

The ironic life of African migrants in Paris



IN Paris recently I noticed an extraordinary phenomenon unfolding around the Eiffel Tower during a casual afternoon stroll. The *sans-papiers*—as the undocumented migrants are known in local parlance—vended touristy souvenirs around the Champ de Mars, Place du Trocadéro, and the Palais de Chaillot. They often played hide-and-seek games with the police to avoid detection. Struggling migrants from Africa—or more specifically from countries such as the Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Mali, Senegal, Eritrea, and Niger—these vendors live a shadowy life in Paris and survive in a particular type of parallel underground economy of the city's tourism industry. Curiously, they sell mostly one product: miniature replicas of the Eiffel Tower. Their surreptitious economic footprint wraps around Gustave Eiffel's soaring tower, built in 1889 to commemorate the centennial of the French Revolution.

Here is the great irony. The *sans-papiers*—whose best self-defense in a hostile environment, one would imagine, is to be socially invisible—make a living peddling the most visible, conspicuous architectural icon of Paris. Many of them cross the Mediterranean Sea in rickety boats risking their lives, gradually move from different port cities to the cultural and economic heart of France, and, finally, occupy a social space that accidentally conflates two most unlikely global conditions: the migrant's unstable, floating life, and iconic architecture, percolating within the transient space of global tourism.

The story doesn't end there. The



A souvenir vendor sells Eiffel Tower models for tourists in front of the Eiffel Tower at the Trocadero in Paris in 2011.

PHOTO: REUTERS

miniature Eiffel Towers are made in China. The socially invisible migrant sells the most visible architectural trope of French cultural chauvinism to tourists from across the world.

The state system seems to tolerate the *sans-papiers* as long they are humanoid silhouettes, not real people with real names, real addresses, real families, and personal histories. Always at the mercy of the state's shifting migration politics and the focus of many worried gazes, they are the spectral protagonists of a global narrative, one in which Europe, Africa, and Asia converge at the foot of a wrought-iron tower.

The social dramas that take place around the Parisian monument offer poignant narratives of modern migration, globalisation, xenophobia, anticipation, and nationalist angsts. Thus, the migrant's story couldn't be explained away as one of mere resilient survival.

In 2005, estimates of France's illegal immigrant population were placed

somewhere around 400,000 people. Undocumented migrants have been trickling into Paris. According to some aid groups, as many as 100 migrants pour into Paris, the "City of Lights," each day. The dream is to get asylum in France or cross the English Channel to eventually reach Britain. In 2016, over 160,000 migrants crossed the central Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Italy and other European destinations. Many perish in the rough waters of the sea. The United Nations Refugee Agency reported that 239 migrants drowned in two boat capsizes alone in 2016.

The crisis has sparked new kinds of transnational dialogue. European government officials have been trying to persuade African governments to beef up their efforts to minimise the northbound traffic. Aid and other forms of international cooperation have been promised. For instance German Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Ethiopia, Mali, and Niger to discuss how the refugee crisis in Europe could

be resolved through sharing resources and offering military aid.

Why are African and Asian migrants flocking to Europe en masse?

Many African observers believe that the current migration crisis is a result of some of France's postcolonial practices. French businesses brought large numbers of workers from former African colonies as cheap labour. Current migrants continue to come to France with hopes of finding work, building a better life, and joining family members who have already settled there. They also try to escape from ethnic conflicts, civil wars, corrupt governments, and lack of economic opportunities in their home countries.

Furthermore, there is this entrenched belief among Africans that France has built enormous networks of corruption across Africa in collusion with African leaders. Still, many desperate Africans believe that risking their lives in a perilous boat journey is far better than living under a constant threat of death in their native countries, devastated by ethnic rivalry. A brighter life is only one sea voyage away, no matter how precarious it is. Thus, the crowded boats on the Mediterranean are signs of extreme desperation and anxious global mobility.

When some of the people survive the dangerous sea journey, arrive at the Eiffel Tower, and begin vending its Chinese-made miniature version, globalisation and national identity dovetail in a saga of unlikely protagonists and their hide-and-seek economies. As much as the Eiffel Tower, the *sans-papiers* inadvertently become new emblems of France and a category of "Frenchness" that the country projects on to the world stage.

Like the uncertain and unwelcome lives of the migrants roaming around its base, the Eiffel Tower's beginning was dubious. Before it was inaugurated on March 31, 1889, Gustave Eiffel's monumental structure attracted the

wrath of many of France's famous writers, artists, and intellectuals, who wrote a scathing letter, rejecting the iron "monstrosity" as fundamentally incompatible with French values and aesthetic consciousness. Eiffel sought to justify his creation on both aesthetic and functional grounds, offering a range of historic precedents and a seemingly inexhaustible list of practical uses for the tower.

In the 21st century, the *sans-papiers* find themselves in a somewhat parallel situation, having to justify their presence in France on grounds of human rights, open-society ethos, and social justice. The great French writer Guy de Maupassant hated the Eiffel Tower, the then-tallest human-made structure in the world (the record previously held by the Washington Monument), yet he lunched at the restaurant located inside the tower, so that he wouldn't have to see it. By going in, thereby internalising it, Maupassant self-choreographed a love-hate relationship with the Eiffel Tower.

Here is another uncanny parallel with the undocumented migrants, who suffer constant humiliation of social exclusion in their adoptive country, while, paradoxically, selling her undisputed cultural symbol to thousands of global tourists each day. Their livelihood depends on the very icon of the country that frequently refuses to give them legal status. The Eiffel Tower is the epitome of French pride and the refugee's uncomfortable hope for the future.

Could Gustave Eiffel in the late 19th century imagine a more ironic practical use of his monument as the subterfuge of anxious migrants?

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America's fraught midterm polls

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

NEVER has America been so bitterly polarised, nor midterm congressional and state gubernatorial polls aroused such frenzied partisan feelings. For both Democrats and the Republicans, this electoral battle has enormous portents. The early voting turnout (some states allow this) has been of an unprecedentedly high level, demonstrating how serious the stakes are in this election. For the Democratic Party in particular, it is no less than an existential fight.

If the Republicans retain control of both the House and the Senate, the Democrats will be in an utterly forlorn plight. The troubling agenda that President Trump has been pushing with maniacal zeal—anti immigration moves, tax cut tilted towards the wealthy, dismantling insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, a virulent nativism, ending birth-right citizenship, and so forth—and will proceed completely unchecked.

In a broader and more critical sense, America's traditional ethos of nurturing a tolerant inclusive society where people of diverse ethnic and religious background can live peacefully and harmoniously (already under threat in Trump's first two years of presidency) will be grievously imperilled.

The consequence of the midterm will transcend America's frontiers. This country has been a beacon of democracy and rule-based polity, and in the past served as a template and inspiration for other nations aspiring to construct a healthy democracy. Sadly, in recent times America's appeal has frayed, especially with the kind of

trends taking root under Trump's leadership. The president of America wields such awesome power that his influence, not only in his domestic sphere but in the broader global arena. We have seen how he has already shaken up the long-established practices. No American president before has been known to behave in this manner. Never before did any president call the media "the enemy of the people". Indeed, they have usually been a force for stability and inclusiveness.

The *Economist* magazine said, with good reason that the failure of the Democrats to win control of at least one of either the House or the Senate bode ill for America's democratic future. Democracy's health requires that debates be based on truth and evidence, not made up stuff and creation of false and vacuous issues.

Until the last couple of weeks or so, the midterm electoral scene did not look promising for the Democrats. After the party lost the presidential election in 2016, demoralisation seemed to set in and the Democrats seemed to lose their way. There has been an internal rift between the left wing and the centrist elements. There has not been any figure showing promise of inspiring leadership. If the party achieves success in this election, it faces a big challenge for reorganisation and framing a purposeful agenda.

The midterm outlook for the Democrats began to brighten only in the last few weeks. The shooting of 11 worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh on the heels of parcel bomb threats against a number of prominent Democrats were catalysts. No one accused the president directly, but there was a tide of criticism in the media that



Voters cast their ballots at a polling station in Alhambra, California on November 4, 2014.

PHOTO: FREDERIC J BROWN/AFP

the targeted people of bomb threats were those whom he berated and dehumanised. It was as if he had created a permissive climate.

It needs to be pointed out that when the Republican dominated Senate confirmed the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh, accused of harassing a woman, to the Supreme Court after a bitter debate in the judiciary committee, women were deeply alienated. America's top lawyers and law professors objected to this appointment. Some remarks Kavanaugh made during his hearing also blatantly showed his hostility to the Democrats. It was said by his critics that his openly expressed political bias disqualified him to be a Supreme Court judge. The #MeToo women's movement launched into a furious agitation against the

Republicans. It is now obvious that a swathe of women, who voted for Trump in 2016, will shift to the Democrats in the midterm polls. In recent days, there is a widespread sense in the media that just ahead of the November 6 polls, a blue (Democratic) wave has begun. How reliable this view is will only be known on election day.

In this midterm, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives, 35 of the 100 seats of Senate and 39 state gubernatorial seats will be in play. Predictions are that the Democrats will take control of the House and to do that they need to win back 23 seats. Republicans look likely to retain, and perhaps even enhance, their current 51/49 majority in Senate. For Democrats, even retrieving the house will mean that the President will be

under some check. A point to note is that a Democratic House will protect the ongoing investigation of special counsel Robert Mueller into Russian collusion with the Trump campaign in 2016 elections and possible obstruction of justice by Trump.

A Democratic House may also demand that Trump reveal his tax returns—something he has not done. There are some other areas where the House can make trouble for the President. Time will reveal if they opt for a deal making approach on issues where there is shared interest. Some of these areas are healthcare, infrastructure development etc.

If the Democrats do well in the election of the state Governors, and win in some of the swing states like Florida, Ohio, Iowa, Minnesota, it could bode ill for Trump's 2020 re-election chances. The Governors have a lot power in shaping politics in their states. They can redraw the voting districts, thereby reversing the advantage the Republicans created for themselves.

If the Republicans retain both the House and the Senate, it will be an affirmation of the agenda that President Trump is pushing. His already strong grip over the Republican party will be further strengthened. There is a consensus among analysts that he will not change his ways until he faces consequences that hurt him.

The midterm elections will show which direction American politics takes. It will be a test of whether Americans want to restore civility, ethics, inclusiveness and humanity that have been the historic and defining features of the country's ethos.

Ziaus Shams Chowdhury is a former ambassador.

QUOTABLE Quote



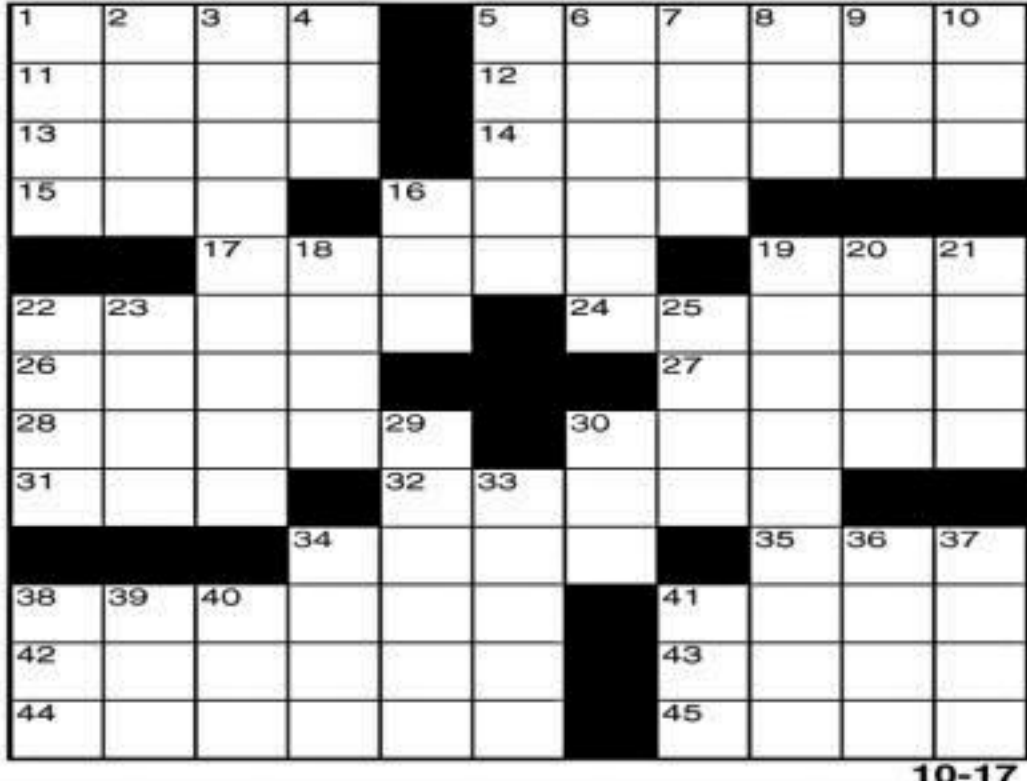
ISMAIL KADARE (b. 1936)
Albanian novelist, poet, essayist and playwright

Dictatorship and authentic literature are incompatible... The writer is the natural enemy of dictatorship.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Milk buy	10 Each
1 Hang open	34 Wrath	16 Lingerie buy
5 Treat for Tabby	35 Vigor	18 Spheres
11 Persia, today	38 Travel woe	19 Minnesota capital
12 Each	41 Tear down	20 Eyeball
13 Glided	42 Take to the sky	21 Stiff drink
14 Spree	43 Mystique	22 Bistro's kin
15 Great weight	44 Word on a poster	23 Vaccine type
16 Like some cars	45 Severe criticism	25 Brother of Loki
17 Rich dessert		29 Consider the same
19 Cry loudly	DOWN	30 Spring month
22 Hooded snake	1 Main idea	33 Encouraged
24 Theater feature	2 Singer Guthrie	34 Level
26 Speedy horse	3 Colorful sport	36 Poet Pound
27 Sledding site	4 Goal	37 Summit
28 Untrue	5 Labrador explorer	38 Mouth mover
30 "Water Lilies" painter	6 Summits	39 Longoria of TV
31 Building wing	7 Wee	40 Badge material
	8 Homer's neighbor	41 Brit. fliers
	9 Driving hazard	

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BEETLE BAILEY

GREG+ MORT WALKER



BY MORT WALKER

WHAT'S HE DOING HERE?



BABY BLUES

I'M GLAD YOU HAD FUN AT SEWING CLASS TODAY.



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

MAYBE I'LL DESIGN CLOTHES FOR A LIVING SOMEDAY, TOO.

