and he and his father are being smuggled in a car to another city where they can continue towards Pakistan (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 103-9). During this process, a negotiation of identity has already begun within the migratory subjects as they wait for passage. Houtum and Wolfe write: “To a large extent a border can be considered a waiting act. A border causes a standstill, a distance and difference in time and space. Waiting is both an inclusion and exclusion at the same time” (2017, p. 135). While they are crossing the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a process of who is allowed across and who is not allowed has already begun. During the process of crossing borders, and especially through means such as human traffickers and smugglers, the border-crossing subject is at their mercy. Those who are waiting for inclusion cannot rush this process, as they have no means of voicing their reasons for crossing the border until they have already been granted passage. This process is then repeated, where the migratory subject becomes powerless in the face of the state. Border-crossers are either granted access or denied entry to their destination country. This is the complexity of both inclusion and exclusion during border-crossings. Either you are included as a citizen of the state, or you are excluded as “Other”.

During the process of crossing borders, gender becomes a crucial factor of the powerless situation that migratory subjects find themselves in while waiting for passage. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir and Baba have bought themselves passage to Pakistan through a smuggler who promises he can get them across the border. In this car, each border-crossing subject becomes powerless and at the mercy of those granting access. When their car is stopped at a checkpoint, a Russian soldier requests to spend half an hour with a woman in the truck. Hosseini writes: “The young woman pulled her shawl down over her face. Burst into tears. The husband’s face had become as pale as the moon hovering above. ‘It’s his price for letting us pass’, Karim said. He couldn’t bring himself to look the husband in the eye” (2003/2013, p. 106). While Karim, their smuggler, has already paid off all the soldiers to allow them passage, money is seemingly not enough. This scene also displays the vulnerability of the female border-crosser by showcasing how easily female bodies are reduced to currency. What complicates this matter further is that the reader is given no background of who this woman is. She is a stranger to everyone in the car and provided no agency in this situation. We do not know her name, where she is from, or her own thoughts

regarding this request. In a sense, this anonymous woman in *The Kite Runner* becomes a representative for all female border-crossers, by showcasing how their bodies become exceptionally vulnerable while waiting for passage. The Russian soldier is renegotiating the agreement he struck with the smuggler because he believes it is his right. No one has the power to oppose him unless they want to risk death or being sent back to Kabul. The soldier does not see the people in the truck as individuals, or fellow humans, but as lawless individuals that owe him their lives.

This also highlights an important difference in gender and sexuality that is crucial to each novel. In this scene, Karim struggles with meeting the eyes of the husband rather than the wife that is being targeted. He feels shame in front of the husband rather than the woman who is about to be raped. This further accentuates the difference in agency when it comes to female and male migrants. Rosello and Wolfe write: “A focus on the performativity of borders goes hand in hand with a questioning of which comes first; the border or its performative engendering. The border is a product of symbolic differences, even if it is also a spatial dimension” (2017, p. 7-8). Here, a symbolic difference takes place between the wife, the soldier, the smuggler, and the husband. The wife is left in an impossible situation as she cannot refuse without dooming them all. She is granted no agency in this situation, and her honor is being tied to her husband’s shame of having his wife raped.

For the individuals in the car to stand up against the soldier is almost impossible. Their current situation can best be described as existing in a state of limbo. They are not allowed to deny the soldier’s request if they wish to continue their journey. Houtum and Wolfe write: “The practice of waiting at the border as a subject is potentially not felt only as a practice of liberation but also of containment, a self-imprisonment of one’s multiplicity in a spatially ordered box set out by others” (2017, p. 140-41). In this scene, those in the car are not allowed to be anything other than submissive border-crossers. Opposing the requests made of them provides a serious consequence they cannot afford to pay. In *The Kite Runner*, no one dares to oppose the Russian soldier because they are desperate to leave Afghanistan, or terrified of losing their lives. Both of these fears are valid, and while they feel ashamed by the soldier’s request, they are all willing to allow it. Amir is quiet the whole time, and in the end, it is Baba who refuses to let this happen. Amir is shocked and terrified at his father’s opposition: “*Do you have to be the hero, I thought, my heart fluttering. Can’t you just let it go*

*for once?* But I knew he couldn't – it wasn't in his nature. The problem was, his nature was going to get us all killed" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 107). In a sense, Baba is unable to negotiate his identity to that of a waiting subject. In his refusal, he is also accepting the consequence of being killed by the soldier. Regardless of who's mercy he is at, Baba is more willing to face death than allow this act to transpire in front of him. However, this also complicates the issue of gender and agency in front of the border.

An important question to ask is how come Baba is allowed to stand up against this injustice, but the woman who the situation revolves around is not? How would the dynamic have changed if the woman refused and threatened to kill the Russian soldier, like Baba does? In the end, the Russian soldier is killed by another Russian guard who blames his behavior on drugs (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 108). Still, female agency is reduced to an act of waiting, not only in front of the border, but in front of decisions that directly influence their lives. This woman's agency is removed before it even begins, and it is the male subjects who both acknowledge, allows, and resist the actions about to occur. The female subject is reduced to an object who cannot speak or act for themselves and remain passive in this process. Indrani Karmakar writes: "Since women are the bearers of community identity as well as markers of the boundaries, they became the corporeal example of the very act of border crossing when violated by men from another community" (2021, p. 116-7). Women in literature are often symbols of the community's honor, where they represent both the vitality and vulnerability of their homeland. An attack on women is an attack on the community, where women are put in a situation they cannot win. Their sexual assault is a marker of shame and weakness, but it transcends the subject to represent the community. The female experience is not her own, but a marker of the community's failure. This can be read in this scene from *The Kite Runner*, where the men exchange sympathetic and shameful looks with each other as the woman in question is crying in the corner. This reduces the female character to a representation of more than just herself, to be a representation of the community's shame and weakness. This is a notion that often haunts female migrants, and something Unigwe actively tries to avoid in *On Black Sisters' Street*.

This scene from *The Kite Runner* is reminiscent of a scene in *On Black Sisters' Street*, where Ama must perform a sexual act on her smuggler to gain access to Europe. As the reader will come to realize, Ama's background complicates this act further. She grew up in a

wealthy household but suffered sexual assault by her stepdad from an early age. Her stepdad is an assistant pastor at a Christian church, and very religious. Ama grew up believing that Brother Cyrus, which is what he refers to himself as, was her real father. It is then extremely shocking to learn that Ama was molested by Brother Cyrus from she was eight to eleven years old. He only stopped molesting Ama because she began menstruating, and the risk of her getting pregnant became a possibility. During the moments Brother Cyrus would sneak into her room, Ama would often dream of escaping and freeing herself: “Ama told the walls she wanted to go abroad. When she slept she saw herself, hair long and silky, in a city very far away where her father’s whiteness did not stifle her” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 134). Ama considers moving abroad to be her escape from a life that is suffocating her and making her long for freedom. Ama is perhaps the most striking contrast to Amir, as they share the most similar backstory. They both grow up in comfortable homes where they receive good education, are fed properly, and dressed in nice clothes. However, Ama’s gender and sexuality leaves her vulnerable at the hands of her stepfather. As Amir wishes he would get closer to his father, Ama wishes that she could escape hers. Dina Ligaga writes: “Ama’s life is in essence one that she wishes she could escape. She desires a new fortune, and given her background, Europe presents an opportunity” (2019, p. 81). After spending a large portion of her childhood dreaming of going abroad, it is not surprising that Ama is willing to do almost anything to achieve her dreams. However, the path there requires her to confront her own feelings of shame regarding her own sexuality.

The same feeling of shame that was discussed in the previous paragraph haunts Ama and complicates her feelings regarding her own sexuality and gender: “When her friends discovered boys and make-up at thirteen, and urged her to try some lipstick, she refused. She didn’t want to be attractive to any man” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 145). Ama tries to renounce her sexuality and gender, refusing to indulge in anything considered feminine in fear that it will leave her with further unwanted advances from the opposite gender. She avoids further enforcing her gender and sexuality with make-up, believing that her sexual assault might repeat itself if men find her attractive. Despite her efforts, Ama is quickly approached by Dele because of her beauty. Dele, a human trafficker, is willing to grant Ama passage to Europe to become a sex worker, believing she is guaranteed to make him money. At his suggestion of sending her abroad to become a sex worker, Ama spits at his face and turns him down effectively (Unigwe, 2009, p. 165-6). However, she cannot keep his offer out of his mind, and

notes: “Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted, no questions asked. No please or may I or could I. Discarding her when she no longer sufficed. And strange men taking and paying her for her services. And it would not even be in Lagos. But Overseas. Which earned you respect just for being there” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 166). Ama then gives herself two days to consider Dele’s offer, before agreeing. For offending him, he must “sample” her first, which leads to a sexual situation where Ama takes complete control (Unigwe, 2009, p. 167-9). In this scene, Unigwe showcases the ambiguity of agency. Eze writes:

Rather than providing an African alternative to Western feminism, she [Unigwe] tells of bodies in pain, which are so not because they are biologically female, but because of their gender, that is to say, the roles society has assigned to them. Nearly all patriarchal cultures share an implicit belief that women’s bodies do not belong to them. (Eze, 2014, p. 94).

As noted by Eze here, a crucial theme in both *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* is the difference in precarity between male and female border-crossers. Female bodies and male bodies are treated differently, and female bodies are especially vulnerable to objectification and exploitation. Comparing these two scenes from *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* display this conception to the extreme, by presenting sexual assault as something border-crossing women have no way of avoiding without ruining their opportunities in the process. The difference between these two scenes is therefore how the authors chose to display these characters' agency.

In this scene from *On Black Sisters’ Street*, similarly to the one previously discussed from *The Kite Runner*, Ama’s body is not seen as belonging to herself. Dele first approaches her because he sees her as a suitable body for making him money, and then he must “sample” her before she leaves. Ama is objectified immediately by this man, and he forces her into sexual relations before she leaves. Dele exploits Ama’s dream of going abroad, and he puts her in an extorting position by forcing her to engage with him sexually to “make up” for her previous rudeness. However, Unigwe purposely makes Ama take control of this situation to display her agency. Although it is limited, as she cannot refuse Dele’s advances if she wants to leave for Europe, Ama still takes hold of the situation so that she is the one in control. Instead of the scene progressing as in *The Kite Runner*, where the unidentified woman is

refused agency to act or make choices, Unigwe allows Ama to display agency and control in her situation. It is not a matter of free will, as she finds herself in a limited position, but it is an active display of agency that allows Ama to be an agent of her own life. In this scene, she also negotiates her identity to one that will function in Belgium, to a person who reclaims her sexuality and past trauma. Ama could not have refused to indulge Dele, to hold on to her wish of staying unattractive, without also giving up on her dream to travel abroad. Ama, unlike Baba in *The Kite Runner*, cannot afford to refuse a renegotiation of identity. The difference in precarity between Amir, Sisi, Efe, Ama, and Joyce continues to make itself clear in situations such as this one. Even common tropes such as family and freedom are severely contrasted through intersecting identities and differences in precarity.

### 3.2.2 Family, Gender, and Shame

Crossing borders for the sake of family is a shared theme between *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. The reason as to why the characters in each novel chooses to migrate is based on family and opportunity. Both novels treat family as a factor for migration, either for securing their safety or providing for them. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the reader is early informed that Sisi and Efe are considered their families' greatest chance at escaping poverty. A similar theme of family and caring is also located in *The Kite Runner*, where Amir feels as though his father is giving up everything to care for him. Both characters feel pressured to ensure that they are not disappointing their parents, or the efforts they have made to secure their families a good life. Both novels involve motifs where parents have sacrificed everything for their children, and the children are trying desperately to live up to the expectations that follow. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, this is closely linked to Efe and Sisi. In *The Kite Runner*, it is best represented through Amir, Baba, and Soraya who is Amir's wife.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the reader learns that Sisi does not come from a home with many available resources. Sisi's father was unable to receive an education because he was expected to take care of the family: "His parents had needed him to get a job and help out with his brothers and sisters. We have trained you, now it's your turn to train the rest. Take your nine siblings off our hands. [...]. Sisi studied hard at school, mindful of her father's hopes for her" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 19-20). The readers understand that Sisi feels that it is her



responsibility to take care of her family and to help them out of poverty. She wants a better life for herself, but also for her parents. Although Sisi has a university degree, she is unable to secure herself a job: “Yet, two years after leaving university, Chisom was still mainly unemployed, and had spent the better part of two years scripting meticulous application letters and mailing them along with her resumé to the many different banks in Lagos” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 21-2). Because Sisi comes from a home with few social connections, she is unable to secure an opportunity that will give her a job. In the context of the educational institution, this presents the readers with an interesting revelation. Education is often pursued as a way of securing one’s future and is highly encouraged in Norwegian society. Through self-reflection, the reader must begin to question the actions they would take if they could not secure a job for themselves and had few other options for acquiring financial security and a comfortable life without government aid. Understanding migration as an active choice that includes agency also requires the subject to inquire into their own privilege and position in the world. Neither Sisi nor Efe can care for their families back home in Nigeria, as there are not enough opportunities available to do so. Hence, the only way for them to provide care for their family members is to migrate. This is even though it will take away their ability to care for family members through close, physical proximity.

While leaving Nigeria is a hard decision for all the women, it is arguably Efe who leaves the most behind her when agreeing to Dele’s offer. She has a son with a man named Titus, who is much older than herself. Titus engaged in a sexual relationship with Efe when she was only sixteen years old, making him almost thirty years older than her. He tells her early on that she has possessed him: “Every afternoon, for the next four months, Efe saw Titus at his insistence. He said she had taken possession of him, he had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 49). By claiming that he is possessed by her, Titus is effectively making Efe responsible for their relationship. This is perhaps Titus’ way of placing the blame on Efe for his sexual involvement with a minor. He removes his active participation from the crime he is committing. He presents it as Efe’s fault for being too irresistible for him to keep away. Efe is young and vulnerable when Titus meets her, and through constant persuasion and bribing, he eventually makes her cave and give into his sexual advances.

While this portrays Titus as a predatory man, which he is, Unigwe also makes sure that Efe is not only a victim of this relationship. Cécile Canut highlights that agency enables the subject to continually shape their identities through interactions and experiences, as agency enables different opportunities at different times (2021, p. 36-7). Efe is living in poverty and with the responsibility to care for her whole family when she meets Titus. She is barely scraping by after losing her mother to cancer and losing her father to the despair that her mother's death brought him. While Titus no doubt objectifies Efe, she objectifies him just the same: "He [her father] left it up to Efe to look after the house and her three siblings. The money he gave her every month was barely enough for food and Efe yearned for luxuries. If Titus was what she had to endure to get the things she wanted then so be it" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 58). Efe uses her agency to secure herself a more comfortable life. She allows Titus access to her body in return for goods that she craves. Unigwe showcases that agency is complex and difficult to navigate, and sometimes there are no perfect choices. She also displays how fragile these choices can be, and how quickly situations can change. Agency is a constant negotiation of choice and the characters current situation.

Efe admits to getting bolder and bolder as their relationship continues, asking Titus for things she could only dream of before (Unigwe, 2009, p. 57-8). However, the difference in power and privilege between the two compromises this relationship the second it changes from a transactional, sexual relationship, to imply something more. This happens when Efe tells Titus she has fallen pregnant with his child: "That was all it took to get him out of that bed, get him dressed [...]. Then he got up, turned his broad back to her, picked up his car keys from the bedside table and walked out of the hotel room, closing the door so gently behind him that it made no noise" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 59). Titus disappears the moment he is faced with the consequences of his actions, and Efe is left behind as a single mother with no education or job prospects. She is already burdened with having to care for her entire family, and now she is also expecting a child of her own. Efe ultimately ends up working several jobs just to be able to provide for her family, and when she meets Dele who offers her passage to Europe, she accepts (Unigwe, 2009, p. 81-5). There are several reasons as to why Efe accepts the offer, but her main motivation is to be able to provide a better life for her son. Ligaga writes: "It is useful to think of vulnerability not as something to overcome, but as a space for mobilizing action. For the embodied subject, ... it can come through mere refusals to remain in positions of continuous victimhood and helplessness" (2019, p. 76). Efe understands that

she will never be able to care for her son the way she wishes she could by remaining in Nigeria. She does not have the education, connections or the right opportunities to make this happen. When Efe agrees to Dele's offer, she uses her agency to remove herself from a situation in which she feels hopeless. Her vulnerability as a female gives her little room to negotiate her opportunities and agency, and her choice to migrate is her way of mobilizing action. She is a mother willing to sacrifice raising her son in exchange for the possibility to provide for him.

Like Efe and Sisi, Baba migrates to care for and protect his family. He acknowledges that he did not chose America for him, but for Amir, based on the opportunities it could provide for his son. While both Baba and Amir are legal immigrants, Baba struggles with learning the English language. He adapts more slowly to the American life than Amir. His motivation is to care for his son, and in this process, he strips himself of his past privilege and power. He accepts a grueling job at a gas station so he can provide for his son. Amir notes: "I reached across the table and put my hand on his. My student hand, clean and soft, and his laborer's hand, grubby and calloused. I thought of all the trucks, train sets, and bikes he'd bought me in Kabul. Now America. One last gift for Amir" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 120). These opportunities become accessible to Amir through his father's sacrifice. While his son can adapt and thrive in America, Baba's identity is not able to reshape itself in the same way. Johannessen and Moi writes:

If we stay with the particular configuration of borders in aesthetic practices, we could add that as tropological constructs, borders are consequently at the same time confirmations and interrogations of the very construct that they are: constructs which simultaneously include and exclude, echoing spatially the double movement of 'deviation from and toward'. (2017, p. 56-7).

Borders as both including and excluding were discussed during section 4.2.1 of this thesis, but through the lens of waiting for access. It is important to acknowledge that the interrogation of borders does not stop once the migratory subject has been granted passage. It continues as a social process of inclusion and exclusion once the migratory subject has entered the destination country as well.

For Baba, this is best represented through his inability to accept how he is perceived in America. In Afghanistan, he was a wealthy man who received respect from everyone. In America, this image no longer accompanies him. During one of the scenes from *The Kite Runner*, Baba trashes a grocery store after the cashier asks him for an ID after Baba tries to write him a check. He is furious at this request, interpreting it as Americans having no trust in one another and accusing him of being a thief. However, Amir understands the necessity of this request and is left having to apologize for his father: “After I’d made him promise he wouldn’t go back in, I returned to the store and apologized to the Nguyens. Told them my father was going through a difficult time. I saw her hands shaking more than usual, and that made me angry at Baba, his causing an old woman to shake like that” (Hosseini, 2003/2013), p. 119). While Amir understands that his father is having difficulties adapting in America, he is also angry at him for not being able to conform to the American life. Taylor (2014) writes: “The way in which people imagine their social *difference*, how they *do not* fit together with *their own* and others, how things *fail* between them and their fellows, the expectations that are *hardly ever* met, and the deeper normative notions and imagines that underlie these expectations” (as cited in Johannessen & Moi, 2017, p. 64-66). All these factors influence social imaginaries and our perception of our own self. Baba’s life in America is perhaps such a stark contrast to his life in Afghanistan that he is unable to cross the emotional border that would enable him to adapt more easily.

While Baba struggles to fit into US society, he still enjoys the same respect and admiration he used to have in Afghanistan within the Afghan communities him and Amir frequent. When Baba is diagnosed with cancer, Amir’s last request of him is for Baba to arrange a marriage between him and a woman named Soraya (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 150-2). Baba’s respected status among the Afghan community transfers to his son, who benefits from his father’s reputation. However, the marriage proposal functions as a transaction of Soraya, agreed upon by Baba, Amir and Soraya’s father. In this proposal, Soraya’s agency becomes limited and her position as a woman leaves her vulnerable to the agreements of the men around her. Soraya’s previous attempt at freedom has left her tainted and without marriage proposals, until Amir meets her. Her previous experience ties her gender to feelings of shame and dishonor.

Soraya's first introduction to Amir is in an American flea market, where they are both helping their families sell different items for profit. Immediately, Amir is smitten with Soraya. Baba explains that she comes from a proud family as her father was a General in Afghanistan, but that she has not yet married. While Baba is hesitant to share what he labels as gossip, he tells Amir that there were rumors of a man whom Soraya was involved with, but that he does not want to say more (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 129-31). Female sexuality in *The Kite Runner* is closely tied to feelings of shame and dishonor. Women engaging in sexual behavior outside of marriage is considered shameful and taboo. Like the woman in the car we encounter during Amir and Baba's journey to Pakistan, Soraya's sexuality leaves her vulnerable. She has previously deviated from the Afghan culture by running away with a man outside of wedlock, and now she is considered tainted by other Afghan men. In other words, Soraya engaged in sexual activities outside of marriage, which ruined her reputation as a virgin suitable for marriage. The virgin concept makes it extremely difficult for female characters to navigate the culture and environment in which they reside. Soraya is not allowed to feel her shame in solitude, she is physically forced by her father to display it for all to see: "So my father took me up to my bedroom and sat me in front of the dresser mirror. He handed me a pair of scissors and calmly told me to cut off all my hair. He watched while I did it" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 165). Soraya's father, who is the one who drags her home and away from her shameful situation, requires her to cut off all her hair. This is to signal that Soraya is no longer a virgin and that she has shamed both herself and her family.

Soraya and Efe have similar concerns related to having engaged in extramarital activities. Efe thinks to herself: "She ought to hate her baby; after all, she never asked for him. He kept her home and was a visible sign that she was *damaged goods*. Now there was very little hope of marriage to a rich man rescuing her from the pit she lived in" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 75). Efe's concern is that she will be portrayed as a cheap girl that is willing to offer her body to anyone. Unigwe grants Efe agency in this situation by acknowledging that she still has choices: "She might have a baby outside wedlock but it did not mean she was cheap. She could still pick and Dele seemed the type of guy to give his girlfriend a munificent allowance" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 81). Efe is allowed to actively search for someone to provide her with more opportunities, whether that be as a mistress, girlfriend, or wife. Despite considering herself to be "damaged goods", she believes she can be valuable to the right man.

On the other hand, Soraya has no agency to search for another man. In her culture, all marriage proposals must go through her parents, and she is considered responsible for ruining her own chances at marriage. Johannessen and Moi write: “We encounter the concept of the imaginary in various contexts, and quite often in only more or less defined terms; hence it often assumes a place in a register of designations referring to vague ideas of how communities think of themselves collectively” (2017, p. 57-9). Despite living in America, the imaginary Afghan culture and community still rule the social norms of the female gender. The collective perception of Soraya’s community decides her judgment. This does not only impact the perceived female qualities of Soraya, but also her mother. As Amir notes how much he is loved by Soraya’s mother, he acknowledges: “I had rid her heart of its gravest malady. I had relieved her of the greatest fear of every Afghan mother; that no honorable *khastegar* would ask for her daughter’s hand. That her daughter would age alone, husbandless, childless. Every woman needed a husband” (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 164). Her mother would also feel shame if Soraya did not marry, as it would reflect poorly upon the mother. This displays a difference in precarity within *The Kite Runner* as well. In the novel, Afghan women are portrayed as most valuable when they have husbands and children to care for. However, none of the men are described as feeling this pressure. Baba never remarries after his wife dies in childbirth. Amir is never pushed to find a wife. The men can exist within their community and be single, but the women are punished for it.

Soraya is shunned by the Afghan society and punished because of a mistake she made. Amir notes: “I cringed a little at the position of the power I’d been granted, and all because I had won at the genetic lottery that had determined my sex” (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 137). While Amir acknowledges his gender privilege, he does not show this to Soraya. It is a fleeting thought that he has when courting her. Amir recognizes that his power is tied to his gender. He can display agency by asking Baba to request his marriage to Soraya. This is then negotiated by Baba and the General, but Soraya is not allowed a voice in this. She does express her joy, and Hosseini depicts their feelings for each other as warm and mutual. However, Soraya is not the one deciding who to marry, and so this is a lucky coincidence. When she asks Amir if he is okay with the fact that she is not a virgin, he thinks: “I couldn’t lie to her and say that my pride, my *iftikhar*, wasn’t stung at all that she had been with a man, whereas I had never taken a woman to bed. It did bother me a bit” (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 151). This is an interesting passage, as it showcases that what bothers Amir the most is that

Soraya is technically more experienced than him. Again, this shows the implications that follow the female gender and how this shapes how they are perceived. Soraya should be a virgin so that she is considered pure, but also so she is not more experienced than her husband. Amir assures Soraya that he does not judge her for her past, but he arrives at this decision because he believes he is in no position to judge anyone. His acceptance is tied to his own limitations, rather than accepting Soraya's past because he considers her to be his equal. This complicates Soraya's agency in her marriage to Amir. She has no say in accepting it, and while she and Amir do love each other, she must also seek Amir's forgiveness for not being a virgin.

Reading about topics such as gender and shame is important to incorporate in the classroom. While Efe, Sisi and Soraya belong to different cultures, their vulnerability in concern to their gender and sexuality is a shared concern for many women. Banks writes: "A multicultural curriculum that includes information that helps students examine and clarify their gender stereotypes and misconceptions will help both girls and boys to attain educational equity" (2016, p. 229). Investigating the implications of female sexuality and the concerns, implications, and discrimination it often involves is vital in a transformative curriculum. It is not only beneficial for developing intercultural competence so we can understand other cultures, but to understand our own culture as well. The female body is often singled out as vulnerable and as something to exploit. This is showcased in both *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. To investigate the agency in which these female characters can navigate these circumstances is crucial to developing intercultural competence. This is not only so that women become more familiar with these scenes, but men as well. Nussbaum writes: "Compassion requires one thing more: a sense of one's own vulnerability to misfortune. To respond with compassion, I must be willing to entertain the thought that this suffering person might be me" (1997, p. 111-14). In other words, the narrative imagination allows both men and women to imagine these exploitive situations as if they could be subjected to them as well. It is important to acknowledge the power relations between men and women, and especially the gendered, migratory subject. This will highlight that we all have a responsibility towards each other. The narrative imagination, and acknowledging the gendered subject, is important when investigating why these subjects are willing to take this risk when migrating to other countries.

### 3.3 The Land of Opportunity

The difference in precarity between characters in *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street* has been a central part of the analysis thus far. While they all have different reasons to migrate, and some motivations are more similar than others, a large aspect of each novel is how the characters manage to adapt to their destination countries. As mentioned previously, Amir considered America to be a vast land of opportunity where he can afford to bury his sorrows and regrets. For Ama, Sisi, and Efe, Belgium is a country of dreams and fortune that quickly exploits their strong wish for a better life. Eventually, Joyce will also come to see it as a place for opportunity. As students continue to develop their narrative imagination, and start to question the thoughts and concepts of citizenship, discussion becomes necessary. We must question and put into perspective the imagined “land of opportunity”, and how limited some subjects become within a country. Banks writes: “Serious tension exists between the conceptions of international human rights and national sovereignty. Despite the codification of international rights by bodies such as the United Nations, nationalism is as strong as ever” (2020, p. 136). This tension can also be traced back to individual prejudice, and what our conceptions of legal and illegal migrants consist of. The tension that Banks directly refers to is a point of discussion in both *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, but present in different ways. An analysis of this tension is especially relevant in regards to the push and pull factors of each destination country, and how Amir, Ama, Efe, Sisi, and Joyce can navigate their migrant status in these countries.

#### 3.3.1 The Push and Pull Factors of Destinations Countries

An interesting question the reader might ask as they engage with these two novels is the exact reason as why these specific destination countries have been chosen. Why America, and why Belgium? Ahmad writes:

Whereas sociologists and historians differentiate between ‘push factors’ (namely, reasons that people emigrate, for example war or economic depression) and ‘pull factors’ (namely, the reasons that people immigrate to a specific country, for instance



employment opportunities or changes in immigration policy), popular media in destination countries tends to focus almost exclusively on the latter. (2019, p. 8-11)

The push factors have already been briefly mentioned in chapter 3.2. In *The Kite Runner*, the main push factor is war. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the main push factor is economic struggles. However, this does not necessarily explain why Baba chooses to migrate to America, or why Sisi, Ama, Joyce and Efe are sent to Belgium. These pull factors can be understood through a variety of reasons in both novels.

In *The Kite Runner*, Amir explicitly tells the reader that his father has always been fond of America: “Baba loved the idea of America. It was living in America that gave him an ulcer. ‘There are only three real men in this world, Amir,’ he’d say. He’d count them off on his fingers: America the brash savior, Britain, and Israel” (Hosseini, 2003, p. 116). From this citation, we see a common trope present itself; America as the loud, dominating savior. Baba looks up to America and considers it to be one of the few “real” countries the world has to offer. This is perhaps both a direct appeal to the Western audience by Hosseini, and a play on the stereotype America holds in the global society. Ahmad writes: “The writings included here counter the primacy of the United States in the rhetorical landscape of global migration. Whereas many in the United States think of ourselves as holding a global monopoly on immigration, other countries host a far greater number of migrants” (2019, p. 8-11). The tension surrounding migration in the US has only risen during recent years, and a relevant example of this is the Trump administration and its closed-door policy.

From *The Kite Runner*, the push factors must also be understood through the scope of agency. Baba and Amir wait in Peshawar for their visas, which they have time and patience for. They are not in an immediate situation that requires them to travel to the US as illegal immigrants, and they can wait for their visas and hence receive their status as legal immigrants. Another display of agency is the fact that Baba is allowed to choose which country they migrate to. An interesting aspect of this is that Amir does not mention himself as part of these discussions, but more as along for the ride. This provides an interesting contrast of Amir as solely part of the journey, but not very interested in taking part in it before he enters America and is granted opportunities.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the pull factors for Belgium are largely placed out of the women's hands. They are sent to Belgium because it is where Dele has located some of his business. He tells Sisi: "I get connections. Every month I send gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid. Ma gals dey there. You be fine gal now. *Abi*, see your backside, *kai!* Who talk say na dat Jennifer Lopez get the finest yansh? Make dem come here come see your assets!" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 42-3). In this scene, Dele is objectifying Sisi and using her body as reason to send her abroad. She has, in his words, assets that make her a worthy investment to send to Antwerp. Later, Efe notes what he has told her: "And as for liking black women, Dele had told her they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting a bit of colour and spice" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 84). From Dele's perspective, the pull factor for Belgium is how the men there want to exploit Nigerian women. For Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, Belgium is the destination country Dele picks out for them. It could just as easily have been Madrid or Milan, but the demand for Nigerian women seems to be highest in Belgium. This is a contrasting image of what most European countries would like to associate with, similarly to the image of America that Ahmad writes about. Receiving immigrants based on the pull factor of sexual exploitation within the nation is something most nations would find hard to associate with. This does not change the fact that Unigwe writes from the perspectives of actual women who have experienced this themselves, and who can attest to the large demand of illegal immigrants and to the purpose they serve. This leads to a discovery of "the land of opportunity" as more oppressive, discriminative, and exploitive than many might find comfortable to accept.

Dele recognizes the business he can make by catering to the sexual fetishes of European men and has created a human smuggling business that can supply the demand of African women Europe craves. This complicates the relationship between the migrate and the destination country, as it shows how Belgian subjects request Nigerian women to satisfy their demands. It is not simply the migrant subject requesting entry, they are also in demand inside the nation. From a political viewpoint, this contests the idea that illegal immigrants have no purpose in their destination countries, and that all nation subjects want them gone. Regardless, this does not change the fact that an exploitive system such as this only damages the illegal subject. Dina Ligaga notes: "Human trafficking is, in essence, about supply and demand. I read trafficking [in *On Black Sisters' Street*] as moving beyond mere smuggling to include the sustained exploitative relationship that ensues once the person trafficked crosses

the border” (2019, pp. 75). In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women are not immediately granted the lives they envisioned for themselves once they cross the border. They must pay Dele back, and they are required to offer their bodies in exchange for currency.

While there is an exploitive relationship that goes both ways, meaning the women can exploit the demand of Nigerian women from Belgium, and Belgium can exploit the women when they arrive, there is a huge power imbalance in this relationship. The women end up paying a much higher price to access a country that does not acknowledge their existence, and some women end up paying with their lives. This is a stark contrast to *The Kite Runner*, where Amir and Baba are granted access to multiple facilities once they arrive in America. They are given food stamps by the American government, and Baba gets a job while Amir enrolls in high school, where he graduates after two years (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 120-21). Whereas Amir and Baba are free to begin their lives in America upon their arrival, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce must first honor the agreement that sent them to Belgium before they can begin their lives. Sisi, who breaks this agreement and jump-starts her life in Belgium before paying her dues, ends up paying with her life. It is therefore important to acknowledge the contrasting experience that these migratory subjects experience when they enter their destination country, and how their new reality begins to conflict with the life they had envisioned before their arrival.

The push and pull factors of migration are especially interesting in a comparative reading of *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. As noted by Banks: “In addition to helping students view events and situations from diverse ethnic, gender, and social-class perspectives, a transformative curriculum should be organized around powerful concepts and social issues” (2016, p. 191). By using two novels from two different authors, the transformative curriculum is able to showcase more than one type of migrant experience. This becomes apparent through *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. Between the two novels, the destination countries are almost portrayed as polar opposites. America is the perfect dreamland where everything is possible if the migrant is willing to adapt. On the other hand, Belgium becomes a prison that confines Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce until they pay off their debt. This is, in reference to the citation by Banks, a powerful concept and social issue that is important to discuss within the classroom. Teaching both novels provides interesting contrasts that would be lacking by only reading one. The novels portray widely different

migrant experiences and provide insight where the other novel might lack it. Both novels are therefore beneficial to teach side by side, by providing contrasting, useful insight as to how these migrant experiences are shaped through hardships and opportunities. While this thesis has primarily focused on the hardships of the migrant experience, it is important to acknowledge that these experiences also provide the migratory subject with agency and opportunities.

### 3.4 Reclaiming Agency

The ability to reclaim agency is especially important when discussing border-crossing literature. Both Chika Unigwe and Khaled Hosseini have made this a central part of their novels, although it transcends in different ways. For Unigwe, showcasing that the female characters are able to achieve their hopes and dreams despite their situation is a vital part of the novel. For Hosseini, Amir's redemption in Afghanistan is what eventually helps him reclaim his agency. The narrative structure of *On Black Sisters' Street* highlights the notion of agency. Joyce, Ama, and Efe from *On Black Sisters' Street* make active choices to confide in each other after Sisi's death. They share their stories with the only people who can listen, understand and sympathize, namely each other. As a result, the reader is also allowed to take part in this process of them reclaiming their agency. In *The Kite Runner*, the reader accompanies Amir back to Afghanistan where he is given the chance to reclaim his agency by rescuing Hassan's son, Sohrab. By doing this, and risking his life in the process, Amir is allowed a chance at redemption that also allows him to reclaim his agency. Understanding agency is important for developing intercultural competence, and as we have already concluded, agency is complex and shifting. Characters who use agency to make choices the reader might disagree with in vital to developing intercultural competence: "Literacy in the transformative curriculum is reconceptualized to include diverse voices and perspectives and is not limited to literacy in the Hirsch (1996) sense, that is, to the mastering of a list of facts constructed by mainstream authorities" (Banks, 2016, p. 190). It is thus important to further investigate how the characters reclaim and use their agency as the novels progress.

Amir's reclaiming of agency begins after he receives a phone call from his father's old friend, Rahim Khan. He requests that Amir come visit him in Pakistan, where he reveals that

he is dying. Rahim Khan's final request is that Amir saves Hassan's son, Sohrab. He informs Amir that Hassan and his wife were killed by the Taliban near the house they grew up in. He believes Sohrab resides in an orphanage near Kabul and wants Amir to travel to Afghanistan so Sohrab can be placed in an orphanage in Pakistan, which is managed by an American couple (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 202-5). While Amir wants to refuse, Rahim Khan reveals that Hassan is Amir's half-brother, effectively making Sohrab his nephew (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 205-6). This revelation is completely shocking to Amir but forces him to accept that he must do this last act of service to Hassan. He admits to himself that he owes Hassan this much.

In Kabul, they discover that Sohrab is no longer at the orphanage. The man in charge there reveals that once a month, a Taliban official comes in and purchases a child. While he mostly purchases girls, he sometimes purchases boys as well (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 235). The man running the orphanage admits that while he knows allowing this to happen is wrong, he has no other choice. If he refuses, the Taliban official takes ten children instead of one. So, he accepts the payment for one child so he can care for the other children in need (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 236-7). This is a gruesome image that provides a stark contrast to Amir's experiences up until this point. While Amir allowed the rape of Hassan, he believed this was an isolated incident. Upon his return to Afghanistan, he realizes that it is now much more common. The Afghanistan he left behind and the America that welcomed him are nothing like this image.

Amir can no longer recognize his homeland. Pallavi Thakur notes: "With rape being used as a weapon of war against males, boys became more vulnerable to sexual exploitation" (2020, pp. 1). Amir realizes that Afghanistan is more at war than it was when he left, by the Taliban leaving the country in ruins and its inhabitants traumatized. Children without parents, those without homes or families, are at special risk for sexual exploitation (Thakur, 2020, p. 2). As previously noted by Karmakar, women sometimes become symbols of the community's failure to protect and defend their homelands. What Hosseini tries to achieve through his allegory of Afghanistan's trauma is perhaps closely linked to this belief. The changing factor is that while Karmakar discusses women, Hosseini displays horrific acts against children. Sohrab, whom Amir realizes is a victim of sexual violence, becomes a representative of this trauma. Sohrab shares his parent's ethnic status. He is a Hazara at the

mercy of Pashtun Taliban soldiers. His agency is completely removed in this situation, and he cannot defend himself without risking his life. Like the women in *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sohrab is faced with a limited scope of agency. By playing into the role he has been given, he can stay alive. For instance, he has been given feminine qualities by Assef, as noted by Amir: "His head was shaved, his eyes darkened with mascara, and his cheeks glowed with an unnatural red. When he stopped in the middle of the room, the bells strapped around his ankles stopped jingling" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 257). Sohrab is wearing makeup on his face, which the reader has every reason to believe is a forced act by Assef. This is perhaps done to further humiliate him, as noted by Thakur: "Sohrab seems to be enveloped by humiliation and fear in such an abysmal condition. As a child, he is not only harmed physically but also psychologically" (2020, p. 7). Sohrab's status as an orphan in Afghanistan has left him vulnerable to sexual exploitation and possession. Amir realizes that if he can save them both, he can also be granted redemption.

This effectively brings Amir face to face with his greatest sin, namely the same person he let rape Hassan when they were only boys. Assef has become a solid definition of evil throughout *The Kite Runner*. He is not only a human being doing evil, he is literally portrayed as evil incarnated. Jefferess notes: "Assef is not simply the doer of evil, he is evil. Evil is embodied in his actions (Assef's rape of Hassan) or ideas (of ethnic supremacy), but is not reducible to these; it is, significantly, an irredeemable condition" (2009, p. 393). For Amir to then reclaim his agency, to receive his redemption, he must literally defeat evil itself. Hosseini places all the Western stereotypes of Afghans on Assef, a clear psychopath who revels in the torture and humiliation of others. Because Assef is clearly not in his right mind and a member of the Taliban, he becomes a parody of these stereotypes. This is perhaps a conscious effort by Hosseini, to avoid representing all Afghans in Assef's image. Assef is not only evil incarnated, he is also a representative of the evil that has caused trauma to Afghanistan throughout history.

To rescue them both from this evil, Amir sacrifices himself by allowing Assef to beat him to a pulp. Assef has every intention of killing Amir, and while the beating is brutal, Amir feels peace: "What was so funny was that, for the first time since the winter of 1975, I felt at peace. I laughed because I saw that, in some hidden nook in a corner of my mind, I'd even been looking forward to this" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 265). Amir accepts the beating he

thinks he deserves for not interfering when Hassan was raped by Assef. He realizes he is willing to risk his life for his redemption. O'Brien writes:

Though Amir understands this incident as securing his redemption, as noted, Hosseini has problematised the notion of Amir's liability and, by extension, that of Afghanistan. We are thus able to read this encounter more precisely as an excision of demons, Assef's defeat representing a rejection of those destructive forces for which he stands. (2018, p. 10).

This is an active choice by Amir, and by extension, Hosseini's active choice at bringing agency to Afghanistan. Neither Amir, Hosseini, or Afghanistan can be considered liable for the destructive force of the Taliban, or Afghanistan's turmoil. History is much too complex to make such a claim, and Hosseini attempts to provide some national relief through Amir's redemption. Amir's act of agency allows him to finally heal from the sin he has carried with him since he was a boy.

In the end, Amir decides that Sohrab will not be staying in Pakistan. He offers Sohrab to come back to America with Amir. While Sohrab is hesitant at first, he eventually agrees. It is perhaps not surprising, given the cultural and historical background of *The Kite Runner*, that Sohrab must come to America for healing. O'Brien highlights that the happy ending taking place "back home" in America is problematic. It signals that resolution is dependent on the West for realization, and by offering Sohrab a happy ending in his new Western home, Hosseini risks undermining his attempts at national healing by suggesting that healing is done best in America (O'Brien, 2018, p. 12). Through this final scene, the attempt at healing that Hosseini tries to provide Afghanistan seems futile and performative. It is thus important to be critical when reading about Hosseini's clear involvement in Amir's redemption, and what it is he is trying to present during this reclaiming of agency.

When Amir decides to bring Sohrab home, he is also forced to allow Soraya to know his story. This is one of Amir's most active displays of agency, and one that sends a message more focused on community. He has held on to his secret since 1975, never sharing it with anyone. He notes: "I told my wife everything. Everything. I had pictured this moment so many times, dreaded it, but as I spoke, I felt something lifting off my chest" (Hosseini, 2003/2013, p. 298). This relief that Amir feels is by letting someone share his burden with

him. By finally acknowledging to himself what he did wrong, and how he has made amends, Amir can finally begin to look forward. He reclaims his agency by telling Soraya about the incident in 1975. By sharing his burden with his family, which is his community, Amir can heal and accept his past and future. The same sentiment is reflected in *On Black Sisters' Street*.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women start to reclaim their agency after they are informed of Sisi's death. They confide in each other by sharing their stories and real names. They allow their constructed identities to be replaced by their real identities in front of each other. Efe is the one who opens up first: "She does not know why she feels the urgency to tell her story, but she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done before. Sisi's death has re-enforced what she already knew: that the women are all that she has" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 40-1). Sisi's death shows the other women that they are expendable, that no one in Belgium will care if they disappear or die. The only people they have are each other. De Mul notes: "Through the intimacies of storytelling, the women discover their communal bond and shared predicament, which gradually ignites a sense of home. It is the act of storytelling that constitutes the women's community in the house" (2014, p. 23). The women begin to feel a sense of community when opening up to each other, which makes their experience in Belgium less lonely. While they have vastly different backgrounds, they can find belonging in each other.

Joyce is perhaps the one who benefits the most from finally confiding in the other women. Her precarity is completely different from Ama, Sisi, and Efe. She is the only one who did not make an active choice when deciding to migrate to Belgium. The choice was made for her. As the reader will come to realize, Joyce is not Nigerian either. She is Sudanese and is the only one who has experienced the horrors of war. Reinares writes:

Alek, whom Dele renames "Joyce," is the last one to unravel her traumatic past. Unlike the other two, she is a Sudanese refugee who survived the ethnic cleansing wars in South Sudan, a massacre notoriously ignored by the West. Alek endured unspeakable brutality, gang raped by a Janjaweed militia that also raped her mother and killed her whole family. (2019, p. 64)



As mentioned by Reinares, Joyce's sexual assault is violent and traumatic. She is raped by several men before she is left amongst her dead family members to process everything that happens (Unigwe, 2009, p. 190-2). She manages to stagger her way to a refugee camp alongside other Sudanese men and women who have also lost everything. Here, she discovers that her story is one amongst many: "*The woman did not blink as she listened to my story. She did not wince when Alek told of how she heard the shots that killed her parents. Of how the soldiers took turns raping her. [...]. The woman's reaction convinced her that the camp was a collection of sad stories*" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 194). This refugee camp is perhaps another way for Unigwe to showcase that there are no saviors in the world. The woman who listens to Joyce's story has become so desensitized that she barely bats an eye. However, this situation is earthshattering for Joyce. She has never experienced something so gruesome. At this moment, she realized that she is just one story among many. In this refugee camp, Joyce meets a Nigerian soldier who helps her heal. His name is Polycarp, and when he is deployed back in Nigeria seven months later, he takes Joyce with him.

What Joyce imagines to be a new start turns out to be the beginning of new heartbreak. Polycarp refuses to introduce Joyce to his parents, which makes her suspicious. She notes: "She asked Polycarp when she could meet his family, she was looking forward to it. She anticipated hours of gossip with his mother, to befriending the woman who had given birth to the one person alive she loved" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 219). As it turns out, Polycarp has his own reasons for not introducing Joyce to his family. They are incredibly xenophobic, and they refuse Polycarp to marry Joyce (Ligaga, 2019, p. 82). This is what instigates Joyce's meeting with Dele. It is Polycarp who sets up the meeting, feeling responsible for providing Joyce with opportunities now that he has broken her heart. However, Joyce is completely passive during her meeting with Dele. She is heartbroken over Polycarp's choice, and cannot imagine life becoming any worse than it is at that moment. She admits: "The soldiers that raped her that night in Daru had taken her strength, and Polycarp's betrayal had left her unwilling to seek it back" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 231). This scene is an example of how Unigwe allows the female characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* to feel defeated. They are allowed to feel overwhelmed by their circumstances and have moments where they wish to give up. They do not need to be strong all the time to display their agency. For Joyce, who believes she is going to Belgium to be a nanny, her new life is a shock. However, Polycarp has agreed to be her benefactor, and he pays her debts for her. Joyce is thus able to save more money than the

other women, and she is treated differently by those in charge of the girls (Unigwe, 2009, p. 235). However, she still cannot find peace in Belgium. Knowing that she has nothing left, and no one to care for her leaves her unable to reclaim her agency.

It is through sharing their stories with each other that Joyce realizes that she must take charge of her own life. Ama adamantly tells her: “You might not have asked for this, but this is what you got. That’s life. We don’t always get what we bloody order. Forget Polycarp. Be the best worker that you can be, make your money and do whatever else you want to do” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 241-2). The women have a very limited space to negotiate their agency. They cannot escape, or they will be murdered like Sisi. They cannot travel home, as their passports are confiscated until their debts are paid. They cannot contact the authorities because they have no legal ties to Belgium. They would be putting themselves at risk by attempting something like that. What they can control is how they chose to respond to the situations that are thrown at them. They can choose to actively engage and display agency, despite how difficult it can be. After Ama tells Joyce this, she thinks to herself: “Later when she thinks of this conversation with Ama and Efe, she will think of it as a release from something she had not know was holding her hostage” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 242). What was holding Joyce hostage was perhaps her own unwillingness to accept the situation she was in. As soon as she realizes that she still has agency despite her status as an illegal border-crosser in Belgium, she feels released. This will eventually allow Joyce to pursue her dreams, much like Ama and Efe who also pay off their debts.

At the end of *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Unigwe shows the reader that the women are in fact granted their freedom after paying off their debts. This is the final moment of Ama, Efe and Joyce reclaiming their agency. Reinares writes: “Unigwe does go to great lengths to resist the disempowering tropes many anti-trafficking advocates repeat ad nauseam, to represent instead most of her trafficked characters as in control of their destinies” (2019, p. 65). The women are allowed to have lives after their experience in Belgium. Joyce returns to Nigeria to open up a school in Yaba, having saved a large sum of her money. She is able to hire teachers, most of whom are women, and names the school in Sisi’s honor: Sisi’s International Primary and Secondary School (Unigwe, 2009, p. 279). Joyce is showing tribute to Sisi through this act, which also allows Sisi’s spirit to live on. She is remembered through Joyce’s gesture, which shows the impact Sisi had on Joyce in Nigeria. Sisi will not be forgotten as long as her

legacy lives on. This is an important display of the agency and solidarity the women form after sharing their stories with one another.

Ama opens up a boutique, becoming a shop owner who is able to hire Mama Eko to be the shop's manager. Mama Eko took Ama in after Brother Cyrus kicked her out, and Ama views her almost as a mother. Unigwe writes: "Mama Eko would tell her [Ama] she always knew she would make it. They would never talk about Ama's years in Europe" (2009, p. 279). While it is not stated explicitly, this citation shows that Ama most likely returned to Lagos after her debt was paid off. This also plays into an interesting concept surrounding the knowledge the women's extended family have of the work they are doing in Europe. For instance, Sisi never tells her family that she is a sex worker. She comes up with an elaborate ruse, and her family pretends to believe her. However, as Sisi notes: "Her parents always said the right things. Reminding her to pray. Thanking her for the presents she sometimes sent them. But there was an underlying flatness to their voice that filled her with such anguish that she could not sleep when she knocked off work" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 261). While Sisi's parents never confront her about her work, the flatness in their voice is alluding to the fact that they know exactly what Sisi is doing to earn money. This is a complex situation where the families probably know what the women are doing, but for various reasons do not speak out against it. For Sisi's parents, she is caring for them the only way she is able to, and they are perhaps grateful for her sacrifice. They allow the women to display their agency without shaming them, and by acting like they do not know the truth.

The one who perhaps makes the hardest choice to sympathize with is Efe. Unlike Ama or Joyce, she stays in Belgium after her debt is paid off. Efe becomes a madam herself, purchasing girls to put in the same situation she found herself in years before (Unigwe, 2009, p. 278). Efe uses her insight as a former sex worker to make the decisions of what girls to purchase and how to secure her business:

Efe would buy numbers five and seven. Number five because she smiled easily. Number seven because she looked docile and eager to please, the sort of girl who was grateful for little. Like Madam, Efe would have some police officers on her payroll to ensure the security of her girls and business. (Unigwe, 2009, p. 279)

Efe's decision is perhaps hardest to relate to, as the reader has witnessed the hardships and struggles of all the women during their time in Belgium. After Sisi's death, it seems almost unimaginable that any of the girls would want to further participate in this exploitive business. This is Unigwe's way of showcasing the different experiences and choices that accompany each woman. There is no right or wrong answer when it comes to choice, only different perspectives and possibilities. Unlike many of the other women, Efe has grown up to view female bodies as a form of currency from she was very young. Her experience with Titus has taught her that female sexuality is tradable, and something that provides profit. Sex has always been a survival technique for Efe, a way for her to acquire things she needs and wants. Unigwe is extremely realistic in this portrayal of the women. While she could have provided a happy, socially acceptable ending for them all, she chooses to display the various routes that exist within such a limited field of agency. While Efe's decision can be considered morally corrupt, Unigwe makes it clear that we are in no position to judge her. This is Efe's reality, and after her experiences, who can expect her to make a different choice? Instead of providing each character with a "pleasing" ending, Unigwe showcases that agency continues to be complex and fluid up until the very end of the novel.

Understanding agency as something fluid also means understanding agency as something that can be reclaimed. It is deeply personal, and not always easy to navigate. While Amir lives a privileged and fulfilled life in America, his agency is affected by his inability to forgive himself and own his previous mistakes. His return to Afghanistan allows this to happen. Ama, Sisi, Efe and Joyce show that agency is present even in the most limiting circumstances. The fact that Unigwe allows the women their freedom at the end of the novel is perhaps too optimistic, but it allows for an important reclaiming of agency. The women pay their debts and are allowed to pursue the dreams that sent them to Belgium in the first place. Unigwe refuses to present agency as something dooming if one chooses "wrongly". Both Hosseini and Unigwe showcases characters who make morally questionable choices. Amir allows the rape of his friend, and Efe decides to continue the cycle of exploitation in Belgium (Reinares, 2019, p. 65). As noted by Martha Nussbaum, being able to sympathize with the characters of a novel is not always an easy process: "Again, the reader's learning involves both sameness and difference. [...]. They also notice a difference in the inner world, seeing the delicate interplay between common human goals and the foreignness that can be created by circumstances" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 114-7). The narrative imagination is not developed so

that the readers can cast judgment on the characters, but rather so that they can understand differences in precarity and circumstance. This highlights why teaching literature that challenges our perception, worldview, and assumptions is crucial. It is also why it is important to include controversial subjects in the classroom, despite how daunting it can be.

### **3.5 Working with controversial subjects in the classroom**

As the final part of this analysis, this thesis will touch on what might be the biggest cause for hesitation when implementing these novels in the classroom, which is related to working with controversial subjects in the classroom. Both *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street* deal with many themes that might be triggering, upsetting, uncomfortable and difficult to teach. These themes include sexual assault, prostitution, murder, and war. During many scenes in the book, these themes are depicted in close detail. While literature often will require the reader to read between the lines, both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *The Kite Runner* portray controversial themes in close detail. The reader does not have to wonder whether Sisi, Ama, Efe or Joyce have experienced sexual assault and violence. Unigwe confirms this in her writing. Likewise, Hosseini does not leave it up to discussion whether Hassan and later Sohrab have been subjected to these topics as well. We know this based on the descriptive scenes of the incidents. Many of these scenes, and scenes concerning the other controversial topics, are uncomfortable and possibly difficult to read. They concern serious topics that require knowledge of the students, the classroom environment, and the teacher's own relation to students. It is complicated because it requires both the teacher and students to be open and able to discuss topics that many might find hard to articulate out loud. While reading about these subjects can be uncomfortable, it can be even more uncomfortable to talk about it. However, this is also the reason why it is crucial that these subjects are included as part of the classroom discussion.

In 1999, Megan Boler published her book *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. In this book she introduced the term "pedagogy of discomfort". This term is best explained as the need for inquiry into our own beliefs and assumptions, by using pedagogy as a tool for self-reflection and critical thinking (Boler, 1999, p. 176). This is a process that does not come

without risk, as both the educator and students will be at risk of facing feelings of anger, fear, and discomfort. However, the pedagogy of discomfort is important to avoid passive empathy: “Self-reflection, like passive empathy, runs the risk of reducing historical complexities to an overly tidy package that ignores our mutual responsibility to one another” (Boler, 1999, p. 177). What Boler highlights here is that empathy should never be reduced to simply “feeling” the experiences of others. By reading *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the goal is not for the students to say, “I know exactly how it feels to be an illegal immigrant”. This would reduce the meaning of reading these novels to simply being able to relate to the characters. Boler separates reading into confessional and testimonial reading. The former term involves producing passive empathy, while the latter term involves a critical examination of ourselves, our beliefs and our own worldview (Boler, 1999, p. 177-8). Testimonial reading is what encourages social action, examination and involvement. When Nussbaum discussed the narrative imagination, she also highlights this as extremely important: “Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest – with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 107-8). Essentially, while developing the narrative imagination, we must also aim to develop intercultural competence. This will allow students to see the link between reading literature, challenging their own perceptions, and identifying existing prejudice from the way we view the world. While focusing on developing empathy is important, we cannot limit intercultural competence to this achievement alone.

Working with controversial subjects in the classroom is highlighted as important to aid in prejudice reduction and intercultural competence. While it is difficult to point at one technique for reducing prejudice, as there are several theories of why and how prejudice is formed, a common nominator is culture. Banks writes: “Most of the explanations of the origins of prejudice today focus on cultural and structural factors. An individual may also develop prejudices based not on personality needs but on the way *society is structured*. Individual behavior takes place within a social, political, and cultural context” (2016, p. 278). This is where focusing and teaching intercultural competence becomes important. By investigating different cultures, ways of life, opportunities and worldviews, one becomes better adapt at critically examining one’s own privilege and prejudice. However, prejudice is a difficult subject to discuss. By opening up for discussion, one is also creating an

environment where prejudice can be shared amongst the students, which can become counterproductive and cause a negative response from both students and the teacher.

In 2015, the Council of Europe and the European Union put together a professional developmental pack for teachers that provides both guidelines and activities that can be implemented in the classroom to safely teach about controversial issues. In this developmental pack, the Council of Europe writes: “Learning how to engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one’s own and to respect them is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and fostering a culture of human rights” (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 7). Norway, a member of the Council of Europe, also mirrors this statement in LK20: “School shall promote democratic values and attitudes that can counteract prejudice and discrimination. Pupils shall learn in school to respect the fact that people are different and learn to solve conflicts peacefully” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019a, p. 9). A focus on discussion and prejudice reduction is central to Norway’s democratic values. Integrating literature such as *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* is an example of how the educational institution can showcase different perspectives through literature. By teaching literature in its cultural and historical context, it also showcases how different cultures, attitudes, and lives can intersect and influence different opportunities and choices. This ties back to the previous quotation from The Council of Europe, where they highlight the importance of respecting differences to foster a culture of human rights.

As this thesis has touched on previously, introducing a novel in the classroom without any context might heavily impact the quality of learning that literature in the classroom has the potential to provide. This argument is also valid for inviting discussion of controversial subjects. Simply opening for discussion without any context is potentially dangerous and harmful for the students. They might end up uttering hurtful statements that negatively impact the classroom environment. The students must understand the importance and sensitivity of discussing these topics. The importance of keeping an open mind and being respectful of others should be stressed before starting any discussion. However, it is also important that students do not feel as though they cannot share their thoughts. An inclusive environment where everyone can share their thoughts is important. Banks writes: “Personality characteristics, the social structure of institutions, the national culture, and group identity and

categorization influence the degree to which individuals are prejudiced and the extent to which they act on their prejudice, that is, *discriminate*” (2016, p. 281). It is therefore important that the teachers are familiar with their students, and that there are good relations between the individuals in the classroom. The quote by Banks also shows that prejudice is influenced by several factors, and there might be a large variety of existing prejudice between students in one classroom. Introducing border-crossing narratives in the Norwegian EFL classroom is not a quick fix that will erase all prejudice that students might harbor. Regardless, there is no denying that teaching controversial subjects is beneficial for both students and teachers. It is important that hesitation and fear are not allowed to dictate the subjects that are discussed in the classroom, and that we prepare our students to engage with the world by becoming familiar with intercultural competence, discussion, and opposing viewpoints.



## 4 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate how border-crossing narratives could be implemented in the Norwegian EFL classroom to promote intercultural competence through an understanding of agency and choice. My hypothesis was that literature enables the reader the unique ability to live through experiences they would not be subjected to in their lives otherwise. This was then supported and highlighted by Martha Nussbaum, who calls this *the narrative imagination*. The particular reason this thesis chose to focus on border-crossing narratives was that it is extremely important to showcase different cultures, ways of life and opinions when trying to promote intercultural competence. In other words, simply reading “any kind” of literature will not achieve intercultural competence. As it is presented by James A. Banks, intercultural competence must be a goal of the educational institution. It should encourage critical thinking, prejudice reduction and self-reflection (Banks, 2020, pp. 129). By these standard, the literature selected for the classroom should be thought-provoking, unfamiliar and challenging to read.

In Banks’ terms, this is the transformative curriculum that enables students to view the human experiences beyond what is familiar to them, and to consider various perspectives in their construction of a different human experience (2016, pp. 190). By encouraging students to think about different cultures and historical context, they are also confronted with their own privilege and position in the world. This is not only highlighted by Banks, but also in LK20. LK20 is the renewed, Norwegian curriculum, where the importance of globalization and intercultural competence is highlighted in various subject curriculums. What is most important is to enable students to consider how different opportunities allow agency, and how different this is for everyone. Arguing that literature is central for developing intercultural competence, and the ability to consider different cultures in the world, is something Martha Nussbaum is very passionate about. Nussbaum claims that literature is able to cultivate powers of the imagination, which will make students compassionate and empathetic towards people and situations they do not have intimate knowledge of (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 105). As highlighted previously, this literature should be challenging and potentially uncomfortable to read.

As this thesis has argued, border-crossing narratives provides insight into different cultures, agency, and ways of life. In addition to this, no border-crossing narrative is the same. There is a vast difference between the context, characters, and precarity that is found between Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. The comparative analysis of this thesis does not aim to highlight the similarities between the two novels, but rather how their differences can be used to showcase a broader spectrum of discussion in the classroom. The fact is that while these two novels are both border-crossing narratives, they display completely different characters and precarity. *On Black Sisters' Street* is a narrative focused on the limited agency of Nigerian sex workers, and how they should navigate this as illegal border-crossers in Belgium. *The Kite Runner* is a proclaimed "universal" story focused on human redemption and is heavily based on the historical context of Afghanistan.

In arguing in favor of border-crossing narratives to support intercultural competence, this thesis also highlights the importance of integrating cultural and historical backdrops to introduce alongside each novel. The reason for this is that while learning to analyze literature is extremely important, it is equally important that the students have the knowledge and understanding of the situations that are depicted. Can students fully grasp the need to migrate in *On Black Sisters' Street* without understanding the cultural context of African migration? Can the students understand Amir and Baba's migration without being familiar with the historical context of Afghanistan? These questions are debatable, but this thesis argues that intercultural competence is supported by knowledge of both cultures and history. If students are familiar with the framework the novels are based upon, they become better adept at understanding the setting and agency that the characters showcase throughout the novel.

Alongside knowledge of history and culture, Banks argues that students should familiarize themselves with the author's purpose for writing and conveying their stories (2016, pp. 190). A central aspect of this thesis is whether the authors are able to achieve what they claim to in their own words. For both Hosseini and Unigwe, this is providing a voice to those marginalized by the dominant culture. An interesting point of discussion is thus the critique and praise directed towards the authors' attempts at achieving these claims. For instance, Hosseini is critiqued for providing a voice to Afghans by subjecting them to Western standards of what is "acceptable" to read about. Because of the tense relationship between the US and Afghanistan, any critique Afghans might have of Hosseini's

representation is thus labeled as intolerant and dismissed by the West. This is important to note, as much of Hosseini's writing refuses to critique US involvement in Afghanistan's affairs. It is then also vital that this does not become a critique of the author, but rather an acknowledgment of the limitations this novel contains. On the other hand, Unigwe is praised for her critique of Belgium's treatment of illegal immigrants. While Unigwe does not showcase one country as better or worse than the other, she protests the portrayal of Europe as a golden land of opportunity. Unigwe does not appear to favor one viewpoint over another. Instead, she chooses to remain loyal to the people she represents through her writing, and her critique appears balanced and nuanced.

As Unigwe and Hosseini chooses such different approaches to showcasing their stories through their writing, many discussions surrounding topics such as gender, family, belonging, and identity emerge. Investigating different categories such as these is beneficial when developing intercultural competence as they allow the reader insight into situations of different precarity. Banks argues that the transformative curriculum is required to showcase "diverse ethnic, gender, and social-class perspectives" (2016, pp. 191) so that it remains challenging and different from what students might already be familiar with. This is also supported by Nussbaum, who claims that difference in opinion and choice is what enables us to fully understand another person's circumstances (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 114-7). However, reading border-crossing literature does not only provide insight into the topics mentioned above. It also provides insight into topics that can be extremely uncomfortable and challenging to read, such as sexual assault and violence, murder, war, and prostitution. These subjects are widely acknowledged as being controversial, as they constitute a widespread discussion each time they are brought up in dominant media or in various artforms such as literature and film.

While teaching controversial subjects can be daunting, it is crucial for developing intercultural competence. Agency is displayed through complex, fluid, and limited opportunities. These situations are often uncomfortable, but important to teach. Border-crossing narratives will often include many controversial subjects. Their purpose is to showcase both the hardships and opportunities of migration, and it is necessary for students to know the implications this carries with it. Migration is sometimes difficult, exploitive, and traumatizing. The migratory subjects who wait for passage are completely exposed when

crossing borders. In that moment, they are part of a process that decides whether or not they are included or excluded from their destination country. Based on this decision, the migratory subject might enter as a legal or an illegal migrant. This showcases a complete difference in human rights, precarity and safety. This is also why it is crucial to include border-crossing narratives that might supplement each other so that this difference is highlighted. With the novels from this thesis, *The Kite Runner* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, this is achieved through contrasting border-crossing experiences.

While teaching controversial subjects is difficult, a close relation to the students and control over the subject material is crucial for the teacher. In the end, the teacher must decide whether the students can discuss such subjects in a constructive, respectful way. However, it is important to acknowledge that controversial subjects are highlighted as important and encouraged subjects to integrate into the classroom. The Council of Europe considers controversial subjects to be a gateway to intercultural competence by reducing prejudice and discrimination in the classroom. Being open about controversial subjects is also important when we consider what our students are subjected to in popular media. They engage with controversial subjects in their spare time constantly, and so engaging in discussion within a safe framework such as the classroom can be beneficial in processing different thoughts and opinions.

In the end, I feel it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of this thesis. The question of literature's role in the classroom, and especially how teachers can promote intercultural competence is long and complex. It is also a question that has no answer. While this thesis argues that border-crossing literature has a unique and underutilized role to play in the classroom, it is still my subjective opinion. I hope that border-crossing literature can be included as part of the transformative curriculum, and teach about intercultural competence through the narrative imagination. This thesis emerged from my own questions surrounding how literature should be incorporated and taught in the classroom. However, it is by no means a finished statement at the end of a long question. This thesis offers no final answer, and certainly does not claim to have figured out how intercultural competence can be achieved in the classroom. Rather, this thesis hopes to offer new insight into an ongoing debate, and hopefully enable the discussion to reach new, or perhaps different, ideas surrounding border-crossing literature and intercultural competence.



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