Reality in the Text and the Text in Reality: Integrating Migration Literature in the Study of Migration

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Abstract

Migration scholarship today agrees that migration can be understood most comprehensively through interdisciplinary research (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; Burge, 2020; Einhaus, 2018; King, Connell, & White, 2003; White, 1985). Although, traditionally, migration studies relied on positivistic methods, the opening towards postclassical and constructivist approaches has largely reduced the distinction between fictional and non-fictional sources. Despite this openness, some questions remain about how to integrate literature as a reliable source in interdisciplinary studies of migration. What can literature can tell about migration that other sources cannot? This paper explores some new insights that migration literature can provide for understanding better certain aspects of migration, which the conventional methodologies and sources in the study of migration cannot do. Literary texts fictionalize and subject to imaginative scrutiny one concrete dimension of the total structure of an epoch reflecting, in Stephen Greenblatt's words (Greenblatt, 1997), how the social energy inherent in a cultural practice is negotiated and exchanged, therefore they can be sites of representation and contestation of a migration mythology that results from the everyday interaction between migrants and natives in reception societies. Both media and literary texts can refer to the same concrete aspect about migration, but these texts may give us different insight into phenomena associated to migration, such as the creation and perpetuation of migration myths. By analyzing representations of the myth that migrants rely on social benefits, first in a news article published by Daily Mail (Beckford, 2016) and then in the novel *We Come Apart* (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017), this paper argues that, even though both mass media and fiction texts can contain representations of the same migration myth, the complexity of figurative language, the inclusion of multiple perspectives, and heterogeneous viewpoints allow literary texts provide more interpretative perspectives, thus facilitating the distinction of facts from myths in social contexts informed by hostility to migration.

Key words (alphabetically):

1. Introduction

Migration has constantly been in the top of Britain's media and cultural representations agenda since the beginning of the 21st century, with a noticeable intensification in the period preceding the 'Brexit' referendum. On July 23rd, 2014, Prime Minister David Cameron referred in a speech held at the Commonwealth Games Business Conference in Glasgow, Scotland to the need to tackle the "magnetic pull of Britain's benefit system" (James, 2014), thus reinforcing the myth that migrants in Britain are a social burden as they rely on social housing, free education and health care, and financial benefits.

The 'social burden myth' is, nevertheless, just one of the migration myths permeating the British society, which are mostly being spread through the conservative media outlets. From the belief that Britain is flooded by migrants, to British culture and identity are shattered by migration, to migrants being a threat to the British economy and social order, just to mention a few, migration myths have influenced the debate on migration, acting as convenient explanations for societal, political, or economic failures, as well as for shaping and justifying British natives' anti-migrant attitudes. As prominent migration scholar Hein de Haas claims, in contemporary Britain "much conventional thinking about migration is based on myths rather than facts" (De Haas, 2014). Besides, the way migration policies are designed and politics are run in contemporary Britain are not reliant on real insight of the causes and impact of migration, but highly influenced by a litany that conflates separate myths together into a cohesive story (Finney & Simpson, 2009, 161).

Given the wide presence of migration myths across the British society, migration researchers started to show interest in the implications these myths have in the emergence of nativist attitudes (De Haas, 2005, 2008, 2014, 2016; Finney & Simpson, 2009; Hayter, 2004; Wickramasekara, 2014) and work towards a critical assessment of myths and facts in order to dispel misconceptions about migrants and migration. Studies have also looked at the implications of the media through which migration myths are propagated, with special interest in the mass media representations of such myths and their impact. Recent scholarship in social sciences and media studies has explored the presence of migration myths in mass media (Arcimavičienė & Baglama, 2018; Balch & Balabanova, 2016; Mawby & Gisby, 2009; Threadgold, 2009; Ureta Vaquero, 2011), tracing the processes of migration myths creation and dissemination at societal level and exploring critically the ways mass media can contribute to shaping the public perception of migration and to

constructing discursively a migration crisis. Many of these studies focus on exposing the artificiality of the frames in which migration myths operate and how they attempt to create essentialist perceptions and evaluations of self and other. As the trend of incorporating migration myths in British news continues today, it can be anticipated that more sociological and critical discourse studies will be added to the already existing body of research.

The attention of scholars dealing with representations of migration myths has been, somehow justifiably, mostly drawn towards mass media texts, since the extensive amount of such sources backed by an established methodological and theoretical background facilitate such research. Nevertheless, migration myths occur in cultural representations as well, such as fiction texts about migrants and migration. However, up to now, there is a gap in the study of representations of migration myths in fiction texts, both in the particular case of migration literature representing migration from Central Eastern Europe to the UK and, in general, of any category of migration literature. I therefore consider it necessary to examine in this article representations of migration myths in literature as well, in order to fill this gap and thus start a scholarly debate on this topic. As already mentioned, the studies on discursive representation of migration myths in mass media provide important insight into the societal impact these myths may have. My approach complements such studies by focusing on the formal specificities that the literary domain can provide.

Although literature provides an adequate space for reflection and scrutiny of migrant experiences and of the impact of migration on society in a way that goes beyond the possibilities offered by non-fiction texts (King, Connell, & White, 2003, x), research on migration in literary texts is still an emerging field. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is to examine the idea that fiction narratives (i.e. literature) can contribute to the study of migration as a reliable, effective, and comprehensive sources, by applying an interdisciplinary approach and integrating literary studies in migration research, which, as Paul White suggests, facilitates the examination of neglected aspects about migration and opens up the possibility to raise new questions (White, 1985). By following the interpretative practices of New Historicism, which considers that literary texts have a role in documenting and mirroring realities of a particular culture in a particular phase of history, since they are ineluctably connected to a social-historical context that they represent (Greenblatt, 1988, 8), I address the question 'what can migration literature tell us about migration in addition to other sources?' To reach this objective, I perform a comparative analysis on how the 'social burden

myth' is represented in the media article *£886million... That is the eye-watering sum YOU pay in benefits to out-of-work EU migrants in just one year* (Beckford, 2016) and in the novel *We Come Apart* (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017). Therefore, the second objective is to pursue in my analysis what interpretative perspectives about the origins and effects of this myth in society the literature text provides, in order to explore the benefits of including fictional texts about migration as a source in the study of specific phenomena connected to migration.

The sources I analyse in this study were selected specifically for the purpose of comparing factual and fictional texts that include representations of the same social phenomenon, i.e. the myth that migrants in Britain in the pre-Brexit period are a burden for society. The news article *886million... That is the eye-watering sum YOU pay in benefits to out-of-work EU migrants in just one year*, published in *Mail Online* on the 26th of February 2016, builds the 'social burden myth' on the narrative that unemployed EU migrants, mostly those from Bulgaria and Romania, received £886 million in housing benefit, jobseeker's allowance, and sickness pay in the course of one year. By deploying statistics and data retrieved from Governmental sources, doubled by a persuasive rhetoric, the article intends to disseminate the myth that the British welfare system is threatened by the large number of migrants coming from Central Eastern European countries.

The novel *We Come Apart* by Sarah Crossan and Brian Conaghan, published in 2017, is a lyrical novel that depicts the story of Romanian Roma teenager Nicu, who moves to the UK with his family and struggles at his best abilities to pass for normal citizen, but implacably becomes a victim of a system imbued with prejudices and anti-migrant mythology. The experiences of interacting with the authorities as well as with his peers reveal an unanticipated side of the British society until his rehab and school mate, Jess, decides to look at him beyond the veil of prejudice and ignorance. The adventure of discovering each other's humanity develops into an affectionate relation which eventually proves to have fatal consequences for Nicu.

2. Interdisciplinary Migration Studies beyond Social Sciences

Looking at the texts I analyse in this article through the lenses of interdisciplinary methodology, it is crucial to mention that I consider both fictional cultural expressions, such as novels, and allegedly factual ones, such as news articles, to offer only representations of social phenomena and not reflect social reality as such. Migration research has for long been dominated by mono-disciplinary strategies, which, despite the complexity of their theoretical and methodological

approaches, cannot capture and explain comprehensively all the complex aspects of migration processes (King et al., 2003, x). Steven Castles contends that disciplinary boundaries and paradigmatic closure restrain an effective and sympathetic study of human migration, leading to loss of comprehension of the overall migratory process. This fragmentation into fields of study "conflicts with the lived reality of migrants, who experience migration, settlement, ethnic relations, public policies, language issues and identity construction as closely related and overlapping segments of a single process" (Castles, 2000, 15). The results of mono-disciplinary research make sense in terms of a single discipline, but appear incomplete in the context of migrants' overall experience.

To overcome the challenges of this disciplinary fragmentation, many contemporary scholars (Bald, 2003; Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; Burge, 2020; Castles, 2000; Castles, De Haas, & Miller, 2014; Einhaus, 2018; King et al., 2003; Massey et al., 1993; White, 1985) argue for more openness towards an interdisciplinary approach in migration studies. In the wake of this debate, some scholars have tried to outline theoretical and methodological directions in this sense. I would mention a few seminal works - documenting and mirroring such as the textbooks edited by Thomas Hammar and his colleagues (Hammar, Brochmann, Tamas, & Faist, 1997), Caroline Brettell and James Hollifield (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015), Michi Messer, Renee Schroeder, and Ruth Wodak (Messer, Schroeder, & Wodak, 2012), as well as the contributions done by Michael Samers (Samers, 2010) and Russell King (King, 2002, 2012).

The social scientific approaches adopted and the sources used by classical migration studies can shed light on many relevant aspects related to economic, political, social, and cultural circumstances of migration, but, as King, Connell, and White contend, they "fail to capture the essence of what it is like to be a migrant: and be, or not be, part of a community, a nation, a society— cut off from history and from a sense of place. It fails to portray nostalgia, anomie, exile, rootlessness, restlessness" (King et al., 2003, ix-x). Such gaps in the study of migration can be filled by employing an interdisciplinary approach and integrate literary studies in migration research. In the New Historicist tradition, literature is considered as inseparable from society, not just because it is created in society (i.e. the materiality of the text), but also because the literary text fictionalizes and subjects to imaginative scrutiny one concrete dimension of the total structure of an epoch, therefore, fiction texts can be considered as reliable sources for assessing phenomena connected to migration, including migration myths. As Stephen Greenblatt contends, a text is more

than a linguistic and aesthetic structure; it is produced by humans and thus informed by the forces and conditions that shape society, encapsulating "the social energy encoded in those works" (Greenblatt, 1988, 6). Literature thus, besides its aesthetic function, documents and mirrors "how the social energy inherent in a cultural practice is negotiated and exchanged" (Greenblatt, 1988, 12). It can be argued that literary texts rightfully have a role in documenting and mirroring realities of a particular culture in a particular phase of history, since they are ineluctably connected to a social-historical context that is manifest beyond their material and aesthetic dimensions. Being "anchored in the larger reality they represent" (Tew, 2007, 13), they prove to be effective tools that facilitate the comprehension of the social world as they "both rationalize and engage dialectically with our historical presence, playing their part, however provisionally at times, in our understanding of and reflection upon our lives" (7).

The new historicist turn in the study of literature has opened the interest of some scholars (Burge, 2020; King et al., 2003; White, 1985) towards constructivist epistemological approaches in migration studies as well. The tradition they established considers both literary and non-literary texts as viable objects of analysis, thus largely dissolving the difference between fiction and non-fiction, between factual and imaginative sources. This new perspective in migration studies acknowledges the importance of humanities in understanding migration and rightfully consider that just as "social constructivism discourages researchers from seeking objective 'truths', so too can migration literature be helpful for thinking beyond the idea of authenticity and 'truth' to consider what can be revealed by the way these texts use literary forms and techniques" (Burge, 2020, 16). In the wake of this tradition, I consider that any text that deals with migration, either fictional of factual, can represent valid material for qualitative interpretation, since narrative truth should be evaluated by verisimilitude rather than verifiability.

Moreover, literary texts are fit for the analysis of extratextual aspects of migration reality as they include representations of real-world phenomena such as the way agents involved in migration create meaning about events, situations, and people, the experiences of migrants negotiating their social position and power relations in a particular social-historical context, the processes of migrants' identity (re)configuration, the individual and group attitudes emerging from the interaction between migrants and natives in communities informed by migration, the cultural constructs resulting from such interactions, or the structural transformations that migration triggers in society. By drawing their energy and inspiration from the real world, fiction texts depict

recognisable social and cultural practices in setting, plot, and character development and therefore they function as an expression of an existing social-historical environment, of the ideological traces, world-views, political order, and individual sensibilities that inform them.

Insofar as literature is an adequate medium for the representation of contested world views, in which vulnerable and marginal groups receive a voice, it undoubtedly provides a space for reflecting critically the relations that establish between migrants and natives in societies informed by migration. The scrutiny of such writings, combined with other sources, can therefore provide a deeper understanding of the complex realities of migration, which are often informed by ambiguous and contradictory experiences, by mixed emotions resulting from the interaction between migrants on one side, and the new environment and the natives on the other.

3. Contemporary Migration Myths: Some Explanations

Since the end of World War 2, the British society has continuously been influenced by increased migration, which has brought diversity, but also triggered divisions between supporters and critics of migration. The latter group has often employed migration myths to justify the need for migration control and for explaining failures of domestic politics or economy. The social-historical context informed by increased migration from the Central Eastern European countries after 2004 has particularly been affected by an unprecedented instrumentalisation of manipulative myths and detrimental narratives about migration, either targeting Eastern European or other categories of migrants, which has engendered nativist attitudes and endorsed anti-migrant policies. These elements of the anti-migrant discourse, permeating either the public sphere, the mass media, or cultural representations, need to be confronted by a rigorous, critical examination. My study intends to contribute to the already existing research that has been done in social sciences on representations of migration myths in the British mass media in recent years and, at the same time, explore the potential of literary texts to critically assess the migration myths that often inform the plot of migration literature texts.

The term *migration myth* is not new and completely unexplored, but scholarship referred in this study, which critically assesses the deployment of migration myths in mass media, has failed to provide an articulated definition of the concept. In the above mentioned critical studies, migration myths are generally perceived as narratives about migration that are untrue, as in the expression 'that's just a myth', and which deploy overstatements, oversimplifications, and generalisations to

influence the public perception of migration. This interpretation is in line with the definition provided by Finney and Simpson in their study on the use of statistics in the creation of myths about race and migration, who consider that migration myths are "legends or powerful stories that have influence but are not true" (Finney & Simpson, 2009, 13). Myth, however, is a fluid phenomenon that permeates all world's cultures in all times and its function cannot be reduced just to misleading the way a group perceives phenomena, people, and events. Characteristic for myth is to provide collectively accepted explanations for the way things work, to help understand the positions a group occupies in society at a certain time, to provide means to crystallise common beliefs and attitudes, and to underpin ideological group positions and political preferences. As Christopher Flood argues, "mythicality arises from the intricate, highly variable relationship between claims to validity, discursive construction, ideological marking, and reception of the account by a particular audience in a particular historical context" (Flood, 2002, 2). It is therefore sensible to consider that myths address a particular event or situation and are rooted in the culture of a particular group. They do not provide just an explanation, but also a practical argument that imposes a certain course of action, whose finality is either the survival or the empowerment of a community. It is these characteristics that explain the myth's pervasiveness, despite the low degree of veracity informing the narrative it contains. Myths are followed, although not necessarily believed, just because they concentrate a way of understanding, thinking of, and expressing about social issues, such as migration, that are commonly accepted by the members of a group. Myths become memorable because they repeat what is already known to be 'true', and this makes them culturally entrenched and therefore difficult to challenge.

Although the common understanding of myth in today's social context has derogatory connotation, not all myths are harmful; by contrary, myths can be seen as "narratives that coagulate and reproduce significance […] by which the members of a social group or society represent and posit their experience and deeds." (Bottici, 2007, 201) and thus contribute to the construction of the social imaginary and constitute the framework for policy making. Myths become problematic when they promote a narrative that "pivots around the dichotomy that opposes a 'we' to a 'they'" (Bottici & Challand, 2013, 11), thus stimulating prejudice, division, discrimination, hostility, and tension between groups. Migration myth is therefore understood in this study as a category of myth whose subject matter involves fabricated or exaggerated references to migrants or instances of migration, originates in the antagonisms raised by the interaction between migrants and natives, and aims at

explaining supremacist and nativist attitudes, actions, and policies as well justify the existence of an alleged ethno-politically homogeneous and stable body nation. Many contemporary migration myths are therefore problematic because they impede communication between migrants and natives and thus create and uphold symbolic borders between these groups.

4. What Can Migration Literature Tell Us about Migration in Addition to Other Sources?

A critical analysis of how the myth that migrants rely on social benefits in the UK is depicted in mass media and fiction revolves around a set of questions about the conditions each category of text provides for a balanced interpretation and to increase the possibility to distinguish the myth from reality. A first criterion I take into consideration in my analysis refers to the **perspectives rendered in the text**. The news article *886million... That is the eye-watering sum YOU pay in benefits to out-of-work EU migrants in just one year* incorporates exclusively the viewpoint of migration critics. The myth that migrants drain the welfare system is supported by the use of unsourced figures and statistics, unclear references to mainstream sources (e.g. the Office for National Statistics), and statements of politicians who are known to be notorious critics of migration, such as Philip Davies, a Conservative MP "who has repeatedly failed to obtain Government statistics on the migrant welfare bill, said: 'It's amazing we've got some figures at last, but one has to question how reliable they are. They certainly won't be underestimates. It's quite clear that immigration has gone up recently so the figures must be well over a billion pounds now, even by the Government's own estimates" (Beckford, 2016). The ambiguous use of the expression "it's quite clear" with reference to the [exaggerated] level of migration and the costs it entails triggers a victimisation effect and implies the 'truth' that Britain's 'immigration burden' is unprecedented and unique in European context. Davies' claim is however incomplete and de-contextualised, as he disregards the net impact of migration (immigration minus emigration), which has been rather balanced throughout the last two decades (Finney & Simpson, 2009, 55), as well as the fact that the increase of migration to and from the UK is not exceptional, but in line with international migration levels across the world.

The type of discourse employed by Davies, as well as the general tone of the article, arises a sense of urgency and conceals an underlying agenda that promotes Britain's withdrawal from the EU: "At last we are laying bare the huge cost of being a member of the EU. The changes the Prime

Minister has negotiated are trifling – the only way to restrict benefits to EU migrants is to leave the EU" (Beckford, 2016), Davies sustains. Although the article employs descriptive language in the attempt to render reality as objectively as possible, the single perspective, biased discourse, and dubious use of sources signal a distorted representation of a concrete situation. No migrant, non-governmental organisation (NGO), or politician that favours migration is quoted whatsoever, thus exposing the article to 'the dangers of the single story' (Adichie, 2009) that can hinder a more complex, critical interpretation of the reality it describes; the article rather reinforces the myth and thus contributes to the perception of migrants as 'scroungers', 'bogus', and 'profiteers' (Beckford, 2016).

The novel *We Come Apart* facilitates a more balanced perception of migration providing insight into the relation between the socio-historical context and the concrete phenomena that inform it. The use of multiple perspective underpins a critical, more nuanced approach of the 'social burden myth' as the reader has access to antinomical views about the same events, thus having the possibility to question the validity of different narratives. In the novel, the 'social burden myth' is expressed through the statements, attitudes, and actions of the character Terry, Jess' stepfather, who is depicted as a typical middle class English man with nativist views:

> They're only here five minutes
> and the council's putting them in houses
> down Lordship Lane.
> It's disgusting.
> Taxpayers' money
> putting up scroungers
> who'd pimp out their
> own kids for a pound. (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 136)

Terry epitomises throughout the novel the influence that migration myths may have in the attitude formation of British natives. As the narrative shows, he hardly has any direct contact with migrants and his opinions are influenced by the media entries and the 'pub talk' with his peers. The narrative technique of multiple voicing employed in the novel, however, juxtaposes his perspective with that of his stepdaughter, Jess, who develops a genuinely sympathetic, affectionate relation with Romanian Roma migrant Nicu. If during the first contacts with Nicu she displays traces of 'banal' nativism, socially constructed in the family and school environment, Jess' propensity to develop overcomes her prejudices. She reluctantly engages in dialogue with Nicu just to discover his humanity, amiable character, and true intentions. Nicu and his family are by no means 'free riders'

on the British welfare system, as Jess finds out, but tax paying hard workers who pay their rent and hardly use any of the social security benefits:

> Tata [*father,* Romanian] lucky he have connections
> to give him strong job.
> On some days after we arrive
> I helping Tata with his tough work.
> He driving his white lorry van
> around streets,
> spying
> seeking
> searching
> for the metals that people in
> North London
> not wanting. (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 8)

Terry's unequivocal perspective on migrants as "scroungers" living on "taxpayers' money" (136) subscribes to the mythical mind-frame that unilaterally projects all migrants in the category of bogus welfare beneficiaries in a similar way the news article *886million...* does. Nevertheless, the multiple perspectives present in the novel juxtapose the reductionist view of migrants ingrained in the myth with the complex depiction of migration realities, which inspires plausibility due to the detailed and realistic account of events. Jess' positionality towards Nicu's condition as a migrant, which changes from careless, unaware rejection to conscious and assumed acceptance, creates the premises for the reader to experience alternative ways of seeing and assess critically dissonant representations of the same phenomenon.

A second analysis criterion refers to the **choice of key terms designating migrants**. The way the news article refers to migrants is meant to create a blur effect; the main focus of the article is Central Eastern European economic migrants, but the manner of signifying this central concept is informed by bewildering linguistic twists, as distinct terms such as *migrants, work migrants, work EU migrants, jobless European immigrants, unemployed EU migrants, Romanian and Bulgarian migrants, EU migrants, jobless Europeans, foreigners, foreign born people* (Beckford, 2016) are used inter-changeably to refer to the same category of people. In addition, a picture of a large group of people running in an urbanised landscape is accompanied by a caption conflating references to *Romanian and Bulgarian migrants* and *refugees* (Beckford, 2016), blurring even more the connection between reality and story and thus enhancing the narrative's mythical effect. This apparently indiscriminate mingling of various terms signifying *economic migrants,* conflated with the modifiers *jobless, unemployed,* and *foreigner* has the effect to arise the suspicion of the reader

that any person that can be in any way associated with migration from certain parts of the world, Eastern Europe in this case, represents a potential danger of draining the resources of the British welfare system.

In contrast to the reductionist effect of the language use in the news article, the richness of the literary text in terms of vocabulary, description, and use of figuration increases the complexity of the story, which opens up more possibilities of interpretation regarding the condition of migrants. By following the development of the intricate relation between Jess and Nicu, the novel explores the protagonists' innermost thoughts and feelings, their attitudes, and reactions, which allows them, and implicitly the reader, to access the complexities and contradictions comprised in the signifier *migrant*. If the vocabulary of the news article attempts to confiscate the meaning of the term *migrant* and equate it with a social burden, in the novel *We Come Apart* we encounter various terms describing Nicu's migrant condition. Terry employs a pool of words to refer to migrants that includes "dirty immigrant, rat scum" (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 92) and "scroungers" (136), whereas Jess and Nicu's schoolmates designate Nicu as "stinking gyppo" and "rat boy gypsy scum" (133). Jess herself refers to Nicu as "gypsy wolf boy" (80) after their first contact. Nevertheless, unlike the news article, the novel does not mean to attach a single meaning to the signified *migrant*, but grants a larger flexibility of employed signifiers. The narrative flow, which simply depicts events, relations, and characters' experiences and feelings, challenges the readers to for themselves what semantic categories suit the characters. Jess' transformation on the way from ignorance to familiarity, from denial to acceptance, from rejection to inclusion, from hate to love triggers the inclusion of signifiers that allows the reader to asses critically the social burden myth in the novel. As Jess learns about Nicu's daily routine and his intentions - "I want to stay here! I need to go to school, work the hardest, have a job like businessman, making clean money, find my own wife" (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 94) - she changes not just her perspective on Nicu, but also the signifiers she attaches to him: from "gypsy wolf boy" (80) to "good citizen" (93).

The last analysis criterion I explore in this study refers to the **arguing techniques**. The news article employs the *"numbers game"* (van Dijk, 2000, 45) by repeatedly including large numbers, which seeks to draw attention and often exaggerate the scope and scale of migration. At the same time, the argument that underpins the myth that migrants drain the welfare system is obsessively sustained by statistics and inclusion of precise numbers, often selectively presented, manipulated or, at times, if convenient for the argument, simply ignored, which however generates a feeling of

irrefutability and reliance. The myth is already incorporated in the article's headline and the inclusion of an unequivocal sum intends to sustain an unquestionable truth: *£886million... That is the eye-watering sum YOU pay in benefits to out-of-work EU migrants in just one year* (Beckford, 2016). Besides, the 'numbers game' infuses the entire text, meaning to argue for the narrative's veracity beyond rhetorical language: "… detailed statistics published alongside the report by the Department for Work and Pensions give a far bigger figure. They show the total 'out-of-work expenditure' on European migrants was £886 million in 2013-14. Of this, £465 million went on Housing Benefit, £216 million on Jobseeker's Allowance and the remaining £205 million on disability payments" (Beckford, 2016). It is no surprise that statistics are employed to endorse a myth, since it generally accepted that statistics have authority as they are associated with science and scientific methods (Finney & Simpson, 2009, 11) and, in this context, the reference to documented numbers and the reliance on surveys and censuses are meant to legitimise the narrative of the 'social burden myth'. The recurrence of large numbers is not value neutral, but it is meant to arise public concern and incite fear over the number of migrants and the effects of their presence over the welfare system. The emphasis on the reader through the capitalisation of the pronoun "YOU" (Beckford, 2016) in the headline has the double effect to draw attention to the numbers on which the narrative relies and to involve personally the reader(s); as in any myth, the adherence to a story is a crucial feature, and this rhetorical feature implies the reader's appropriation of, and mergence with the story.

As mentioned before, the major danger about contemporary migration myths is the effect they have on dividing communities and raising hostility. The urgency of myth's language promotes fear and the unequivocal argumentation hinders critical interpretation and confrontation with reality. The news article *886 million …* obsessively argues for the myth's veracity, displaying a unilateral perspective that allows no room for *counterarguments*. In the context of critical study of myths, *counterarguments* are defined as "narratives with a different message" (Finney & Simpson, 2009, 15), which often refer to a common humanity, or to neighbours' common conditions and interests (15), thus stimulating empathy and cosmopolitan dialogue between migrants and natives beyond prejudices, stereotypes, and segregation. In daily narratives, *counterarguments* have rarely held the weight, pervasiveness and strength of contemporary myths (15); as mentioned above, the news article *886 million …* allows no room for such narratives, prioritising the conveyance of the unequivocal message that the British welfare system is under the siege of Eastern European

migrants. The novel *We Come Apart* lays no claim on convincing the readers of one or another perspective's veracity; it just presents a story of humane, easily recognisable characters, who are exposed to failure as well as redemption, who have dilemmas and hesitations. As a form of perpetuation of the 'social burden myth', most characters of British decent regard Nicu as non-integrable, dependent migrant; the myth seems to have attached to him irreversibly the label "scrounger", triggering Nicu's identity crisis:

> It is so much frustrating
> when words can't escape my head,
> when peoples not
> understand my meanings.
> All I want
> is for them to see how
> I am fun,
> clever,
> and
> nice guy.
>
> I afraid no one
> ever know who I am. (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 77)

Jess, nevertheless, comes to perceive Nicu beyond the veil of prejudice and the story of their relationship acts as a counterargument to the narrative of the 'social burden myth'. The depiction of realistic, believable details presents the story of Jess and Nicu's relationship as a persuasive, authoritative *counterargument* that dispels the claims to truth ingrained in the myth. The novel, unlike the news article, appeals to no evidence or hard data, but presents the reader with a narrative that highlights the benefits of contact, communication, openness, dialogue, empathy, and desire to encounter different people and experience different cultures. The epiphany that liberates Jess completely of the prejudiced, reductionist view on Nicu as migrant occurs when she visits Nicu's flat, of which Terry, her stepfather, claims to be a luxury, "down Lordship Lane house" (136) paid by council. The reality, however, revels a self-rented flat that "smelled clean" (210), but otherwise far from Terry's fanciful depiction, with

> Windows covered in
> bed sheets,
> gangs of kids everywhere
> and loads of people with dogs on chains –
> a total hellhole. (Crossan & Conaghan, 2017, 137)

The discovery of Nicu's and his family's true condition triggers a major change in Jess' attitude and way of perceiving migrants. This transformation represents a form of counterclaim that challenges the migration myths influencing her stepfather and most of her schoolmates, which also opens alternative interpretative perspectives for readers. The novel *We Come Apart,* similarly to other migration fiction texts, by accommodating antagonistic characters, contradictory viewpoints, and representations of opposite angles and multiple perspectives on event, phenomena, and people, does not attempt to impose a 'true' and unique view on the migration 'social burden myth', but rather stimulates each reader to reflect critically and assess the myths and facts in order to dispel misconceptions.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, this article contributes to filling the gaps in research that explores how migration myths are represented in literary texts. In the first section, I have argued for the importance of including fiction and literary studies in the study of migration, relying on the theoretical background of New Historicism, which considers literature to be a reliable source in the examination of social reality on the same level to factual texts. Furthermore, by performing a comparative analysis of how the myth that migrants represent a social burden for the British welfare system is represented in a news article and a novel, I have argued that the way these texts represent the myth may influence readers' the interpretation ability to discern between facts and misconceptions. The news article conveys a single perspective of the narrative that migrants exploit the welfare system, employing unequivocal claims to truth that are sustained by allegedly irrefutable numbers and statistics, as well as a deceiving vocabulary that includes imprecise terms to designate labour migrants. The way the novel treats the relation between migrants and the British welfare system provides more interpretative possibilities of this issue; through the inclusion of multiple perspectives, the employment of connotative language, and alternative viewpoints, the novel stimulates critical interpretation and facilitates the distinction of facts from myths.

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