



## Refugee Crisis and Hospitality in Literary Representation

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzed Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* through migration and refugee theories to explore displacement, identity, and belonging. The purpose was to examine how the novel portrays forced and voluntary migration about exile, and cultural hybridity. The method used was literary analysis informed by the works of Sorenson, Nail, Balibar, and Derrida. The results showed that the protagonist Lilly and other migrant figures experience uprootedness, exclusion, and vulnerability, but also create new forms of solidarity and resilience. This happened because systems of power seek to erase migrant histories while communities resist through hospitality and cultural continuity. The impact of this research is its contribution to refugee and migration studies by highlighting the importance of unconditional hospitality and community service as ethical responses to displacement in a global context.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of refugee crisis and hospitality lies at the core of contemporary debates on migration and identity (Effiong & Aya, 2022; Kyriakidou, 2021; Junuzi, 2019; Rozakou, 2012; Sajjad, 2018; Almustafa, 2022; Lee & Nerghes, 2018; Ivanov & Stavrinoudis, 2018; Sidhu & Rossi-Sackey, 2022; Almustafa, 2022; Aliu & Aliu, 2022; Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2024; Mahadevan, 2024). Refugees are displaced by war, famine, and political instability, often forced to navigate systems that exclude them from belonging while simultaneously relying on the hospitality of host communities. Literature becomes a medium to portray these struggles, where narratives of exile and return reveal the precarious status of individuals caught between home and foreign lands. In this context, Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* dramatizes the intersections of crisis and hospitality through the story of Lilly, a white Muslim woman displaced across continents, whose experience reflects the complexities of being both an insider and outsider in multiple cultural and political settings (see Gibb in 2006 regarding "Sweetness in the Belly").

Scholars have long examined refugee issues from multiple perspectives. Sorenson highlights that in the Horn of Africa, there were more than two million refugees, most of them Ethiopian, displaced by war and famine, while Ethiopia itself became an asylum for thousands fleeing from Sudan and Somalia (Sorenson, 1991; Hammond, 2014; Kibreab, 1996; Maulinardi *et al.*, 2022; Bamfo, 2010). Migration has also been theorized in broader terms: Nail proposes the "figure of the migrant" as a conceptual lens to understand human movement beyond territorial stasis, while other researchers develop the idea of the "citizen subject" to reveal the tensions between sovereignty and subjection (see Nail in 2015 regarding "The figure of the migrant"; see Balibar in 2016 regarding "Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology"). Some researchers extend these concerns to ethics and politics, emphasizing unconditional hospitality toward the stranger as a universal responsibility, while some researchers point out the paradox of human rights and their denial to non-citizens (see Derrida in 2001 regarding "On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness" in page 1-24; see Arendt's book in 1976 regarding "The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism" in page 267-302). These critical interventions demonstrate how displacement is not only a personal tragedy but also a philosophical and political problem.

Based on previous studies regarding novel analysis (Warren, 2025a; Warren, 2025b; Warren 2025c; Adeoye, 2023), the purpose of this paper is to analyze *Sweetness in the Belly* through the lens of migration and refugee theory to examine how the novel portrays forced and voluntary migration, exile, and the struggle for belonging. The novelty of the study lies in integrating literary analysis with the concepts of the migrant figure, citizen subject, and unconditional hospitality, showing how literature can both critique exclusionary state policies and foreground community service as a form of ethical resistance. By situating the novel within this theoretical framework, the research underscores the significance of literature as a space to imagine more inclusive responses to refugee crises.

## 2. METHODS

**Table 1** presents the main migrant figures in *Sweetness in the Belly* and the reasons for their displacement, which serve as the central material for literary analysis. The novel is approached as a narrative text where each character embodies different aspects of migration, exile, and identity, providing a basis for theoretical interpretation.

The study employed a qualitative literary analysis focusing on the intersection of migration theory and narrative representation. Detailed information regarding this method is reported elsewhere (Susilawati *et al.*, 2025). The primary text is Camilla Gibb’s *Sweetness in the Belly*, which is examined through close reading to trace themes of forced migration, exile, and hospitality (see Gibb in 2006 regarding “Sweetness in the Belly”). The analysis considers how the novel constructs the lived experiences of refugees and migrants through characters such as Lilly, Amina, Munir, and Aziz, and how their stories mirror real-world displacements caused by war, famine, and political upheaval (Sorenson, 1991).

**Table 1.** Migrant figures and reasons for displacement in *sweetness in the belly*.

Character	Reason for Migration	Notes on Experience
Lilly	Displaced by racial exclusion and political upheaval in Ethiopia	English-born, raised in Morocco, later moved to Ethiopia, forced to leave after the 1974 revolution, became a refugee in London
Aziz	Migration for education and professional practice	Sudanese doctor, separated from Lilly due to political turmoil in Ethiopia
Amina	Migration due to poverty and survival	An Ethiopian refugee in London, who endured violence in a Kenyan refugee camp, raises a child born from trauma.
Munir	Migration caused by political suppression	Represents statelessness and silenced history under an authoritarian regime
Yusuf	Arrested from a refugee camp, a victim of state violence	Amina’s husband disappeared due to persecution
Robin Gupta	Migration by choice	A Bengali doctor in London represents a voluntary movement distinct from forced exile.

The theoretical framework combines multiple perspectives. Sorenson provides historical insights into Ethiopian refugees and displacement in the Horn of Africa (Sorenson, 1991). Nail’s notion of the “figure of the migrant” conceptualizes mobility as a universal condition of modern existence (see Nail in 2015 regarding “The figure of the migrant”). The theory of the “citizen subject” interrogates the contradictions between sovereignty and subjection (see Balibar in 2016, regarding “Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology”). Arendt, in her book, critiques the limits of human rights when applied to stateless individuals (see Arendt’s book in 1976 regarding “The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism” in pages 267-302). Some researchers emphasize unconditional hospitality as an ethical response to strangers and refugees (see Derrida in 2001 regarding “On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness”). These frameworks collectively guided the interpretation of the novel’s characters and events.

In conducting this analysis, attention was paid to thematic patterns such as belonging, exclusion, cultural hybridity, and resilience. By integrating philosophical discourse with literary reading, the method ensured that both textual detail and theoretical abstraction were balanced. This approach not only interprets the narrative of *Sweetness in the Belly* but also situates it within broader debates on migration, refugee crises, and community service as a form of ethical responsibility.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Seed of Cultural Clash

The novel *Sweetness in the Belly* portrays the complexities of cultural identity and displacement through the protagonist Lilly, whose life unfolds across shifting geographies and

historical upheavals. From the outset, the text illustrates how migration disrupts stable notions of belonging, generating a condition of in-betweenness that becomes central to Lilly's existence. Her childhood in Morocco under the guidance of a Sufi imam, followed by her relocation to Ethiopia and later London, reflects the multiple layers of uprootedness that define the refugee experience. Although born in England, Lilly identifies more strongly with African and Islamic traditions than with her birthplace. This displacement challenges racial determinism, suggesting that identity is not fixed by bloodline or nationality but shaped by lived experiences, cultural encounters, and social exclusions (see Gibb in 2006 regarding "Sweetness in the belly").

Lilly's situation is further complicated by the contrast with her parents' nomadic lifestyle. Alice and Philip consciously reject roots, embracing a voluntary mobility that echoes the adventurism of colonial travelers. Their daughter, however, inherits a different trajectory: rather than traveling by choice, Lilly is pushed into displacements by political and social forces beyond her control. Her early years (spent moving from Yugoslavia to Ukraine, Corsica, and Sicily) instill no sense of home or stability, leaving her without a place to return to in moments of crisis. While her parents considered movement liberating, Lilly's narrative reveals it as both a wound and a source of resilience. This juxtaposition underscores Thomas Nail's argument that migration cannot be reduced to a single category but embodies multiple modalities, from voluntary to forced, and from economic to existential (see Nail in 2015 regarding "The figure of the migrant").

The cultural clash in Lilly's identity becomes especially pronounced when she is situated within different communities. In Harar, Ethiopia, she is marked as *farenji*, a stranger, despite her embrace of Islamic practices and fluency in local customs. In London, her whiteness does not protect her from marginalization, as she is derogatorily called a "white fu'in Paki" for her Muslim faith and accent. This dual rejection demonstrates how racial and cultural categories intersect to produce paradoxical forms of exclusion. Lilly is simultaneously too foreign to be African and too culturally "other" to be fully accepted as English. Such contradictions reveal what literature terms the tension between sovereignty and subjection, where individuals are defined not only by their origins but also by the power relations that determine who belongs and who is cast out (see Balibar In 2016, regarding "Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology").

An important narrative moment that captures this in-betweenness occurs in the opening chapter, where Lilly assists Amina, an Ethiopian refugee, in giving birth on the pavement outside Lambeth Hospital. The scene places her physically and symbolically alongside other African women, blurring the lines between native and foreign. The newborn's cry signals not only a new life but also the shared condition of displacement among the women. Yet, as Lilly herself reflects, she does not share the history of Lambeth Hospital or its legacy of segregating the sick and marginalized. This absence highlights her position as both participant and outsider in the refugee community. In this sense, Gibb dramatizes the paradox of solidarity: while shared suffering creates bonds, differences in origin and perception remain sources of tension (see Gibb in 2006 regarding "Sweetness in the belly").

The concept of cultural clash is further reinforced through Lilly's encounter with Dr. Robin Gupta, a Bengali physician in London. When Robin compares his separation from family members to Lilly's exile, she internally rejects the parallel. Robin's family may be scattered, but they remain connected through choice and knowledge of each other's whereabouts. Lilly, in contrast, is rootless, with no home to return to and no familial bonds to rely upon. This distinction emphasizes Nail's notion that while all individuals may experience mobility in some

form, the migrant condition is uniquely marked by loss, vulnerability, and exclusion from the history of any particular state (see Nail in 2015 regarding “The figure of the migrant”).

In addition to these narrative events, *Sweetness in the Belly* illustrates how displacement can disrupt conventional understandings of race and identity. Lilly, though white, experiences marginalization typically reserved for racialized migrants. Her embodiment of both privilege and vulnerability complicates simplistic binaries of colonizer and colonized, revealing instead how race operates relationally in specific contexts. The novel resists the trope of the Western woman “going native,” portraying instead a protagonist whose belonging is fractured and contested. This challenges assumptions that racial categories are immutable, underscoring the constructed nature of identity under conditions of migration.

Hospitality, as a counterpoint to exclusion, surfaces intermittently in Lilly’s journey. Her relationship with the Great Abdal, who becomes her spiritual teacher, and with Muhammad Bruce, who provides guardianship, represent moments where hospitality fills the void left by her parents’ deaths. These relationships illustrate the claim that hospitality involves both spiritual and material dimensions, where guidance and care are offered without complete assimilation into the host’s identity (see Derrida in 2001 regarding “On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness” in pages 1-24). At the same time, they reveal the limits of hospitality, as Lilly remains marked as an outsider despite her devotion and loyalty to Harari culture.

The seed of cultural clash thus emerges not only from external rejection but also from Lilly’s internal negotiations of selfhood. Her attempts to reconcile multiple affiliations (English, Muslim, African, refugee) produce what Homi Bhabha describes as a “third space,” where hybridity becomes a mode of survival. Although not explicitly referenced by Gibb, this theoretical lens illuminates the novel’s portrayal of identity as contingent, relational, and historically situated (see Gibb in 2006 regarding “Sweetness in the belly”). In Lilly’s story, hybridity is not celebrated as liberation but endured as necessity, reflecting the precariousness of life in displacement.

The consequences of this cultural clash extend beyond Lilly to encompass other migrants in the narrative. Amina, Aziz, Munir, and Yusuf embody different trajectories of exile, each shaped by particular political and social pressures. Their experiences reveal the multifaceted nature of migration, resisting any homogenizing label of “refugee.” To clarify these differences, **Table 2** summarizes the main migrant characters and the forces that drive their movements, highlighting how each contributes to the broader depiction of the refugee crisis in the novel.

Through these characters, the novel demonstrates that migration is not only about physical relocation but also about negotiating belonging, identity, and survival under conditions of vulnerability. Each figure illustrates how systemic forces (poverty, political repression, racial exclusion, or voluntary mobility) produce distinct yet interconnected forms of exile. In this way, the narrative foregrounds the diversity of migrant experiences while also underscoring their shared struggle against erasure by dominant powers.

**Table 2.** Migrant characters and forms of displacement in *sweetness in the belly*.

Character	Form of Displacement	Cause	Notes on Experience
Lilly	Multiple forced displacements (England → Morocco → Ethiopia → London)	Death of parents, racial exclusion, and political upheaval in Ethiopia	White, English-born, becomes Muslim; seen as <i>farenji</i> in Harar and as foreign in London; struggles with belonging

Amina	Forced migration and exile	Poverty, famine, and violence in a refugee camp	An Ethiopian refugee in London survives sexual violence; raises a child born in exile.
Aziz	Exile and professional displacement	Political upheaval in Ethiopia	Sudanese doctor; separated from Lilly due to the revolution and repression of Sufis
Munir	Statelessness and political displacement	State suppression, authoritarian regime	Represents silenced histories of political victims

**Table 2 (continue).** Migrant characters and forms of displacement in *Sweetness in the Belly*.

Character	Form of Displacement	Cause	Notes on Experience
Yusuf	Arrest and disappearance in a refugee camp	Authoritarian violence	Amina's husband, forcibly taken, presumed killed; family destroyed
Robin Gupta	Voluntary migration	Educational and professional choice	A Bengali doctor in London illustrates the contrast between voluntary movement and forced exile.

### 3.2. Problems Faced by Migrants

The problems faced by migrants in *Sweetness in the Belly* extend beyond the immediate act of displacement to encompass structural violence, cultural marginalization, and the denial of rights. Migration in the novel is not a singular event but a continuous process of negotiation with hostile environments, oppressive states, and fractured communities. The experiences of Lilly, Amina, Aziz, and Munir reveal how refugees are positioned as outsiders within multiple contexts, subjected to overlapping forms of exclusion. This reflects Sorenson's observation that the Horn of Africa produced massive flows of refugees due to war, famine, and political upheaval, generating crises of belonging across the region (Sorenson, 1991).

At the center of these problems is the loss of historical recognition. Migrants, Nail argues, are often excluded from the histories of the states they inhabit, their movements erased or rendered invisible (see Nail in 2015 regarding "The figure of the migrant"). This erasure is dramatized in the novel through characters such as Munir, whose story remains fragmented and silenced by political suppression. His displacement is not recorded in state histories but is preserved only through oral memory and personal testimony. Similarly, Yusuf's arrest and disappearance from a refugee camp exemplify how authoritarian states obliterate migrant lives without accountability. The disappearance not only devastates Amina but also leaves her son without familial history, embodying what Nail describes as the erasure of migrant pasts (see Nail in 2015 regarding "The figure of the migrant").

The condition of women migrants in the narrative underscores how displacement intersects with gendered forms of violence. Amina's survival in a Kenyan refugee camp is predicated on submitting to sexual exploitation by a military officer, highlighting how patriarchal power exploits vulnerability during crises. This resonates with Sherma's findings on hegemonic preoccupations, where women disproportionately suffer at the hands of male predators during displacement (Sherma, 2025). In the novel, Amina embodies resilience, but her trauma reveals how refugee crises exacerbate preexisting inequalities, leaving women doubly burdened as both migrants and survivors of violence.

The issue of rights emerges prominently in Lilly's confrontation with local customs such as *absuma*, a ritual marriage practice justified through distorted religious interpretations. When she bleeds uncontrollably during the event, her body becomes the site of both cultural imposition and violation of autonomy. Aziz's explanation that *absuma* has no Qur'anic basis

exposes the misuse of religion to legitimize harmful traditions. Hannah Arendt’s critique of human rights in her book clarifies this situation: nation-states divide rights between citizens and non-citizens, rendering refugees rightless and excluded from legal protection (see Arendt’s book in 1976 regarding “The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism” in pages 267-302). Lilly’s suffering illustrates this denial, as her status as a foreigner prevents her from accessing safeguards that should be guaranteed to all humans.

Another symbolic form of marginalization is seen in the practice of blackening gums, a Harari beautification custom that Lilly resists. Her refusal marks both her difference and her lack of integration into the host culture. While this rejection protects her autonomy, it simultaneously reaffirms her outsider status. Migrants thus face a double bind: acceptance requires assimilation into practices they may not share, while resistance reinforces their exclusion. This dilemma reflects the notion of the subject as both sovereign and subjected, where agency is constrained by the authority of external powers (see Balibar in 2016 regarding “Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology”).

**Table 3** summarizes the key problems faced by migrants in the novel, illustrating how different forms of displacement intersect with structural, cultural, and gendered oppressions. By presenting these categories, the table highlights the layered vulnerabilities that define the refugee condition.

**Table 3.** Problems faced by migrants in *sweetness in the belly*.

Problem Category	Character(s)	Cause	Notes on Experience
Historical Erasure	Munir, Yusuf	State violence and authoritarian suppression	Munir’s story remains silenced, excluded from official history; Yusuf is arrested in a refugee camp and disappears without a record.
Gendered Violence	Amina	Poverty, refugee camp vulnerability, patriarchal power	Survives sexual exploitation by a camp officer; raises a child born of trauma; reveals double oppression as migrant and woman
Denial of Rights	Lilly	Foreign status, absence of legal protection	Endures harmful custom of <i>absumma</i> without safeguards; embodies Arendt’s critique of refugees denied the “right to have rights” (see Arendt’s book in 1976 regarding “The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism” in pages 267-302)
Cultural Exclusion	Lilly	Racial and religious differences	Marked as <i>farenji</i> in Harar and mocked as “white fu’in Paki” in London; rejected in both Africa and England despite a hybrid identity.
Political Repression	Aziz, Lilly	Ethiopian revolution and crackdown on Sufis	Aziz was forced into exile as a Sudanese doctor; Lilly was expelled from Ethiopia despite cultural assimilation and religious devotion.

The complexity of migrant struggles also extends to the symbolic dimension of exile. Lilly is often treated as a foreigner in both Harar and London, even though she belongs to both and neither simultaneously. In Harar, her whiteness and English background mark her as

farenji, an outsider whose devotion to Islam cannot erase racial difference. In London, her Muslim identity and accented English distinguish her from the native English population, leading to slurs that emphasize her perceived foreignness. This paradox reveals the persistence of xenophobia across different contexts, illustrating how migrants are denied belonging not only in host countries but also in their supposed homelands.

These exclusions resonate with Arendt's argument in her book that human rights, codified in declarations such as those of 1789 and 1948, have been misused by states to selectively discriminate between citizens and non-citizens (see Arendt's book in 1976 regarding "The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism" in page 267-302). The novel dramatizes this failure of universality, showing how migrants lose political and public space when their humanity alone is deemed insufficient to guarantee rights. Lilly's exile thus becomes emblematic of the "right to have rights," a condition denied to stateless individuals who cannot claim protection from any government.

The refugee condition in *Sweetness in the Belly* also illustrates the precarious balance between resilience and vulnerability. While Lilly builds community among fellow refugees, she cannot escape the psychological toll of exile. The trauma of separation from Aziz, the loss of Ethiopia as her chosen home, and the hostility she faces in London contribute to a sense of perpetual liminality. Amina similarly endures through community-building, yet her memories of violence in the camp haunt her daily life. These narratives affirm the argument that true hospitality must be unconditional, since conditional acceptance (bound by legal contracts, cultural conformity, or state approval) inevitably perpetuates exclusion (see Derrida in 2001 regarding "On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness" in pages 1-24).

Finally, the novel situates migrant struggles within broader geopolitical contexts. Wars, revolutions, and famines drive displacement, linking individual stories to structural crises. The Ethiopian revolution of 1974, which ended the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and ushered in the authoritarian Dergue regime, exemplifies how political transitions generate massive flows of refugees. Lilly's forced departure from Ethiopia after the crackdown on Sufis reflects how migrants are caught in the crossfire of ideological shifts and power struggles. This historical grounding supports Sorenson's claim that refugee crises in the Horn of Africa are inextricably linked to regional conflicts and the collapse of states (Sorenson, 1991).

The problems faced by migrants in the novel are thus multidimensional: historical erasure, gendered violence, denial of rights, cultural exclusion, and political repression. Each character embodies a different facet of these issues, creating a collective portrait of displacement that transcends any singular definition of the refugee. By integrating literary detail with theoretical insights, *Sweetness in the Belly* offers a nuanced understanding of migration as a condition marked by both suffering and resistance.

The persistence of displacement in *Sweetness in the Belly* illustrates how exile transforms the most basic aspects of life (family, community, and bodily integrity) into precarious experiences. Migrants are consistently positioned on the margins, denied the stability that citizens often take for granted. Lilly's story, in particular, demonstrates the paradox of identity: her whiteness situates her within the visible majority in London, yet her Muslim faith and accented English ensure that she remains a target of suspicion and ridicule. This dual positioning underscores the fluidity of privilege, showing that race, religion, and language intersect to create contradictory outcomes. Lilly is not fully protected by her racial identity, nor is she fully embraced by her religious community, leaving her suspended between affiliations that never fully claim her.

Arendt's notion in her book regarding the "decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man" resonates powerfully here, as the novel reveals how migrants fall outside the

protective boundaries of state sovereignty. In theory, human rights should safeguard all individuals, but in practice, they are mediated through citizenship. This means that non-citizens like Lilly and Amina are excluded from meaningful protections, relegated to precarious existences shaped by state indifference or outright hostility (see Arendt’s book in 1976 regarding “The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man. The origins of totalitarianism” in pages 267-302). Lilly’s struggles in London reflect this exclusion: although she resides in her country of birth, her transformed identity as a white Muslim refugee renders her alien in the eyes of both the state and the public.

The psychological toll of such exclusion cannot be overstated. Migrants in the novel frequently express feelings of isolation, grief, and disorientation. Lilly mourns the separation from Aziz, whom she is forced to leave behind in Ethiopia, and her loss manifests as an enduring sense of incompleteness. Amina, meanwhile, endures trauma that extends beyond her body to affect her family unit, raising a child conceived through violence. Munir and Yusuf represent the silenced dead and disappeared, haunting presences that reinforce the fragility of migrant survival. These personal narratives reveal that migration is not merely a movement across borders but a profound rupture of self and community.

In addition to these existential challenges, the novel critiques how states manipulate migrants for political ends. Refugee camps, rather than serving as safe havens, become sites of violence and control. Yusuf’s arrest from a refugee camp reveals the vulnerability of migrants even in spaces supposedly designed for their protection. The violence Amina endures further illustrates how refugee camps reproduce hierarchies of domination, exposing women to gendered exploitation while denying them avenues of justice. These dynamics demonstrate that displacement is not only a byproduct of political crises but also a mechanism through which states exert power over the vulnerable.

The issue of assimilation also emerges as a problem for migrants, as they are pressured to conform to cultural practices that may conflict with personal values or bodily autonomy. Lilly’s refusal to participate in the gum-blackening ritual exemplifies the dilemma: compliance could offer partial acceptance into Harari society, yet it would compromise her sense of self. Conversely, resistance reaffirms her status as an outsider. This illustrates insight that subjects are always caught between sovereignty and subjection, compelled to negotiate identity within unequal power relations (see Balibar In 2016, regarding “Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology”). Migrants, therefore, are never fully free agents; their choices are constrained by the demands of both host and origin cultures.

**Table 4** illustrates how different dimensions of migrant problems intersect in the novel, categorizing them into legal, cultural, psychological, and gendered domains. By structuring the analysis in this way, the table emphasizes the layered and overlapping challenges that refugees encounter, underscoring that their struggles cannot be reduced to a single axis of oppression.

**Table 4.** Dimensions of migrant problems in sweetness in the belly.

Dimension	Character(s)	Cause	Notes on Experience
Legal/Political Exclusion	Lilly, Yusuf, Munir, Aziz	Authoritarian state control, revolution, and refugee camp repression	Lilly was expelled from Ethiopia after the crackdown on Sufis; Yusuf was arrested and disappeared in the camp; Munir was silenced by state violence; Aziz was forced to leave professional practice

Cultural Marginalization	Lilly	Racial and religious identity conflicts	Called <i>farenji</i> in Harar despite devotion to Islam; mocked in London as “white fu’in Paki”; pressured to accept practices like gum-blackening to gain partial acceptance
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**Table 4 (continue).** Dimensions of migrant problems in sweetness in the belly.

Dimension	Character(s)	Cause	Notes on Experience
Psychological Trauma	Lilly, Amina, child of Amina	Separation, exile, and inherited memory of violence	Lilly is haunted by the loss of Aziz and Ethiopia; Amina is traumatized by sexual violence in the camp; her child symbolizes both rupture and continuity, bearing inherited trauma.
Gendered Violence	Amina, Lilly	Patriarchal customs, camp exploitation, and harmful traditions	Amina was raped by an officer to survive, raising a child in exile; Lilly was subjected to <i>absuma</i> , a coercive ritual justified falsely through religion
Economic Precariousness	Amina, Lilly	Poverty, limited access to resources in exile	Dependence on refugee networks and community solidarity for survival; involvement in grassroots initiatives to support displaced families

The cultural dimension of exclusion is particularly significant because it highlights how migrants are never fully at home, even when they attempt to embrace local customs. Lilly’s adoption of Islamic practices in Ethiopia demonstrates her desire for belonging, yet she is persistently identified as *farenji*. Likewise, her efforts to participate in refugee networks in London align her with African migrants, but her whiteness provokes suspicion and hostility. These contradictions reveal that belonging is not solely about cultural practice or religious affiliation but is deeply tied to racial and historical perceptions. Migrants, regardless of their actions, remain vulnerable to being cast as outsiders.

Another problem dramatized in the novel is the precariousness of migrant economies. Many characters, including Amina, struggle with poverty and limited access to resources. Their survival depends on forming communal networks that redistribute scarce means of sustenance. Lilly’s involvement in community initiatives with Amina illustrates how solidarity becomes a survival strategy. However, this solidarity is not free from tension, as differences in origin and perception sometimes strain relationships. This duality (where community provides both refuge and conflict) captures the ambivalent nature of migrant life.

The psychological scars of displacement also persist across generations. Amina’s child, born of violence in a refugee camp, symbolizes both trauma and renewal. The child carries the mark of Africa on the forehead, signifying continuity with the homeland despite the rupture of exile. Yet the child’s origins also carry the burden of violence, showing how trauma is inherited within migrant families. This aligns with Nail’s claim that the history of migrants includes not only movement but also raids, revolts, and resistance, which remain embedded in their collective memory (see Nail in 2015 regarding “The figure of the migrant”). The novel thus portrays refugee life as a continuum of trauma and resilience, where survival depends on remembering histories that states attempt to erase.

The cumulative effect of these problems is a persistent sense of vulnerability that defines the migrant condition. Whether through legal exclusion, cultural marginalization, gendered violence, or psychological trauma, migrants in *Sweetness in the Belly* are shown as precarious subjects navigating hostile worlds. Yet the novel also emphasizes their resilience, as characters find ways to build community, maintain traditions, and assert dignity even in the face of adversity. This tension between vulnerability and resistance sets the stage for the notion of hospitality, which the next section explores as a potential ethical response to the refugee crisis.

### 3.3. Problems Faced by Migrants

Hospitality emerges in *Sweetness in the Belly* not merely as a background theme but as a potential response to the refugee crisis dramatized in the narrative. Where exclusion, violence, and denial of rights dominate the migrant experience, moments of care, solidarity, and ethical openness provide a counterweight. Jacques Derrida's reflections on hospitality, particularly his distinction between conditional and unconditional forms, illuminate how the novel envisions the possibilities and limitations of human relationships in contexts of displacement (see Derrida in 2001 regarding "On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness" in pages 1-24).

The relationship between Lilly and Amina represents one of the most profound illustrations of hospitality in the text. Brought together in London after the Ethiopian revolution, these two women form a bond that transcends racial, national, and even religious differences. While Lilly is white, English-born, and marked as an outsider among refugees, Amina embodies the figure of the African exile, enduring direct violence and loss. Their solidarity is forged through shared rituals, collective memory, and community-building activities, such as establishing networks to locate missing Ethiopian refugees. The mole shaped like Africa on Amina's baby's forehead becomes a symbolic marker of continuity and resilience, showing how even trauma can give rise to new forms of belonging. This act of forming community reflects a vision of hospitality as an opening to the stranger, an embrace of the Other without the demand for assimilation (see Derrida and Dufourmantelle in 2000 regarding "Of hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond (R. Bowlby, Trans.)").

Hospitality also arises in the care Lilly receives from spiritual and paternal figures like the Great Abdal and Muhammad Bruce. The Great Abdal provides her with guidance and spiritual grounding, while Muhammad Bruce offers financial support and protection after her parents' deaths. These acts reveal hospitality's dual role: it provides immediate relief for the displaced while also shaping identity in enduring ways. Lilly's deep connection to the Great Abdal becomes a defining marker of her break from British colonial heritage, showing how hospitality can serve as both material and symbolic sustenance. Yet these relationships also underscore the limits of conditional hospitality. Lilly is welcomed but never fully integrated; she is guided but still marked as foreign. This limitation aligns with the critique of hospitality that is bound by conditions, acceptance that requires conformity, loyalty, or reciprocal obligation is never truly unconditional (see Derrida in 2001 regarding "On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness" in pages 1-24).

**Table 5** provides an overview of how different forms of hospitality are represented in the novel, contrasting conditional and unconditional dimensions. By systematizing these encounters, the table demonstrates how Gibb's narrative dramatizes theoretical distinctions while also situating them within the lived realities of refugees (see Gibb in 2006 regarding "Sweetness in the belly").

The importance of the concept lies in its insistence on welcoming the stranger without imposing criteria of worthiness or assimilation. In *Sweetness in the Belly*, conditional hospitality is exemplified by state practices and cultural rituals that demand conformity. For example, refugees in London are often subjected to legal scrutiny, forced to prove their legitimacy to remain. Similarly, Lilly is pressured in Harar to accept customs such as gum-blackening and absuma, where hospitality is contingent upon her willingness to assimilate into local traditions. Such practices illustrate Kant’s notion of a limited “right of visitation,” where the foreigner is tolerated only under specific conditions and may be expelled if deemed unsuitable (see Derrida in 2001 regarding “On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness” in pages 1-24).

By contrast, unconditional hospitality appears in the novel through acts of solidarity that disregard difference. Amina does not question Lilly’s origins but embraces her as part of the refugee community. The shared work of remembering, organizing, and seeking justice for lost Ethiopians demonstrates a hospitality that does not erase differences but acknowledges them as part of a collective struggle. Lilly, in turn, offers care to Amina and her child, refusing to see them as burdens but rather as sources of strength and connection. These acts align with Levinas’s ethical imperative to welcome the Other, recognizing their infinite alterity without subsuming them under categories of race, nationality, or religion (Levinas as discussed in Derrida’s book in 2001 regarding “On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness” in pages 1-24).

**Table 5.** Forms of hospitality in sweetness in the belly.

Type of Hospitality	Character(s) Involved	Nature of Encounter	Notes
Spiritual Guidance	Lilly & Great Abdal	Spiritual and cultural mentorship	Provides Lilly with religious knowledge and a moral foundation; represents hospitality as care and guidance
Material Support	Lilly & Muhammad Bruce	Financial and protective assistance	Offers economic help and guardianship after Lilly’s parents’ deaths; illustrates practical hospitality
Communal Solidarity	Lilly & Amina	Shared rituals and refugee organizing	Build networks to search for missing Ethiopians; demonstrate hospitality as community service.
Cross-Cultural Bond	Lilly & African refugee women	Shared maternal experiences in London	Lilly assists Amina during childbirth, symbolizing solidarity beyond race and nationality.
Ethical Resistance	Amina & the refugee community	Collective care in exile	Refusal to abandon traditions despite displacement; enacts hospitality as a survival strategy

Hospitality in the novel also carries a strong dimension of community service, particularly in how refugees organize themselves in exile. The formation of grassroots networks to search for missing relatives, provide shelter, and sustain cultural traditions illustrates how displaced communities create alternative systems of belonging. These practices challenge state-centered notions of sovereignty, showing that hospitality can be enacted from below through collective care. In this sense, the novel suggests that while states often fail to protect refugees, communities themselves can become sites of ethical responsibility. It envisions “cities of refuge” as spaces that transcend national boundaries, reorienting politics toward

unconditional openness. The refugee communities in *Sweetness in the Belly* exemplify this possibility, becoming microcosms of hospitality in an otherwise hostile environment (see Derrida in 2001 regarding “On cosmopolitanism. On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness” in pages 1-24).

Another dimension of hospitality arises in the symbolic reconfiguration of identity. Lilly’s life demonstrates that belonging is not about fixed origins but about relational practices. Though rejected in both Harar and London, she creates a sense of home through acts of care and solidarity. Her embrace of Islam, while not securing full acceptance, represents a spiritual form of hospitality that transforms her identity beyond racial and national determinism. This transformation aligns with the notion of the citizen subject, where identity emerges from the interplay between sovereignty and subjection. By choosing to align herself with refugee communities, Lilly asserts agency within constraints, embodying hospitality as both an ethical stance and a lived practice (see Balibar in 2016 regarding “Citizen subject: Foundations for philosophical anthropology”).

The political implications of hospitality are particularly significant. The rise of the modern nation-state has undermined the right to asylum, replacing unconditional welcome with legalistic conditionality. Refugees must prove themselves “deserving,” often facing deportation or rejection if they fail to meet arbitrary standards. *Sweetness in the Belly* critiques this logic by showing how states not only deny protection but also perpetuate violence. The arrest of Yusuf in a refugee camp reveals the betrayal of supposed safe havens, while Amina’s trauma exposes the failures of international systems to safeguard vulnerable populations. Against this backdrop, the acts of solidarity among refugees stand out as radical gestures of unconditional hospitality, small but significant challenges to systemic exclusion.

**Table 6** summarizes the contrast between conditional and unconditional hospitality in the novel, highlighting how these dynamics shape migrant lives.

**Table 6.** Conditional and unconditional hospitality in *sweetness in the belly*.

Category	Example in a Novel	Characteristics	Implications for Migrants
Conditional Hospitality	Refugee camps, cultural rituals like <i>absuma</i> and gum-blackening, and state asylum policies	Requires conformity, legal proof, or cultural assimilation	Migrants face rejection if they resist; hospitality becomes exclusionary and coercive
Unconditional Hospitality	Lilly and Amina’s friendship; grassroots networks of refugees; Lilly’s embrace of Islamic identity	Welcoming conditions of reciprocity or assimilation	Enables solidarity, dignity, and resilience; creates alternative “cities of refuge” beyond state authority

The ethical urgency of hospitality becomes clear when considering the consequences of its absence. Without unconditional welcome, migrants are left in perpetual limbo, denied stability, dignity, and recognition. The novel dramatizes this through Lilly’s constant oscillation between belonging and exclusion, never fully embraced by any community yet always striving to create spaces of care. Amina’s survival similarly depends on the fragile networks of solidarity she builds in exile. These narratives affirm the claim that hospitality begins with an unquestioning welcome, an openness that risks destabilizing existing structures but also makes justice possible (see Derrida and Dufourmantelle in 2000 regarding “Of hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond (R. Bowlby, Trans.)”).

Hospitality in *Sweetness in the Belly* is not presented as an abstract ideal but as a lived practice of survival, solidarity, and ethical responsibility. The novel demonstrates that while states often fail to provide genuine refuge, communities and individuals can enact forms of unconditional welcome that resist exclusionary logics. By weaving together personal narratives with broader theoretical insights, Gibb's text illustrates how literature can serve as a powerful site for imagining alternative responses to refugee crises (see Gibb in 2006 regarding "Sweetness in the belly"). Philosophy thus finds concrete expression in the acts of care, solidarity, and community service portrayed in the novel, offering a vision of hospitality that is fragile yet indispensable in a world marked by displacement.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Sweetness in the Belly* portrays refugee life as a struggle with exclusion, trauma, and political repression, but also as a space for resilience and solidarity. Using theories of Nail, Balibar, Arendt, and Derrida, the novel shows how migrants resist erasure and create new forms of belonging. Its novelty lies in integrating philosophical concepts with literary analysis, emphasizing that unconditional hospitality and community service are crucial ethical responses to displacement in a world of continuous movement.

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#### 7. AUTHORS' NOTE

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