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The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour in Contemporary Transcultural Migration Narratives: Melatu Uche Okorie's "This Hostel Life", and Fadia Faqir's "Under the Cypress Tree"

Abstract: The voice of the immigrant in Western societies is being heard in the first person in contemporary literature. Therefore, the experience of emigration is no longer or, at least, not necessarily told from the privileged perspective of the white man or woman. And the short story is being a recurrent favourite genre for sharing with readers the diverse causes that force a man or a woman to abandon his/her native land, as well as the conflicts that emerge in the countries of reception. Collections such as *The Things I Would Tell You* (2017) by Sabrina Mahfouz, or *This Hostel Life* (2018) by Melatu Uche Okorie, among many others, are offering interesting examples of transcultural renderings of the experience of migration. The purpose of the present contribution is to focus on the use of irony and humour as ethically committed strategies for deploying the possibilities as well as the limits of conviviality in contemporary societies. I study the representative examples of two stories, Melatu Uche Okorie's "This Hostel Life" (included in the homonymous collection by the author), and Fadia Faqir's "Under the Cypress Tree", published in Mahfouz's collective volume. These two stories are aesthetically brilliant instances of the ethical potential of humour when offering a transcultural view of contemporary migrations that overcomes the limitations of traditional multicultural and intercultural treatments of the topic.

Keywords: *migrations; transculturalism; humour; ethics; aesthetics; British Muslim women writers; gender studies; identity; Melatu Uche Okorie; Fadia Faqir.*



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.2.8>

<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>

ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)

Volume 13 | Issue 2 | 2023 |

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I have been dealing with the representation of migrations in contemporary literature for some time, particularly in the American and European contexts. My interest is not only literary but also sociopolitic. This time I put the emphasis on the case of Ireland and England. As I will try to evince, the case of Ireland and of the Irish is paradigmatic in many senses due to its long history of emigration and its more recent past as an allegedly multicultural society, especially since the 1990s and the beginning of economic affluence. Nevertheless, as I propose to briefly illustrate here, the history of Ireland and its migrations was and still is, like it is the case of most countries, not exempt from complexity and even controversies.

Before referring directly to the case of Nigerian writer Melatu Uche Okorie, it is worth revising the contribution to the topic by James Joyce. As it is well known, Joyce was an emigrant himself, or to be more precise, an exiled from his own country who lived in many different cities such as Rome, Trieste, Zürich or Paris. He managed to survive in some of these foreign cities and even to succeed both socially and professionally in others. Despite his irrefutable ability to adapt himself to other countries, he never forgot his native country, which he evoked once and again in all of his works. He also dealt with the issue of emigration in most of his literary production. Thus, in *Dubliners*, and specifically in the short story “A Little Cloud”, we see an apparently successful returned emigrant, as well as Dublin men and women who, despite their adverse professional or personal circumstances, are paralysed and unable to abandon home, family and land. Besides, Stephen Dedalus decides at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to abandon an Irish land which suffocates the young man’s artistic aspirations, but we encounter him back in Dublin in *Ulysses* without having been able to fulfil his expectations abroad.

In Joyce’s poor and paralysed Ireland, immigration was a *rara avis*. Therefore, we do not find many cases of immigrants or allusions to immigration. Nevertheless, on occasion of the publication of “The Dead”, Joyce referred to the alleged Irish hospitality. Notwithstanding, he might be referring to hospitality among the Irish because in *Ulysses* we see how Mr Deasy laughs at the fact that the Irish never persecuted the Jews since the country never let them in. Yet, the character most clearly considered as an outsider, even a foreigner, in Joyce’s fiction is certainly Leopold Bloom; and it is precisely on account of being considered a Jew due to his father’s ancestry, that he is ridiculed and despised.¹

Things have changed a lot in Ireland since Joyce’s times, and after successive waves of emigration, from the 1990s onwards, and especially during the years of economic welfare which ended in 2008, the Green Eire became the recipient of many immigrants. Many Irish writers recorded the changes in the social landscape of the island. Margarita Estévez Saá has written on the topic in “Immigration in Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger novels”, and she has studied the contribution to the topic by authors such as Elizabeth Wassell, Mary Rose O’Callaghan, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, Chris Binchy, Peter Cunningham or Hugo Hamilton. It seems to me particularly interesting that these writers were as sensible

¹ The fact that it is Molly Bloom and not her husband the real Jew in *Ulysses*, because of her mother’s Sephardi ancestry, is not even considered by the Dubliners, who seem to ignore the matrilineal transmission of Jewishness.

as to denounce in their works the bouts of racism that they detected in Ireland, even during the years in which economic conditions were favourable, and despite the fact that, as they illustrated in their works, immigrants occupied the worst jobs that the Irish discarded. Notwithstanding, these were the voices of Irish men and women speaking for the immigrants. In fact, Hugo Hamilton's novel *Hand in the Fire* (2010) is one of the first cases of an immigrant dealing openly and crudely with the issue of immigration in Ireland.

More recently, and it is the case that occupies us today, we find immigrant writers overtly denouncing Irish policies on immigration. One representative voice is that of Nigerian-born writer living in Ireland Melatu Uche Okorie. She came to England with her baby daughter in 2006, and she had to spend eight and a half years living in the direct provision system established in Ireland before being granted official refugee status. She holds a M. Phil. in Creative Writing from Trinity College, Dublin, and has been working on a PhD in Trinity, focused on creative writing centres.

She has published several short stories, many of which she began to write during the years spent in direct provision, and she is at present working on a novel. Melatu Uche Okorie is particularly concerned with contemporary migrations, and her stories deal with the circumstances of emigrants in their countries of origin, as well as with the hardships they have to endure in the countries of adoption.

Okorie is a transcultural writer in the sense of the term expressed by Arianna Dagnino, that is, "imaginative writers who, by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities" (1). And, as we are going to see, Okorie projects a transcultural view of contemporary migrations that tries to account for the full complexity of current culturally diverse societies.

One of her most representative and brilliant tales is "This Hostel Life", published by Skein Press in a homonymous collection which appeared in 2018. The collection, preceded by an "Author's note", includes three stories ("This Hostel Life", "Under the Awning", and "The Egg Broke") as well as a sort of postscript by Liam Thornton (an assistant professor in the School of Law, at the University College Dublin) entitled "Ireland: Asylum Seekers and Refugees". Let us briefly refer to the contents of the book before focusing on the literary and social interest of the story entitled "This Hostel Life".

In the "Author's note", the writer refers to the years she spent in direct provision in Ireland and she succinctly describes the "almost tyrannical conditions" in which they lived. She mentions that the reason that brought her to Ireland from her native Nigeria "is all in my stories. I find it easier to talk about myself that way. I'm not a natural sharer" (ix). She also explains that it was during those years as an asylum seeker that she began to write the stories and that she calls "the Asylum Series" (xiii). This preface is followed by three stories. The first one, "This Hostel Life", describes the experience of asylum seekers under direct provision from the point of view of a Congolese woman. The second one, "Under the Awning", is a story within a story, and it illustrates racism in Ireland from the

perspective of an African immigrant taking part in a creative writing workshop. The third one, "The Egg Broke" is set in a rural Nigerian village, and tells of Ogechi, a happily married woman living with her husband's family, and the tragedy that unfolds when she discovers she is carrying twins due to an ancient superstition in the old Igbo tradition that led to twins being killed at birth. The story's open ending does not clarify whether the woman will finally abandon her country so as to save her twins' life, but it certainly shows one of the multiple reasons which could prompt a Nigerian to seek asylum elsewhere. As for "This Hostel Life" and "Under the Awning", both can be read as two stories that respectively address the failure of multicultural and intercultural policies in the western world, illustrated here in the case of Ireland. Therefore, *This Hostel Life* includes renderings of women's adverse circumstances in Ireland both as confined and segregated asylum seekers, as well as once they become Irish citizens of an alleged multicultural country; and the writer has also included the case of a woman compelled to abandon her native land.

Finally, Liam Thornton offers in his essay "Ireland: Asylum Seekers and Refugees" a detailed explanation about what he calls "issues that so far too long have been swept under the carpet" (61). He is referring to the question of immigration in Ireland. Thornton begins his contribution recalling Irish history of emigration, and introduces the current debate within Irish society about "who belongs" and "what is home". He then passes on to address the issue of who is entitled to refugee status, the difficulties of defining a refugee, and of discerning people's "real risk" and "serious harm" in their countries of origin so as to grant them subsidiary protection.

He wonders whether, for instance, being subject to poverty and/or a wholly inadequate health care system might constitute serious harm. These are difficult decisions that belong to the realm of political and legal discussions; and both the International Protection Office and the International Protection Appeals Tribunal are in charge of recognising protection claims. Thornton does not eschew the complexity of the problem; but he emphasises, first, the low recognition rate of protection claims in Ireland, and, second, the excessive amount of time that asylum seekers have to wait meanwhile their applications are processed.

It is in the meantime that asylum seekers are entitled to direct provision, and Thornton explains the history of direct provision since it was established in Ireland in 1998, and the meagre improvements which have taken place in all these years. He also mentions how even though different political parties opposed the system and considered it as a form of human degradation, all of them maintained it once they were in power. Direct provision, as we are informed, provides accommodation and food for asylum seekers, a weekly payment of 21.60 Euro per adult and per child, and a medical card. Until 2018 they were not allowed to work, and at present they can seek a job if the position pays over 30,000 Euros per annum, provided that they or their employers pay €1,000 for a 12-month work permit and that they have a Passport to apply for the work permit. As we can imagine, most of the asylum seekers do not meet these strict conditions. Thornton concludes referring to direct provision centres as systems "of enforced dependency and institutionalisation" (76) which can be certainly considered as Magdalene laundries of contemporary Ireland.

Thornton's is the voice of the academic and of the activist of human rights, but *This Hostel Life* also includes a fictional rendering of direct provision from the point of view of the asylum seeker, and resorting to that special form of humour and irony that so often arises from suffering and pathos; the suffering and pathos of the asylum seeker.

Melatu Uche Okorie's story "This Hostel Life" begins, as we are informed, on a Monday at 10:26 a.m., and concludes at 12:01 p.m. It is a brief span of time, briefer than Joyce's *Ulysses*, and as we are going to see, as it was the case in Joyce's novel, nothing relevant happens. The story is told from the point of view of a Congolese married woman with two daughters who is at present under direct provision in Ireland; and her narrative begins when she and other asylum seekers gather with their buggies so as to collect provisions and toiletries for the week:

In my last hostel, dey give you provision any day, but it's gonna be one month since you collect last. So, if you get toilet paper today, it's gonna be one month before you get another. Dat is why me I happy when dey give me every week for her, but now, me I don feel happy again. Dis direct provision business is all the same, you see, because even if you collect provision for every week or you collect for every month, it is still somebody dat is give you the provision. Nothing is better than when you decide something for yourself. (3)

The narrator, whose name we discover is Beverléé, is 44 years old, and she speaks in patois based on Nigerian pidgin English. As the author has explained in a recent contribution to the *Irish Times*, significantly entitled "We as migrants are used to being spoken for, yet these are our experiences":

Nigerian pidgin English was used in the hostel I was in. I realised that I needed to create a language for the main character as standard English didn't suit her. It wasn't authentic. Then, I started to listen and pay attention to the way non-Nigerians spoke pidgin, and I noticed that sometimes there were bits of Americanisms and Irish swear words thrown in – wanna, gonna, f'ing and even grand. I mixed these together and structured a form of pidgin English for the main character. (*The Irish Times* n.pg.)

Ngozi, the narrator's best friend, as well as Mercy, Mama Bomboy, Mummy Dayo, and Franca, all of them collect their tickets and wait for the security man to give them their tickets. It is Mummy Dayo who summarises the lives of these women: "From laundry to collect provision, from check laundry to see GP, from see GP to collect food, from collect food to check laundry [...] Up and down, up and down from morning till evening" (4), but this is what happens on Mondays since, as the narrator says, "nothing to do, for all the other days" (6). We get only brief glimpses, mere sketches of the different protagonists, what contributes to convey the idea of their secondary subaltern status as citizens of the world. What the reader discovers is a melting pot of characters briefly and humorously sketched –in what can be certainly considered, in Joycean terms, as a style of scrupulous meanness

(Joyce, *Letters II* 134).

The tone of the narrator is neither merely, nor simply of complaint. In fact, it is highly ironic and even humorous. Thus, she reproduces suspicious attitudes among the women immigrants (some of them fear that single or separated women could be interested in their husbands), they comment on the pernicious effects of watching television (their main pastime since they cannot work), and they mock the ignorance of some of them in relation to topics such as fertility. No community or social group is idealised or stereotyped, to the extent that the narrator certainly laments Irish racism but also rejects behaviours from Congolese, Nigerian and Eastern European people:

People tell me before, when I first come this hostel: ‘Be careful of Nigerias; do not make Friends with Nigerias; Nigerias like to make trouble and fight too much; [...] I go close to my own people, and make friends with only Congolese people and go only Congolese party. But now, me I know no is good complete and no one can do you bad like your own people. (6)

‘Congo? Dey crazy pass Nigeria o! We Nigerias, na only mouth we get, but Congo fit take knife fight you.’

‘Eastern Europeans de mall be fake *oyinbo*.’

‘Irish people too dey cold. Whisper, whisper, all the time.’

[...]

She even warn me for women from Franca kind of country, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa... (8)

Stereotypes are also avoided by the inclusion of some immigrants like Mama Bomboy, who speaks correct English and is able to appropriately define words such as ‘Fertility’, or to explain that February sometimes has 29 days; and all of them, with the exception of the narrator, lament that many people do not know about Gandhi or even Shakespeare. Their conversation and their waiting is interrupted when there is a discussion between Ngozi and the manager because of a jar of honey. The manager puts an end to the argument by closing the windows from which the provisions were being dispensed, and the women decide to disperse disappointed and ill-humoured:

12:01 p.m

Small small, all the people have start to go as dey see the manager is not gonna change her mind and open the office to give provision.

[...]

Now me I can see new people have start to line up outside the dining room for lunch. (22)

The story ends with the beginning of a new waiting. This time the asylum seekers will have to wait for lunch. The fragmented structure appropriately illustrates the condition

of the immigrants; and the allusions to time and the hour of the day contribute to render, even in a humorous way, the tediousness of their endless waiting.

The reader does not see the asylum seekers interacting with the Irish, who mainly ignore them, although we also detect problems of communication among the immigrants. Okorie is very careful in avoiding clear cut distinctions between victims and culprits, so that the conflict that ended the dispense of provisions was provoked by Ngozi's ill temper, as well as by the Irish manager's unfair attitude.

"This Hostel Life" is, therefore, a transcultural short story which, in John McLeod's terms, pays particular attention to the aesthetic formulation in literature of silence, tension, dissonance, conflict, misunderstanding and communication failure in contemporary multiethnic and culturally diverse societies (5); and it does so even by resorting to humour. The story illustrates how far we are from Leopold's Bloom vindication of a nation as "people living in the same place" "or also living in different places" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 317). Melatu Uche Okori does not privilege cultural difference as multiculturalism tends to do, neither does she naïvely emphasise intercultural commonality; but rather deploys a transcultural stance which pays attention to the full complexity of contemporary diverse societies.

Leopold Bloom is speaking about identity and nationhood, but also about the misconception and misrepresentation of people like him, considered as foreigners by prejudiced nationalists like the Citizen. Sabrina Mahfouz has also considered identity and lamented misrepresentation in the Introduction to the volume she edited with the title *The Things I Would Tell You: British Muslim Women Write*, published in 2017 by Saqi Books.

I felt upset and angered by the misrepresentations I encountered constantly and I felt grateful when a clear-eyed truth was spoken about us. And then again, who was 'us'?
(7)

These are, precisely, the words quoted by Sabrina Mahfouz in the Introduction. The passage is taken from one of the texts included in the book, significantly entitled "Mezzaterra" (98), by Ahdaf Soueif. The book contains poems, autobiographical and dramatic pieces, essays and short stories written by British Muslim Women of different age, status, and provenance. The settings also vary, so that some of the texts refer to British Muslim women living in the West, whereas others deploy their experience in Eastern places. The contributors include well-known authors as well as emerging new voices; and, as Sabrina Mahfouz explains in the Introduction, all have "both a British and a Muslim background or association, regardless of their birthplace, citizenship status or religiosity" (8). With regards to their religious condition, it is stated that "some are passionately secular; and others relate to Islam purely in terms of a cultural tradition that they have inherited" (9).

These types of volumes, focused on specific communities, in this case British Muslim women, have their positive as well as negative or, at least, reductive dimension. On the one hand, they serve to allow their voices being heard, but at the same time they

can be considered as another illustration or product of reductive multicultural policy and its isolationist dangers. That is, a determined social group vindicates its culture, traditions, and heritage in relation to other groups.

If we focus on the double ascription that the title features, British and Muslim, it could be also interpreted as a representation of intercultural contacts, in so far as the contributors emphasise their double association, and try to establish a dialogue between their two backgrounds. Notwithstanding, what we discover when we read the volume is that the authors are not projecting a simplistic defence of their multicultural condition, neither are they offering instances of naïvely intercultural communication. By means of their stories, dramatic pieces, poems and short stories, the authors in this collection are addressing the full complexity and even difficulty of contemporary sociocultural encounters that should not be reduced to or even related to nation-states, but that must be addressed within the communities of those involved, and that consider parameters such as age, religion, culture and, of course, gender.

These are transcultural authors (with multiple affiliations – at least British and Muslim) deploying transcultural exchanges and situations as far as they have learnt to accept, expose and even laugh at the possibilities as well as limits of contemporary social contacts. And the effect of collections such as the present one is precisely to teach us, by means of humour and subtle irony, how to accept, cope with and learn to live in the confusion, uncertainty and even prejudice provoked by diversity.

Another interesting dimension of these type of collections is the possibility they offer of going beyond literary genre boundaries, what we could call the “transgenre” projection of a volume that allows the reader to witness how a similar topic is addressed in different forms, styles and tone, and even to assess if one format is more or less satisfactory or successful. In this sense, the short story tends to be, comparatively speaking, particularly powerful, since poetry is sometimes too intimate and indirect, the essay too subjective and less imaginative, and the dramatic pieces included always lack the performative dimension that make them so appealing on stage. The same printing house, Saqi Books had published also in 2017 a previous and different collection, *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic*, whose comic appeal and potential should be taken into account as well when dealing with such a timely and delicate topic.

Let us focus now on “Under the Cypress Tree”, the short story by Fadia Faqir set on British soil and included in the volume entitled *The Things I Would Tell You*. The story, rather than featuring multicultural societies either in Eastern or in Western settings, or projecting naïvely successful intercultural dialogues or encounters, it rather illustrates again the complexity of conviviality in contemporary societies, and how the difficulties of coexistence become evident in London.

Fadia Faqir is a Jordanian-British writer and journalist, who lectures in English Literature at Durham University. She is a short story writer as well as author of four novels: *Nisanit*, *Pillars of Salt*, *My Name is Salma*, and *Willow Trees Don't Weep*. She has also edited a book of autobiographical essays by Arab women writers, entitled *In the House of Silence*.

Her story, “Under the Cypress Tree”, opens the collection entitled *The Things I Would Tell You*, and it is a very powerful and rich narrative that brilliantly exposes contemporary transcultural encounters with a humorous and ironic tone that demands out attention. It tells the story of Doris, an old woman living alone in her flat, and her Bedouin neighbour Timam, in a Western city that, towards the end of the story, the reader deduces is London.

The first time in which Doris sees her neighbour is on a misty morning and through a window that symbolically represents the old woman’s encounter with the other in the form of a Bedouin woman:

A veil, fixed with a band, covered her head and the collar of her padded jacket. The hem of her sharwal visible under her loose-fitting robe, her shoes flat. She shook the dust of her saddle bag, gathered her fardels and looked up. When Doris saw her weather-beaten skin, kohled-eyes and tattooed chin she held her breath and steeped back away from the window. (15)

Doris’s moving away from the window symbolizes her reluctant attitude towards this strange woman whose appearance she finds so shocking. And the narrative immediately focuses on the old woman’s remembrances of her childhood years in Brighton, where her father worked as a collier. The tale is interspersed with Doris’s recurrent memories of her youthful years during the Second World War, her parents, her dog Caddy, her love affair with a young man who died, and her traumatic pregnancy out of wedlock, that caused the break with her parents.

These recollections contribute to the characterization of the old woman, at the same time that they portray her as an aging protagonist, too focused on an irretrievable past that she is constantly evoking meanwhile she cannot remember where she has just put her glasses. This very British woman is being constantly visited by her mysterious Bedouin neighbour, who recurrently offers her help in the form of milk, a beautifully embroidered scarf, looking for the old woman’s lost glasses, going to the bakery for a custard tart, or even accompanying her to the cemetery to visit Doris’s mother’s tomb. Their meetings illustrate, in my opinion, contemporary transcultural encounters and exchanges, many of them humorous and funny, in the sense that they do not deploy idealistic intercultural communication, nor do they impose multicultural difference.

For instance, Doris cannot fail to notice Timam’s poor English, her shocking colours, strange odours, and even the weird noises she makes with her mouth (the Bedouin woman is constantly eating cardamom). It is through the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch) through which the body receives information, and that the distance between both characters is emphasized on many occasions by means of humour. Doris observes Timam’s tattooed and weather-beaten skin, and notices her neighbour’s “smell of dung and incense” (16). Sometimes she even fails to understand her, and wonders “If only her English was better” (21). And they have also different tastes when drinking tea and other beverages: “It was bitter as barberry” (18).

Despite these details that separate them and that deploy the inevitable shortcomings of their encounters, they carry on, progressively assuming these little failures that prevent a completely successful exchange between the two women, and that the narrative emphasizes, many times with humour as a descriptive and narrative strategy. Finally, Timam offers Doris the possibility of accompanying her to visit the tomb of her mother that the old woman so much desired. It is on occasion of their visit to the cemetery that the reader deduces that the setting of the story is London, since when looking for the familial tomb, Doris sees Alexander Hurley's grave.

The old woman informs Timam that he was a very popular comedian, the author of the famous British dance "The Lambeth Walk" (18), and the reader can check that the crypt is at the Tower Hamlets Cemetery in East End London. This cultural reference that Doris explains to Timam should be added to others, such as Christmas traditions, old-fashioned English custard tarts, their different way of drinking tea (Doris takes it bitter meanwhile Timam prefers it sweet), Timam's beliefs in the sounds of birds, or even their different way of taking care of the old, and their diverse rituals when facing death.

At the end of the story, Doris dies in Timam's arms. The distance that separates them has not been overcome (the old woman on the verge of death thinks "Alone, in a dingy flat, besieged by foreigners. 'Oh!'" 28). And their last exchange of words reinforces again their problems of communication. Thus, Doris's last words are not understood by Timam:

A few minutes before she died, she whispered something Timam could not understand. 'Tell John I'll meet him at the King Alfred. I'll take Caddy with me. My ma was still missing. Keep the photos, plate and letter!' (28)

Neither does Doris understand Timam's farewell:

Timam held her. 'Don't tired yourself! Everything fine. Just breathe easy! We meet again!'

'Meet again?' Doris opened her eyes. A summer sky covered with hazy clouds. 'Yes. Other end'. She clicked her tongue. (29)

A final note is included in the story. And it explains what follows:

Note: Timam is an Arabic name. It and its derivatives mean completion of a cycle, ending and finishing a task. (29)

The ending, apart from humorous, is somehow ambivalent and mysterious, since the reader is not sure about what kind of beverage Timam gave to Doris, if it was intended to ease her death pains, or if it was to accelerate it. The final note adds more uncertainties to a narrative that is not focused on clearing things, or on earnestly explaining Timam and her traditions or Doris's past. The reader has been encouraged to meet and accept both women in the same terms in which they have encountered each other, in the middle of silences, doubts, inconsistencies, mysteries and also misunderstandings, when not prejudices; all of them exposed many times from an ironic and even humorous point of view.

As a conclusion we can state that both “Under the Cypress Tree” and “This Hostel Life” are good instances of the combination of success and failure in contemporary transcultural encounters, of how they take place in the most ordinary and quotidian circumstances, and how they involve people at a transnational level as well as within the members of a single community.

We began this analysis with Ahdaf Soueif’s wondering “who was ‘us’?” And these two stories have exemplified the transcultural diversity involved in this ‘us’, and the difficulties as well as the urgency of representing it; an ‘us’ that includes Bedouin Timam and aging Doris in England, as well as Beverléé in Ireland.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work is part of the research project “NEMICATID: Aesthetics, Ethics and Strategics of the New Migratory Cartographies and Transcultural Identities in Twenty-First-Century Literature(s) in English (2007-2019)” (PID2019-109582GB-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, and the European Regional Development Fund (MCI/AEI/FEDER, UE).

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Citation: Estévez-Saá, J.M. The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour in Contemporary Transcultural Migration Narratives: Melatu Uche Okorie's "This Hostel Life", and Fadia Faqir's "Under the Cypress Tree". *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 13 (2), 2023: 96-107. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.2.8>

Received: September 30, 2023 | **Accepted:** October 7, 2023 | **Published:** October 11, 2023