

Voices from the Barzakh: A Sociological Reading of Refugee Suffering in Omayma Abdullah's *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh*

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 <https://doi.org/10.58194/eloquence.v4i3.3143>

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Article History

Received

27-10-2025

Accepted:

03-11-2025

Published:

24-12-2025

ABSTRACT

Background: The short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* is a literary work that reflects the suffering of Sudanese refugees during the 1956–2005 conflict, which is important to study.

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the forms of suffering experienced by Sudanese refugees in the short story "*al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh*."

Method: This study uses a library method, with the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* as the primary data source. The analysis focuses on textual elements such as narrative, dialogue, and description. Wellek and Warren's the sociology of content of the literary work approach is used, supported by Agamben's theory of bare life to understand how the suffering of refugees is represented in the story.

Result and Discussion: The results of the study show five forms of suffering, namely physical, psychological, social, existential, and spiritual. This is caused by the collapse of Sudan's socio-political structure, which places refugees in a state of bare life, namely biological existence without social or legal protection. This forces refugees to live without protection, without a country, and without access to basic needs.

Conclusions and Implications: This study shows that short stories function as social documents that record the tragedy of displacement while also showing how humans are reduced to bare life in situations of war. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of literature as a medium of collective memory and a means of understanding trauma, marginalization, and the dynamics of humanity in the study of displacement.

Keywords:

Short story al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh; Sudanese Conflict; Suffering; Sudanese Refugees.

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Cerpen *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* merupakan karya sastra yang merefleksikan penderitaan pengungsi Sudan selama konflik 1956–2005 yang penting untuk dikaji

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan menginterpretasikan bentuk-bentuk penderitaan para pengungsi Sudan dalam cerita pendek " *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* "

Metode: Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan dengan menjadikan cerpen *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* sebagai sumber data primer. Analisis difokuskan pada unsur-unsur teksual seperti narasi, dialog, dan deskripsi. Pendekatan Sosiologi Karya perspektif Wellek dan Warren digunakan, dan didukung oleh teori *bare life* Agamben untuk memahami bagaimana penderitaan para pengungsi direpresentasikan dalam cerita.

Hasil dan Pembahasan: Hasil penelitian menunjukkan lima bentuk penderitaan, yaitu fisik, psikologis, sosial, eksistensial, dan spiritual. Hal tersebut disebabkan oleh runtuhnya struktur sosial-politik Sudan, sehingga menempatkan para pengungsi pada kondisi *bare life*, yaitu keberadaan biologis tanpa perlindungan sosial maupun hukum. Memaksa pengungsi hidup tanpa perlindungan, tanpa negara, dan tanpa akses pada kebutuhan dasar.

Kesimpulan dan Implikasi: Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa cerpen berfungsi sebagai dokumen sosial yang merekam tragedi pengungsian sekaligus memperlihatkan bagaimana manusia direduksi menjadi *bare life* dalam situasi perang. Implikasi penelitian menegaskan pentingnya sastra sebagai medium memori kolektif dan sarana untuk memahami trauma, marginalisasi, serta dinamika kemanusiaan dalam studi pengungsian.

Kata Kunci

Cerita pendek al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh, Konflik Sudan, Penderitaan, Pengungsi Sudan.



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INTRODUCTION

The long-running armed conflict in Sudan is an essential case study for examining the destabilizing effects of deep-rooted structural violence and ethnic discrimination. Historical divisions, the seeds of which were sown even before independence from British-Egyptian rule (1956), are not a series of random events, but rather a manifestation of discriminatory political management and unequal control of resources.^{[1][2]} The Arab-dominated government systematically implemented policies that marginalized ethnic Africans, creating internal colonialism that sparked a series of bloody conflicts.^[3]

This discrimination manifests itself in three main structural dimensions. First, Disparity in Resource Allocation, whereby wealth, particularly oil revenues from the southern regions, is allocated primarily for development in the north. Second, Political Inequality, which explicitly limits the political representation of ethnic Africans. Third, Religious Identity Conflict, which culminated in attempts to impose Sharia law, directly alienating the Christian African majority.^{[4][5]} These three dimensions created a system that politically and economically excluded southerners, pushing them to the margins of civil existence.

This structural violence and political crisis have created a humanitarian crisis, namely the emergence of a mass refugee exodus. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese citizens have been forced to leave their homeland, traveling thousands of kilometers in extreme conditions, facing starvation, exhaustion, and death along the way.^{[6][7][8]} This collective and individual suffering places the victims in a state theoretically referred to as *bare life*, a crucial concept in Giorgio Agamben's perspective.^[9]

According to Agamben, bare life (*ζωή*) is human life that has been reduced to pure biological existence, where legal protection and civil rights (*bios*) are revoked. Sudanese refugees, who have been expelled from their country and lost their citizenship, find themselves in a modern zone of exclusion, namely refugee camps or refugee routes. In this zone, their lives become Homo Sacer: lives that can be killed but not sacrificed. This means that they become subjects of unprotected violence, making their suffering a manifestation of sovereign political power that has stripped them of their humanity.[\[10\]](#)

This humanitarian crisis tragedy is not only recorded in media reports, but also deeply reflected through literary works, such as short stories. The short story *al-Tarīq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah stands out for its powerful and specific representation of the profound suffering of Sudanese refugees during the period from 1955 to 2005. This work dramatically presents physical and psychological suffering, offering an authentic humanistic view of the bare life conditions of the victims.

There is previous research that also discusses Sudanese literature with the same theme, namely the suffering of Sudanese citizens due to war or prolonged conflict. The research is titled "*A Study of Realism Features in the Novels of Amir Taj Al-Sir*". The research was conducted by Pouri and AlJubouri using the same method. The difference between their research and this research lies in the type of literary work used as the object of research. Their research used novels, while this research used short stories. The results of their research show that these novels describe issues related to Sudan's prolonged conflict and its impact, such as poverty, mass displacement, and the losses suffered by the Sudanese people.[\[11\]](#)

The study was conducted by Pouri and AlJubouri using the same method. The difference between their study and this study lies in the type of literary work used as the object of research. In their study, they used novels, while in this study, short stories were used. Their research results show that these novels describe issues related to the prolonged conflict in Sudan and its impact, such as poverty, mass displacement, and the losses suffered by the Sudanese people.

Although there have been previous studies on realism in Sudanese literature that discuss the issue of displacement, studies that focus on an in-depth analysis of the representation of specific suffering in the short story *al-Tarīq 'abra al-Barzakh* and interpreted through Agamben's theoretical lens of bare life are still minimal. Thus, this study fills that scholarly gap.

Based on this theoretical background and gap, this study aims to analyze the forms of suffering of Sudanese refugees as depicted, using Wellek and Warren's sociology of content of the literary work approach and the framework of Agamben's bare life. This article is expected to enrich the study of contemporary Arabic literature, especially in the context of war and displacement, and to make a theoretical contribution to integrating sociological approaches with biopolitical theory in the reading of fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Concept of Short Stories

Short stories are a relatively new form of modern literature in Arabic literature. Short stories in the context of Arabic literature are known as *qīṣṣah qāṣirah*. Structurally, this genre has a limited number of words or pages, which is far less than a novel. However, this limitation still allows short stories to present crucial themes of human life.[\[12\]](#) Khalil defines a short story as "a type of narrative language consisting of one or more incidents, characters, and life values gathered under one title.[\[13\]](#)

In line with its representative ability, short stories are considered social documents that function as mirrors to reflect sociological phenomena. The dialectical relationship between fiction

and reality proves that short stories are rich in meaning and can be analyzed from various perspectives, such as philosophical, religious, cultural, and sociological. Theoretically, short stories are highly relevant to be studied using a sociological approach due to their realistic nature and concise narrative form, making them an ideal medium for intensely representing fragments of conflict and social structures.^[14]

2. The Concept of Sociology of Literature according to Wellek and Warren

Literary sociology provides a critical perspective that examines the reciprocal relationship between literature and society. This framework views literary works not only as aesthetic objects, but also as social products born of specific historical, economic, and ideological conditions. This approach fundamentally believes that literature is a reflection, or even an intervention, of the social structures that gave birth to it.^[15] This is in line with Goldman's perspective that literary works are not born spontaneously. In the process of creation, literary works are influenced by their surroundings, including social, cultural, and traditional factors.^[16] This is what ultimately led to the emergence of a division of focus in Sociology of Literature.^[17]

Based on the classification proposed by Wellek and Warren, Sociology of Literature is divided into three main fields of study that examine the interaction between texts and social structures. These three fields include: (1) Sociology of Author, which examines the social background, ideology, and economic status of authors and their relationship to the creative process; (2) Sociology of Literary Works, which examines the content, characters, and themes in texts as direct reflections of social reality, class, or social institutions; and (3) Sociology of Readers, which analyzes the critical reception and impact of these works on society across various social strata. Although Wellek and Warren's model offers a broad framework, this study explicitly limits its scope to only the second field, namely Sociology of Literary Works, in order to achieve a depth of interpretation of short stories as social documents and allow the text to speak as a reflection of the reality caused by the Sudanese conflict.^[18]

2. The Concept of “Bare Life” According to Giorgio Agamben

Agamben's concept in his political philosophy theory carries the idea of the relationship between humans and power in the form of the state. The influence of sovereign power has the potential to abuse legal laws, even though those laws are the result of the rulers' own policies. This situation is referred to as a *state of exception*, which indicates the existence of exceptional circumstances implemented by the state in an effort to control its people or nation.^[19]

In his view of human rights, Agamben divides the position of humans into levels, with *zoe* as the lowest form, in which humans are viewed in terms of their physical form and characteristics; the condition of *bios*, where the human body has meaning through the existence of political rights; and the condition of bare life, which is when political rights and legal protection are revoked, resulting in the designation of *Homo Sacer*.^[20]

To turn an individual into *homo sacer*, the state can use its sovereign power to create exceptional conditions, thereby nullifying the individual's human rights. This occurs in several cases, one of which is in refugee camps. According to Agamben, human rights are revoked due to a misunderstanding of the modern political concept of the absence of a relationship between the individual and the state.^[21]

METHOD

This study uses a library method to examine the depiction of the suffering of Sudanese refugees in the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah. The approach used is Sociology of Literature, which focuses on the content or reality depicted in literary works according to Wellek and Warren, who view every literary work as related to social dynamics, social values, or

humanitarian issues. Thus, this study treats literary texts as social documents that record human experiences and the socio-political dynamics behind them. Agamben's theory of bare life is used as a complementary lens to help interpret the condition of Sudanese society, which has been reduced to mere biological life in a situation of war.[\[22\]](#)

The primary data source is a short story entitled *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah, which tells the story of a group of refugees traveling through the desert to reach a refugee camp on the border. This short story was chosen for its thematic depth in describing structural conflict and violence. This content is considered important and appropriate for sociological studies and the application of the concept of bare life. This research is also supported by secondary sources in the form of theoretical literature, such as sociology of literature's theories, Agamben's theory of bare life, and research related to the Sudanese conflict during the period 1956-2005.

Data collection was carried out in three stages: 1) intensive reading of short stories to gain an in-depth understanding of the stories; 2) formulating issues in the short stories; 3) determining sociological theories and approaches to the reality of refugees. Then, in the data analysis stage, content analysis was used in four stages: 1) marking parts of the text that describe suffering; (2) grouping the findings into thematic categories of suffering; and (3) interpreting these categories using a content-based sociological framework of literary works (representation of social reality) and linking them to Agamben's concept of bare life to explain how the characters experience the deprivation of rights and reduction of existence. 4) concluding on the types of suffering of refugees as victims of war depicted in the short story text using a sociological approach to literary works and Agamben's theory of bare life.[\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Suffering of Sudanese Refugees in the Short Story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah

After reading and understanding the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh*, the author found that this short story focuses on the various forms of suffering experienced by Sudanese refugees during the prolonged conflict from 1956 to 2005. The story presents a series of extreme experiences endured by refugees, ranging from hunger, exhaustion, and bleeding during childbirth, which reflect physical suffering, to trauma, fear, and loss of hope, which reflect psychological suffering. It also depicts the destruction of social structures due to the loss of homes, communities, and identities, which then develops into existential and spiritual suffering as refugees struggle to maintain meaning in life through prayer and faith. The description is as follows:

Table 1. The types of suffering endured by Sudanese refugees in the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah

No.	The Types of Suffering	Word / Dialogue	Interpretation	Description
1.	Physical Suffering	لقد سرنا على أقدامنا مسافة يوم كامل، الشمس خلّفت أثرا غائرة على الوجوه حفرت خطوطا عميقا، الشفاه صار لها لون الرماد والطريق ما زال	The body becomes an arena of violence due to heat, hunger, dehydration, and bleeding without help.	It shows the extreme vulnerability of refugees' bodies as a result of war and the blurring of the line between life and

		طويلا	death.
		<p>يبدو أنها كانت تنزف ... لم تستطع الفتاة الوقوف كانت تنزف دماء غزيرة، تلطم ثوبها بالكثير منها</p>	
2.	Psychological Suffering	<p>الحياة تبدو كنفق مظلم شفتهاها رغم الألم مبتسمتان</p>	<p>Trauma, fear, despair, loss of orientation. Smiling while dying signifies the collapse of emotional mechanisms.</p> <p>It shows inner destruction as severe as physical suffering, emphasizing the shift of humans from social subjects to beings who only try to survive.</p>
3.	Social Suffering	<p>لأنه لا أمل في الرجوع إلى الديار لم تعد هناك ديار أغلب هذه المساحات الرملية ، كانت قرى بها مئات الأسر كانت تفيض بالحياة والآن هي جزء من الصحراء والفناء والعدم</p>	<p>The loss of homes, communities, and social identity. Refugees no longer recognize themselves as citizens or owners of a place.</p> <p>This illustrates the total disintegration of Sudan's social structure and the loss of the collective space where human identity is built.</p>
4.	Existential Suffering	<p>تحدقان في الأفق البعيد أو في سراب الوصول إلى الحدود والالتحاق بمعسكر اللاجئين هناك</p>	<p>Questions about the meaning of life; physical limitations become existential boundaries between hope and emptiness.</p> <p>This reinforces the idea that suffering is not only physical and social, but touches the core of human existence: the loss of future and purpose in life.</p>
5.	Spiritual Suffering	<p>ثم دعاء الله أن يخفف عنهم عناء الرحلة ويلطف بالأطفال وأن يرفع عن الجميع وطأة</p>	<p>Prayer becomes the ultimate source of meaning and strength. Spirituality serves as</p> <p>It shows that spirituality is the last space where humans maintain their humanity amid the total destruction of</p>

الحنين إلى الديار resistance worldly
against despair. structures.

Based on Table 1 above, the suffering of Sudanese refugees in the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* by Omayma Abdullah, based on the sociology of literature perspective of Wallek and Warren and Agamben's theory of bare life, there are five forms of suffering, namely physical suffering, psychological suffering, social suffering, existential suffering, and spiritual suffering.

1. Physical Suffering: The Body as an Object of Violence

Physical suffering is the first element that appears in the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh*, because the characters' bodies bear witness to a journey filled with struggles between life and death. Their bodies are scorched by the sun, starving, dehydrated, and forced to continue walking through the endless desert. The description is found in the following excerpt:

لقد سرنا على أقدامنا مسافة يوم كامل، الشمس خلّفت أثاراً غائرة على الوجوه حفرت،
خطوطاً عميقاً، الشفاه صار لها لون الرماد والطريق مازال طويلاً

"We had walked barefoot the whole day, The sun had hollowed faces and etched deep lines; lips were painted the color of ash."

Sociologically, this physical suffering illustrates the condition of Sudanese society living in a conflict zone and lacking access to basic necessities such as food, water, healthcare, and shelter. According to Wallek and Warren, this condition reflects the social reality underlying the creation of the work, in which war has destroyed social structures, greatly impacting the Sudanese people's ability to meet their needs and survive.^[25] Furthermore, this suffering is also strongly illustrated in the following excerpt:

يبدو أنها كانت تنزف... لم تستطع الفتاة الوقوف كانت تنزف دماء غزيرة، تلطخ ثوبها بالكثير
منها

"It seemed she was hemorrhaging... Unable to stand, the pregnant woman hemorrhaged blood all over her clothes."

This physical suffering is also closely related to Agamben's concept of bare life. Bare life refers to a condition in which humans are reduced to mere biological organisms whose lives can only continue through bodily processes, while their rights as legal subjects are completely stripped away. In this short story, this condition is manifested through the figures of refugees who continue to move aimlessly with the sole purpose of surviving and the condition of women who give birth but experience bleeding without professional help and medical facilities. The absence of legal and social protection places them beyond the reach of the state and the community, so that their bodies become the only remaining existential capital as well as the arena where structural violence operates.^[26] The vulnerability of bodies that are barely able to perform their basic functions confirms that these figures exist in a state of *vita nuda*, a naked existence left to face suffering and vulnerability to death without legitimacy or attention from any socio-political structure.

2. Psychological Suffering: Trauma, Fear, and Uncertainty

Psychological suffering is an invisible emotional wound. The cries of frightened children and mothers who have lost hope illustrate the mental breakdown they are experiencing. This is reflected in the following sentence:

الحياة تبدو كنفق مظلم

“Life became nothing but a dark tunnel”

The above sentence emphasizes that refugees live in a state of mental darkness and directionlessness. Their fears are not only of physical threats, such as drought or starvation, but also of a future that can no longer be imagined, so that trauma becomes an experience that constantly dominates their minds. According to Agamben, this condition is called a *state of exception*. When law and order no longer function, humans lose not only their rights, but also their sense of security and orientation in life. They are trapped in fear between life and death.^[27] This form of suffering is also illustrated when a young woman who gives birth “smiles” even though she is dying:

شفتها رغم الألم مبتسمة

“Despite the pain, she smiled.”

That smile is not an expression of happiness or relief. It is a psychological reaction that arises when prolonged trauma has completely eroded a person's ability to maintain hope or fear. That smile is a visual manifestation of the inner destruction of a woman who has lost all emotional, social, and existential support. She is in the most vulnerable state, yet she is the most naked example of a life left to run its course without legal or social support. As her life slowly fades away, her body struggles alone, and that smile appears as a form of surrender to an inevitable fate.

2. Social Suffering: Loss of Community and Destruction of Life Structures

The ongoing war has destroyed Sudanese social communities. This is evident when the characters in the short story are uprooted from the communities that have shaped their identities. They no longer identify themselves as Sudanese citizens or homeowners, but rather as a group that has lost their place and social status. This suffering is reflected in the following sentence:

لا أمل في الرجوع إلى الديار لأنه لم تعد هناك ديار

“Returning home was a forlorn hope because home was gone.”

أغلب هذه المساحات الرملية كانت قرى بها مئات الأسر، كانت تفيض بالحياة والآن هي جزء من الصحراء والفناء والعدم

“Most of the sand you see was once spanned by villages... Now they've dissolved into nothing.”

Affirming that homes, villages, and even countries have been transformed into empty spaces that they can no longer claim as their own. The loss of this social space means the loss of relational, cultural, economic, and traditional networks that usually form the basis of collective identity. Based on Agamben's theory of bare life, this loss signifies the disappearance of *bios*, that is, life as recognized by the community, the law, and the state. They are still biologically alive, but are no longer recognized as subjects with a place in the social sphere.^[28]

4. Existential Suffering: Loss of Meaning in Life

Existential suffering is the deepest dimension of this narrative. It arises when the characters question the value of life itself in the face of imminent and inevitable death. The refugees walk without certainty about tomorrow, without any guarantee that their steps will lead to safety. The scene of Batool's death touches on the core of existential suffering:

تحدقان في الأفق البعيد أو في سراب الوصول إلى الحدود والالتحاق بمعسكر اللاجئين هناك

“caught in a futile struggle to see the refugee camp beyond the mirage of the border.”

Here, physical boundaries become a metaphor for the existential boundary between hope and emptiness. Batool died while imagining a salvation she never achieved. This existential suffering was formed from the destruction of basic values: home, family, future, and even her own body. In Agamben's framework, existential suffering arises when humans are in a state of “*homo sacer*,” a term for individuals who can be killed without it being considered murder and who can live without being considered valuable lives. It is at this point that we see the deepest reflection on the fragility of humanity.[29]

5. Spiritual Suffering: The Tension Between Despair and Faith

The dimension of spiritual suffering emerged through the efforts of these figures to maintain their faith amid extreme circumstances. The group leader continued to lead the prayers:

ثم دعاء الله أن يخفف عنهم عناء الرحلة ويلطف بالأطفال وأن يرفع عن الجميع وطأة الحنين إلى الديار

“he recited his prayers and asked Allah to ease the sufferings of the journey, bless the children and provide solace to anyone mourning the loss of their home.”

Prayer in the midst of this desert is not merely a ritual, but the only remaining moral foundation in the effort to preserve humanity when all worldly structures have collapsed. Prayer becomes a form of resistance against emptiness, as well as a way of restoring meaning in seemingly meaningless circumstances. However, spirituality here is not a form of escape, but rather the bitter reality that humans can only pin their hopes on something greater when the world has failed to protect them. In Agamben's perspective, this shows that even in the concept of bare life, humans still seek remnants of a higher quality of life (*bios*) through spiritual practices.[30]

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study reveal that the short story *al-Tariq 'abra al-Barzakh* reflects the humanitarian tragedy in Sudan, which is rooted in structural violence and the collapse of social order. The suffering of refugees manifests itself in five dimensions, namely physical, psychological, social, existential, and spiritual, where their bodies become objects of visible violence (dehydration, starvation, bleeding) and their souls are tormented by trauma and a loss of meaning in life. Sociologically, all these forms of suffering are a direct reflection of the destruction of the country's social structure, where basic needs and security cannot be met.

All this suffering places refugees in a state of bare life. They are reduced to pure biological existence (*zoe*) due to the revocation of legal protection and civil rights (*bios*). This condition creates *homo sacer*, where their lives are vulnerable to death without legal consequences. This reflects the political power that ignores them and revokes their humanity. Spiritualism that emerges through prayer is not an escape, but a last-ditch effort to preserve the remnants of meaning (*bios*) amid worldly emptiness.

Through this research, it is hoped that it can provide deep insights into understanding the trauma and marginalization experienced by refugees. It can also provide significant theoretical implications in the study of sociology of literature and the study of literary works through Agamben's biopolitical theory. Although this analysis successfully reveals the structure of suffering through Agamben's perspective and the context of the Sudanese conflict, this study has not touched on the aspect of reader reception, either from the Sudanese community or global readers, so the opportunity for broader socio-cultural interpretation remains open. Therefore, further research could be directed toward reception studies, trauma studies, or interdisciplinary studies that

combine conflict anthropology and other theories to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social context of this short story.

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