Maggie Gee

Who's on Top? Flipping the Map in Contemporary Fiction

North and South: The Latitude of Letters
University of York
26-28 June 2013

Novels need polarities, whether geographical or moral, to exert tension on the narrative. North and south is one: the cold, rational, powerful north versus the 'beaker of the warm south', as Keats put it – 'true' and 'blushful', a sensuous, fecund place. For north and south you can sometimes substitute west and east – as Shakespeare does in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Power lies in the west, with Rome, seduction and the flesh in the serpentine east. Shakespeare's Prince Harry is also torn between the west of London, Westminster where power and responsibility reside, and the taverns of East Cheap where he pals with Falstaff. Polarities give movement: narratives can move between the two. Good and evil is another polarity that has energised novels since the 18TH century, a polarity that has sometimes coincided with the north-south, or west-east, axis. But where are north and south, and where is good and evil, in the 21st century novel? – if they are there at all. Is there a moral map?

Who's on top? What happens to north and south if you try a straightforward thought experiments and look at the map upside down? The famous image of the earth looking like a blue marble taken from the Apollo 17 spacecraft in December 1972 was originally what we would call 'upside down'. The Hasselblad camera, because of the spin and trajectory of the spacecraft, saw an inverted Africa half-covered with cloud, looking like the peak of a triangular mountain land-mass whose base is Libya and Egypt. Before the photograph could be consumed by the waiting world, it had to be turned around so Africa was orientated the "correct" way, with Libya and Egypt at the top, so we know that above them is the northern land-mass of Europe. North and south, west and east are deeply built into the way we in the north-west think about, and recognise, the world.

Does it matter? Yes. In a recent experiment where the map of a city was shown to volunteers in two different orientations, they consistently judged the locations at the top of the page – conventionally speaking, 'north' – to be the more desirable real estate. North still gets the position of power in most maps.

That's why fiction does its subversive duty by making the physical and moral maps harder to read. A book is, in a sense, a fictional space-capsule that comes at the world at a different angle. Four of my novels, three plus my work in progress, work through reversals of the expected polarities. I will talk about them, and then look at some novels by younger writers, second generation exiles from southern countries, where the characters are so restlessly cosmopolitan, so defined by a state of perpetual dissatisfied migration, that the old maps, geographical and moral, can no longer track them.

1

My novel *The Ice People,* set in the mid-21st century, puts an inversion of the north-south axis at the heart of the plot.

Global warming is the accepted condition of the mixed-race hero, Ghanaian-British Saul's, childhood. But it goes into reverse after the first third of the book .
Migration undergoes a mirror reversal – the rich north, freezing over, wants to escape to the warm south. Africa is naturally not glad to see them because it remembers how hard the north made it for them to migrate northwards, so there's some obvious satirical potential there.

The world of the north as the cold encroaches is a deathly world. Fertility is low, tech-births the norm, feathered robots replace babies, and heterosexuality is the exception. 'Segging' or segregation is the way Europeans live – men with men, women with women. As the cold increases, society starts to break down, and there is no welfare state left to sustain the hungry and desperate.

'In the middle of the night, the cold is like stone, black and solid and hard as death, and as the dawn comes it sharpens into pain, as light creeps back with the morning wind (I

loved it once, that little wind. In the Tropical Time it came like grace. Now it's the wind that takes the dying. Comes like a blade to finish them off.)' (p.44)

Mixed race Saul tries to escape to Ghana with his son Luke, who has a Ghanaian great-grandfather, one of the few qualifying attributes for migration.
But Luke has never been asked what he wants, in a world run by selfish old people. He eventually rejects both his father's opportunistic mythifying of their African origins and his lesbian separatist mother's attempts to chemically castrate him, staying in southern Europe with a band of *salvajes*, wild youth who reject materialist and machine values and who start loving heterosexually and having babies again.

Life returns with the ice. The old categories have all shifted. The younger generation have escaped the perils of their elders by living horizontally, roaming across Europe, and rejecting urban values that deny the body. The old elites are no longer on top. Saul, the aged narrator, says 'I have lived my Day'. There is ' a narrowing stream of human beings' – in other words, human numbers have dwindled to something more sustainable.

"'The grey dead light is being overwhelmed by the growing glow of the day outside. ..The harrowing beauty of my last day. A great wheel of birds comes turning across it...They're coming back slowly, the birds, the foxes, paws, claw-marks printing the ice.'" (p.244)

2

Power struggles and power reversals between north and south are also the subject of my two most recent novels, a pair or diptych called *My Cleaner* and *My Driver.*

Their central dynamic is a relationship between north and south, a white woman and a black woman, a survivor from a former imperial power and a survivor from a former imperial protectorate. They struggle to find a new relationship and a new balance of power in the post-imperial world.

Vanessa Henman is a white British writer, a tragicomic figure, anxious, status-conscious, uncertain of herself, her central relationships those with her ex-husband and her depressed son Justin. Mary Tendo is a Ugandan writer who came to work as a cleaner for Vanessa as a young woman doing an MA in London whose grant from the Ugandan government has run out. She too is divorced from her Libyan husband; her son Jamil has gone missing.

Mary was never less than feisty internally, but as a young woman she needed the money and had to pander to Vanessa. The only thing she enjoyed about the job was incidentally looking after Vanessa's little boy, and she gives Justin the love his mother is too tense and busy to offer – though that sometimes means Mary is too busy to give the same love to her own son Jamil.

Everything changes however as the action of the novel begins. Everyone is ten years older. Justin is now 22, still living at home and too depressed to get out of bed. He asks for Mary, and Vanessa manages to contact her in Uganda. But this is a different Mary to the one of ten years earlier. She is now in middle management at the Sheraton Hotel in Kampala, and if she comes back to the UK, it will be on her terms. Mary's own son has gone missing on the way back from Libya, where his father lives, to Uganda. So these two single mothers have one damaged son and one missing son between them.

Mary agrees to come back, but for double the wages that Vanessa has offered. The South has gathered power: the North is needy. Mary's arrival revolutionises the Henman household – everything from diet to the relationships between Vanessa and her son and ex-husband. A power struggle between the two women begins; Mary wins. Her first step is simply to get Justin out of bed.

The book's climactic scene is a car journey in an epic snowstorm when Mary forces Justin to drive by getting out of the driver's seat and walking down the hard shoulder of the motorway. Justin has to do things for himself: the north cannot always be served by the south. By the end of the book, Justin is not just out of bed, he is in a relationship with a Moroccan woman and they have produced a grandchild who Mary sees before Vanessa does. Mary's writing is, moreover, getting validated by the interest of a British publisher who has rejected Vanessa – though in the second book of the pair, the publisher will be revealed to be a time-waster. In any case, it seems as tho' Mary has, in a sense, swept the field.

'Vanessa is left with a puzzled feeling that Mary is somehow the centre of all this, that the heroic role, which was surely hers, ...has passed to Mary, and will not come back, however much she tells her story.' (p.244)

This would all be rather glib if Mary Tendo was a perfect human being. She isn't. She is bossy, sometimes obtuse, loud, unstoppable, and because this first book of the pair is set in the UK, this book is partly the comedy of the cultural misunderstandings undergone by first generation migrants.

Book 2, *My Driver*, reverses this pattern, because it is set in Uganda. This time Mary has risen further at her job at the Kampala Sheraton, and Vanessa is proudly but slightly nervously visiting Uganda as part of a British Council International Conference, though the reader (but not Vanessa) realises she was just a last minute substitute.

Mary Tendo doesn't know Vanessa is in Uganda, and has chosen not to tell Vanessa that Vanessa's ex-husband Trevor, a cheery plumber (and reader) who has always had a soft spot for Mary, is coming to Uganda to do some repairs to the well in Mary's village.
The three characters do not all meet up until the end of the book, but they are unknowingly within fifty feet of each other at the midpoint of the novel, which happens exactly on the equator, the point of reversals, where water starts to run down a drain in the opposite direction, as the equator businesses are happy to demonstrate to tourists. Trevor is on his way to do something useful in Mary's village, but Vanessa is on her way to the west of Uganda, - the west where only rich tourists go - 'on safari' with a black Muslim Ugandan driver.

She is going to quarrel disastrously with him about feminism and the position of women; her pride and anger will mean that her young driver, furiously hurt, abandons her in the safari hotel on the border with Congo where (in real life and in the novel) a significant number of American and European tourists and their Ugandan guides were famously massacred by Hutu *interahamwe* in the 1990s.

This book is in part the story of Vanessa's serial mistakes and humiliations in a culture she does not understand, a mirror image to what has happened to Mary Tendo in London in the

book before. But it is also a kind of redemption for both women. There is a moral geography in this pair of books. Forgiveness, understanding and trust as a way out of, and beyond, horrible events are really the themes of this second book. Moreover there is another geography and another migration that links these two women: both of them are first generation migrants from the country to the city.

Mary Tendo's lost son Jamil, it turns out, had been waylaid by the LRA, the Lord's Resistance Army, a horribly violent guerrilla force who kidnap children and force them to do the unspeakable things that Jamil has indeed done. He escapes, but how can he ever come back ? By a sequence of accidents, Trevor has to rescue Vanessa, and then the two of them pick up a wild, drenched hitch-hiker on the narrow road back to Kampala – they have no way of knowing he is Mary's son, trying to get home.

The climactic moment is when Trevor and Vanessa have to trust their terrifying hitch-hiker to drive on an appalling road. In a mirror image of what Justin achieves in the first book, Jamil rises to the challenge. Now civil society will have to find a way of forgiving and accepting him, just as Mary and Vanessa have to find a way of forgiving and accepting their mutual and lesser acts of betrayal and aggression. History has to be recovered from. The post-imperial period of half a century has allowed us the luxury of trying to understand.

Though I am deliberately dealing with reversals of the power balance between north and south, and deliberately flipping the map as I flip between the two women's consciousnesses for my narration, these two books, and *The Ice People,* do have a moral and geographical north and south. There is still a map, even if it is upside down. The characters are sometimes laughably selfish, offstage there might be appalling violence, but there is also room for kindness, courage, self-sacrifice, and a sense of growing understanding. In that sense they have recognisable links with the tradition of the 19th-century novel.

Perhaps this is because the worst excesses of the British empire in Africa – the castration and murder of members of the Mau-Mau – were over half a century ago. There has been time enough for writers from the former empire to write back, to show their take on events, time enough for writers from the former imperial power like me to gain some settled sense of

history, however provisional. Negotiations are taking place. Reparations of a sort are being made. Relationships are possible. A new map is being drawn up.

3

I want to look now at three novels whose roots are in Libya and Palestine, where the violence and horror are ongoing and where the moral map is still spinning too fast to read. In both the Libyan novelist Hisham Matar's two books and in the Palestinian novelist Selma Dabbagh's first novel, the narrating consciousnesses are those of educated liberal emigres, looking back southwards at carnage with guilt and puzzlement, but surveying their adoptive northern civil societies with almost equal distaste.

Hisham Matar, a Libyan novelist living in London, was Booker-shortlisted for his first novel, *In the Country of Men*, back in 2006. His real-life story is quite well-known – his father, a Libyan dissident from the educated elite, was kidnapped from exile in Egypt by Gadaffi's thugs when Hisham was still a boy, and has never been found, though his son now accepts he must be dead. Both of Matar's novels feature a kidnapped father, though their tone, form and other concerns are very different.

(I actually think the second novel, which has won precisely no prizes to date, is even better than the first, which won or was shortlisted for every prize going but also had a news factor that the second one did not.)

In the Country of Men is narrated in the first person by a nine-year-old boy, Suleiman, the beloved only son of his father or 'Baba', a former Libyan minister and close adviser of King Idries, who was driven out by Colonel Gadaffi in the original Libyan revolution. Baba is part of a liberal circle of thinkers still living in post-revolutionary Libya but secretly planning a coup against Gadaffi. The reader loves Suleiman, partly because everyone else does – he is their '*habibi*', their 'darling', their 'Champ'. We love him also, pity him, and want to protect him, because his father seems to be brave and his mother, though adoring, an alcoholic – all Suleiman knows is that when his father goes away his mother sometimes drinks 'medicine' which is forbidden by the Prophet, and which makes her sadly talkative.

About a third of the way through the book, having fully engaged our narrative sympathies for Suleiman, the 'I' of the book, Hisham Matar begins to unfold the devastating story of his boy narrator's corruption. This technique leaves us morally more and more at sea, because the 'I' voice means effectively that we, the readers, are complicit in Suleiman's every distasteful act. By the end of the novel, Suleiman has betrayed most of the people who love him and caused several deaths, most by informing on his family connections but one, that of a beggar, Bahloul, by direct violence as Suleiman kicks the drowning man in the face. Meanwhile his 'heroic' father has been revealed to be a weak man who yielded 'like butter' under interrogation.

The traitor Suleiman ends up on top, safe in Egypt, educated, qualified and protected by an Egyptian judge, giving Libya hardly a backward thought, and the death of his father is directly caused by a book titled *Democracy Now.* The only totally good character, teacher Ustath Rashid, ends up vomiting and pathetic, climbing his own scaffold at a public execution. In this claustrophobic human world, handy-dandy, where is good and where is evil? The title of the book, *In the Country of Men*, is perhaps a hint that the whole human race stands indicted.

Hisham Matar's second book, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, written years later, is a very different book despite the repeated motif of a kidnapped father. Now all the central characters are in exile in the north, moving effortlessly but not particularly happily between Geneva, Paris, London, Rome, Cairo. This time the facts of the kidnap are a little nearer to the real-life one of Matar's own father: Kamal Al-Alfi is kidnapped outside Libya, in Geneva. Though a man of secrets, he is not found to be a betrayer, as the father of the first book is. The central character, once again the son of the kidnapped father but this time called Nuri, is not a betrayer either. Instead of learning only that the south is a place of horror, we have the value systems of south and north placed side by side.

The Arab South is the source of secretive violence like the kidnap of the father and the forced marriage of teenage girls like Nuri's mother, but it is also the fount of the unending loyalty and love of family and of servants like the porter, Am Samir. And it is sensual: Mona, Nuri's Egyptian-British stepmother, is unbearably sexually attractive for the young boy – but

attractive with the freedom of moral constraint that seems to characterise women in the north.

The actual north of England, where Nuri is sent away to school, is cold and unfeeling: it smells of cold potatoes – the same smell Selma Dabbagh noted. The teacher who comes to meet Nuri at the station is called 'Galebraith', a cold blast of wind. His breath smells of metal, and there is 'something cold and hard about Mr Galebraith'. Nuri hopes that 'by some miracle' he will 'never have to return to that cold place again'. When his father visits, they buy Mona a thick fur coat and eat a steak 'that bled each time he dug his knife into its thick flesh'.

Women in this northern world are not secretly married off by their families to protect their honour, but the novel poses a question: how much better off are these modern women who no longer behave honourably, and are no longer respected? Mona, Nuri's stepmother, is the only child of an Egyptian emigre and an English mother. Mona – meaning 'on her own' – has no solid values and no solid family. Where Nuri is always known as Nuri El-Alfi, and his father is first named in the index of a book as Kamal Pasha El-Alfi, with a pedigree going back 500 years, Mona introduces her dead father only as 'Monir' –

'First name only , without a prefix, as if he were a friend or a lover'. (p.23)

This lack of hierarchies and categories becomes important when Mona replicates it in her own life. She has '**a fancy to be adored'** by Nuri, and is discovered by her husband Kamal letting his adolescent son comb her hair while she sits looking at herself, bare-breasted, in a mirror. It is because of this incident that Nuri is sent away to his cold boarding school, where Mona never bothers to answer his letters adequately. After her husband is kidnapped, Mona fails to provide properly for his faithful servants like Naima, sleeps with her stepson Nuri, goes back to England and drifts into an affair with a former fellow boarding-school alumnus and sometime lover, a man who calls her by the demeaning nickname 'Crumb' and does not care for her or respect her as Nuri's father did. An investment banker, he loses his job and ends up living off her. Mona, at the end of the novel, has lost touch with her former Arab family and is working in Selfridges – a diminished mirror image of her former privileged life as Kamal El-Alfi's wife in Cairo, spending all her time shopping or at the elite Gezira club.

Self-satisfied northern liberals are another breed whose behaviour Matar dislikes. Sometimes the adult Nuri's British friends manifest a degree of pride in knowing a '**dark-skinned Arab'** or talk about how racist the British are, and Nuri says '**I simply pretended, as one does when an old person farts in public, that I had not heard.**' If the north gives freedom, it is freedom without warmth or good manners.

However, perhaps because Matar is older, the behaviour of human beings in this novel is more nuanced. In both north and south people are capable of empathy and loyalty, even if they don't find happiness. There is a parallel scene to the one in Matar's first novel where Suleiman almost randomly drowns the beggar Bahloul in the sea, but this time it plays out very differently. A man has fallen into a river and the watching crowd, who have already called the fire brigade, watch, willing him to climb back up on to the bank. To everyone's relief, after a couple of attempts he manages it, and the woman with him cradles his head in her lap. Though no one actually jumps in to save him, this is not the universally cruel and baying crowd who cheer the executioners in Matar's first book. The woman with this book's drowning man is not, as Suleiman was, murderous. We are back on some kind of moral map.

In the last book I will consider, we're right off it. Selma Dabbagh is a Palestinian, living in London like Hisham Matar, and her first novel, *Out of It,* is narrated from the point of view of a western-educated brother and sister, Rashid and Iman, twin children of famous, divorced Palestinian activists of an older generation. This new generation is trying to find a way of relating to the present chaos of their country. They are not accepted when they go home; they have been 'out of it' too long. Rashid is also frequently 'out of it' on drugs. Migration is the constant condition: that is why everyone educated or lucky is literally 'out of it' – off the fought-over map. They only feel safe either in Europe or in the Gulf, travelling between those Arab states which are under the thumb of northern states like Britain and America – Dohar, Dubai. London is the pole to which they are drawn, but they are never 'at home' there. It is cold, the people's skin smells of wet potatoes, - the same observation about northerners, you may recall, as Hisham Matar's – and the liberal intellectuals who welcome them are excoriated. They are ignorant, unable to pronounce or remember Arab names ('Ali someone', they hazard a guess), arrogant, trivial (there is an account of a dinner in a restaurant where the conversation made me physically wince – a tribute to Selma Dabbagh's skill). These

northerners are wet, cold, weedy, no substitute for what has been lost with the continuing destruction of the south. One committed pro-Palestine British activist, a young Londoner called Eva, is treated with contempt and irritation by Iman, though Eva's total commitment eventually results in her acting as a human shield in Gaza.

By contrast with Eva, Rashid is entirely lacking in conviction or moral weight. When he finally embarks on what seems like a mission of self-sacrificial courage in Palestine, he loses his nerve at the last moment, foisting his role on one of the unlucky of the earth – the poor and ignorant, for whom death and suffering is normal, while Rashid flies free, 'out of it' for ever. There is no nobility in the poor Palestinian's sacrifice, for he does not know what he has been tricked into doing. There is no moral geography. North and south will not help us here, for we are really in the mire. Not only is there no polarity of good and evil, there is scarcely any better or worse, only haves and have-nots. I think it is partly a question of how close-focus Dabbagh is forced to be: she is trying to write truthfully about what she sees in the immediate present – a bleeding tangle of visceral hatreds and betrayals, a war that is, she says, 'like a cage fight'. Only the clarity of her form, the sharpness of her observation, and the beautiful, terrible inevitability of the final narrative sequence, redeems her book. Art becomes a value when life fails to offer it. There is a hint of the same elegant desperation in Hisham Matar's exquisitely-written second novel: **'The Montreux Palace was where we always stayed'** (p.90) – the émigré El-Alfis habitually stay in the same hotel where Vladimir Nabokov lived, and it is his spirit that presides in Matar's lapidary prose.

It will be interesting to see if Selma Dabbagh's second novel has any of the kind of distancing that produces what feels like a moral deepening and nuancing in Hisham Matar's second novel. That would not necessarily make a better or more truthful novel, but it would make a more spacious one. Such a novel might feel more like the novels built for 250 years on landscapes wide and slow enough to offer moral choices, novels with heroes, however flawed, and a north-south or east-west geography where movements along the axis moved you somewhere, for better or worse. Yes, these novels have always been, in a sense, luxury objects, usually products of peace and leisure for reflection.

Perhaps we are moving now into a bleaker, flatter terrain where as Philip Larkin said ‘all we can hope to leave them now is money’; where the poor stay in hell and the rich migrate, but have nowhere, north, south, east or west, that’s worth going to.