The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

Exile, Migration, and Law in World Literature

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.14

Abstract:

"Home is not where you are born, but where you are understood." This idea gives emotional and legal weight to the study of exile and migration. World literature has repeatedly returned to people who are forced to leave their homelands, live between borders, or struggle to secure recognition in unfamiliar legal systems. Such narratives do not treat displacement as a mere movement across territory. They show how migration changes identity, memory, language, family life, and one's sense of belonging. This paper examines the intersection of exile, migration, and law in world literature, with attention to how literary texts portray the protective promise as well as the exclusionary limits of law. Legal categories such as refugee, asylum seeker, citizen, alien, and stateless person may appear technical, yet literature reveals how deeply they affect everyday life. Through themes of waiting, documentation, border control, social exclusion, gendered vulnerability, and human rights, literary works make abstract legal concepts visible as lived experiences. The paper argues that literature provides an ethical supplement to legal analysis by exposing the distance between legal ideals and human realities. It also shows that law is not only a structure of rules but a social experience shaped by power, history, and personal loss. By bringing literature and legal discourse together, this study highlights the value of interdisciplinary reading in understanding displacement, dignity, belonging, and the search for justice in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: exile, migration, law, world literature, human rights.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.
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The focus is on how literature maps the legal reality of the displaced.

I. Introduction

Exile and migration have shaped human history, but they are often discussed through statistics, border policies, and state interests. Literature approaches the same reality from a more intimate point of view. It asks what happens to people when home becomes inaccessible, when belonging is interrupted, and when identity has to be rebuilt in a new and sometimes hostile place. Across cultures and periods, writers have explored the pain of leaving one's homeland, whether through war, persecution, poverty, political pressure, or the search for a more secure future. Their works show that migration is not only a geographical act. It is also an emotional and social transformation.

The legal dimension of this experience is central. A displaced person does not move only through physical space; he or she moves through systems of permission, documentation, refusal, and conditional recognition. Law decides who may cross a border, who may remain, who may work, who may claim asylum, and who may be removed. Questions of citizenship, statelessness, deportation, detention, and human rights therefore appear in literature not as technical background, but as forces that shape human life. A person waiting for papers, fearing expulsion, or living without status reveals how law enters the emotional world of migration (Houri and Abu-Remaileh).

World literature is important because it does more than reflect legal structures. It critiques them. It shows the distance between the universal language of rights and the uneven practices of states. It also gives voice to those who are often reduced to categories such as migrant, refugee, alien, or undocumented person. In doing so, literature allows readers to see the human consequences of legal decisions. It reminds us that law is not found only in

statutes, courts, and conventions, but also in the everyday encounters between vulnerable people and powerful institutions.

This paper studies exile, migration, and law as connected concerns. It argues that literary narratives give legal concepts a human texture. They turn asylum, citizenship, sovereignty, and rights into experiences that can be understood and ethically judged. By placing legal analysis in conversation with literary reading, the paper seeks to show how stories of displacement can deepen the meaning of justice beyond formal procedure and toward dignity, equality, and compassion.

II. Exile, Migration and Law: Conceptual Framework

Exile and migration are related but not identical ideas. Exile generally suggests compulsion. It is associated with political, social, religious, or cultural conditions that make continued residence impossible. Migration is broader and may include movement for employment, education, safety, family, or opportunity. Yet the distinction between forced and voluntary movement is not always clear. Many migrants appear to choose movement, but the conditions behind that choice may include poverty, conflict, climate insecurity, discrimination, or fear. In this sense, migration often contains hidden forms of coercion.

Law attempts to organize these realities through categories. International and domestic legal systems distinguish between citizens, foreigners, refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons. The 1951 Refugee Convention provides a central legal definition of refugee status and outlines obligations of protection. Human rights law, in a wider sense, insists that dignity and basic protection should not depend entirely on nationality. However, these principles are mediated through the state. A person may suffer displacement in a morally urgent sense and still fall outside a

narrow legal definition. Another may qualify for protection in theory but be delayed, denied, or excluded in practice (Weis 9).

This tension is essential to the conceptual framework of the paper. Law protects, but it also filters. It creates rights, but it also creates thresholds for accessing those rights. Terms such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” and “stateless person” are not merely descriptive. They determine whether a person can claim shelter, work, education, residence, or protection from removal. Legal identity therefore becomes a form of social existence. To be recognized by law is to become visible; to remain outside legal recognition is to become vulnerable.

Literature helps reveal what formal categories leave out. A statute may define refugee status, but a novel or memoir can show the anxiety of waiting, the humiliation of repeated questioning, and the insecurity of life without papers. Texts such as Anna Seghers’ Transit, Shaun Tan’s The Arrival, and Davide Enia’s Notes on a Shipwreck demonstrate that displacement is experienced through bodies, documents, memories, borders, and institutions. Literature therefore links three levels of analysis: movement across space, legal classification, and the inner life of the displaced person. It shows that law governs migration, but migration also reshapes identity, belonging, and the demand for justice.

III. Literature as a Reflection of Displacement

Literature has always been a sensitive record of displacement because it can capture experiences that official documents often flatten. Legal and policy documents may identify causes, numbers, and categories, but literature enters the emotional landscape of exile. It records the loss of familiar language, the memory of home, the silence of separation, the difficulty of adaptation, and the unease of being seen as foreign. These details matter because displacement does not end when a person crosses a border. It continues in the struggle to build an ordinary life under conditions of uncertainty.

In many works of world literature, displacement becomes a double movement. The character moves outward into a new social and legal environment and inward into memory, grief, and self-questioning. The homeland remains present through longing, trauma, guilt, or fragments of remembered speech. At the same time, the new place demands adjustment. The migrant must learn how to speak, work, travel, explain himself, prove herself, and become acceptable within a system that may already suspect the outsider. Themes of identity, belonging, alienation, memory, and cultural negotiation therefore recur throughout migration literature (Gardener and Mishra 661).

Shaun Tan's The Arrival is a powerful example because it communicates displacement through visual uncertainty. Its invented language, strange city, unfamiliar creatures, and silent panels place the reader in the position of the newcomer, forced to interpret a world without full access to its signs. Anna Seghers' Transit, by contrast, shows a world in which movement depends on visas, permissions, official stamps, and waiting rooms. In such works, bureaucracy is not a neutral system. It becomes part of the migrant's emotional life.

Literature also shows that displacement is shaped by social reception. Migrants are not only displaced by the loss of home; they may be displaced again through suspicion, racial prejudice, class hierarchy, or exclusion in the host society. A person may possess limited legal status and still remain socially unrecognized. Conversely, a person may belong deeply to a community yet lack formal legal standing. This separation between legal belonging and social belonging is one of the central tensions that literature makes visible (Kurtz). By reflecting displacement through lived experience, literature complements legal discourse and restores the human stories behind legal labels (Salve 5).

IV. Legal Identity and Statelessness in Literature

Legal identity is often noticed only when it is absent. For those who possess nationality, documents, and recognized status, it may appear ordinary. For displaced persons, however, legal identity can become the condition of survival. Passports, identity cards, birth certificates, residence permits, visas, and refugee documents determine whether a person can travel, study, work, marry, rent a home, receive medical care, or approach a public authority without fear. Without such recognition, a person may become legally invisible.

Statelessness is one of the most severe forms of this invisibility. A stateless person is not recognized as a national by any state. This is not merely a technical problem. It affects dignity, security, mobility, and access to rights. International efforts such as the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons attempt to address this condition, but implementation remains inconsistent. In practice, stateless persons often face obstacles in education, employment, healthcare, property rights, and legal protection.

Literary narratives represent this condition with particular force because they show how legal non-recognition enters the self. A character without papers is not only excluded from services; he or she lives in anticipation of rejection. Bureaucracy becomes an atmosphere of waiting, repetition, and fear. A missing record may matter more than a lived history. Literature captures this slow violence of administrative uncertainty and shows how the absence of legal identity can produce shame, fragmentation, and a feeling of being nowhere fully acknowledged.

The theme of statelessness also raises moral questions about citizenship. If rights depend too heavily on nationality, those without nationality become vulnerable precisely because they lack the status through which rights are normally claimed. Literature challenges this arrangement by presenting characters whose humanity remains evident even when their legal standing is insecure. It asks whether law should begin with membership in a state or

with the dignity of the person. By portraying legal invisibility through human experience, literature deepens legal debates on identity, documentation, citizenship, and protection.

V. Borders, Sovereignty, and Human Rights

Borders are powerful symbols in literature on exile and migration. Legally, they mark territorial authority and define where a state may regulate entry, residence, removal, and security. Politically, they are tied to sovereignty, national identity, and control. In literary narratives, however, borders often appear as places of fear, delay, injury, negotiation, and unequal power. They are not merely lines on a map. They are lived spaces where the displaced person encounters the authority of the state.

The tension between sovereignty and human rights is central to migration law. States claim the right to regulate admission and protect their territory. Human rights principles, however, insist that every person possesses inherent dignity regardless of nationality. Instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights express this universal vision, yet the migrant often discovers that universality weakens at the border. The rights to life, liberty, family, equality, and protection from persecution may be affirmed in principle, but access to those rights often depends on status, location, documentation, and political will.

Literature exposes this contradiction by focusing on the human cost of border control. Dangerous journeys, shipwrecks, detention centres, family separations, and deportation orders reveal how the state’s concern with security can place vulnerable people in conditions of extreme precarity. Enia’s Notes on a Shipwreck, for example, presents the Mediterranean not only as a sea but as a legal and moral frontier. The journey becomes a test of whether human rights remain meaningful when those in danger are foreign, poor, undocumented, or politically inconvenient.

Courts have sometimes tried to moderate this tension by recognizing that fundamental rights cannot be confined too narrowly by citizenship. In National Human Rights Commission v. State of Arunachal Pradesh (1996), the Supreme Court of India emphasized the protection of life and liberty for refugees, reinforcing that constitutional guarantees may extend to non-citizens as well. Such decisions resist the idea that sovereignty permits unchecked exclusion (Gupta 19). At the same time, literature reminds us that a lawful border policy may still produce suffering. A rights-respecting approach to sovereignty does not deny the existence of borders; it insists that moral responsibility does not end at them.

VI. Gendered Dimensions of Migration

Migration and exile are not gender-neutral experiences. Women, in particular, often face layered forms of vulnerability, including exploitation, trafficking, sexual violence, domestic abuse, unsafe employment, and limited access to legal remedies. Literature provides an important space for examining these experiences because it can represent the intimate consequences of displacement that are often hidden in policy language.

In many migration narratives, women carry the burden of both movement and care. They may be responsible for children, elderly relatives, household survival, emotional continuity, and economic contribution at the same time. The journey itself may expose them to violence, while settlement in a new place may push them into informal or poorly regulated work. Domestic work, caregiving, and low-paid service labour are common examples. Because these sectors are often private or weakly monitored, women may have little protection against abuse. Lack of documentation, dependence on employers, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with rights further reduce access to justice.

Legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women recognize the need to protect women’s rights. Yet literature

reveals that practical enforcement often falls short, especially for displaced women. A woman may be formally protected by law but practically silenced by fear, poverty, shame, or the threat of deportation. At the same time, migration can also create agency. Women who migrate may gain financial independence, mobility, and decision-making power within their families. Literature is able to hold this complexity together, showing vulnerability and resilience without reducing migrant women to a single image.

A gender-sensitive approach to migration law must therefore address safety, labour protection, documentation, healthcare, translation, shelter, and legal awareness. It must also recognize gender-based harms such as trafficking, forced marriage, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation as serious concerns within migration governance. Literary narratives help make these realities visible by showing how displacement is experienced not only at borders, but also inside homes, workplaces, families, and bodies.

VII. The Gap Between Law and Lived Reality

One of literature's most important contributions is its ability to reveal the gap between law as written and law as lived. Legal systems often speak in the language of rights, remedies, equality, protection, and procedure. For displaced persons, however, the experience of law may be shaped by waiting, confusion, cost, suspicion, translation difficulties, and fear of rejection. The distance between formal promise and practical access becomes a recurring theme in migration literature.

This gap is visible in asylum procedures, citizenship claims, welfare access, detention systems, and deportation processes. A person may have the right to seek asylum, but that right may be weakened by delay, lack of legal representation, evidentiary burdens, or hostile administration. A migrant worker may be entitled to labour protection, but fear of losing employment or legal status may prevent complaint. A stateless person may have a theoretical

path to recognition, but lack the documents required to begin the process. Literature captures the emotional toll of such situations and shows how legal procedure can become a source of distress rather than relief.

The gap also arises from the difference between formal equality and substantive equality. Law may treat people as equal in principle, but actual ability to use the law depends on literacy, money, gender, age, social support, language, health, and location. Vulnerable groups such as women, elderly persons, refugees, children, and marginalized communities often face barriers that the text of the law does not fully acknowledge (Sansonetti 29). Administrative weaknesses deepen the problem when institutions are slow, inconsistent, or difficult to navigate. Documentation requirements may be impossible for people who fled suddenly. Translation may be inadequate. Officials may rely on stereotypes. Welfare schemes may exist but remain unknown to those who need them.

Literature gives narrative form to this uncertainty. In Transit, movement depends on paperwork, but paperwork itself becomes unstable and absurd. The displaced person is trapped between offices, permissions, and the possibility of departure. Such narratives demonstrate that bureaucracy is not emotionally neutral. It can produce exhaustion, dependency, and a suspended life. Bridging the gap between law and lived reality therefore requires more than new laws. It requires accessible procedures, legal awareness, accountable institutions, timely decisions, and sensitivity to the actual conditions under which displaced people claim rights (Hall).

VIII. Literature as a Tool for Legal Critique and Reform

Literature does not merely illustrate legal problems; it can sharpen legal critique. By presenting individual stories, literary works ask whether legal systems are just in effect, not only valid in form. They make visible the suffering that can be hidden behind administrative

language. Words such as “inadmissible,” “irregular,” “detained,” or “removed” may sound neutral in official documents, but literature restores the human consequences behind them.

This function is especially important in migration debates, where displaced persons are often treated as flows, burdens, risks, labour units, or security concerns. Literature resists such reduction. It gives migrants memories, relationships, fears, humour, contradictions, and moral presence. It also allows readers to understand shared vulnerability without ignoring difference. Legal professionals who engage with literary texts may therefore gain a fuller understanding of how rules operate in ordinary life. Literature can reveal where legal language is too narrow, where procedures are dehumanizing, and where categories fail to recognize mixed motives, historical injustice, gendered harm, or emotional belonging.

This does not mean that literature offers ready-made legal solutions. Its value lies in its ability to unsettle certainty. It asks difficult questions: What does it mean to belong? Can a person be illegal, or only an act? What is the moral weight of a border? Does citizenship exhaust the meaning of rights? These questions are not substitutes for legal doctrine, but they deepen the ethical field in which law is interpreted. More humane migration law requires fair procedures, safeguards against statelessness, recognition of gendered harms, alternatives to unnecessary detention, and stronger protection for human dignity. Literature supports reform by showing why such changes matter in human terms.

IX. Conclusion

Exile and migration are deeply connected to legal structures that define status, rights, responsibilities, and identity. Law provides frameworks for protection, but it also creates categories that can exclude those whose lives do not fit neatly within formal definitions. World literature reveals this tension with clarity. It captures the uncertainty of waiting, the

pain of statelessness, the pressure of borders, the gendered risks of migration, and the gap between legal ideals and lived realities.

The central argument of this paper is that literature humanizes legal discourse without weakening its seriousness. It does not treat law as irrelevant. Rather, it shows law in action, as experienced by those who depend on it and sometimes suffer under it. Through novels, memoirs, visual narratives, and personal accounts, literature gives concrete form to abstract legal concepts such as asylum, citizenship, sovereignty, and human rights. It also exposes the moral questions that legal systems must confront if they are to remain committed to justice.

A literary approach to exile and migration is therefore not only a cultural exercise. It is a way of expanding legal understanding. It asks scholars, lawyers, judges, and policymakers to see displaced persons not as files, numbers, or categories, but as human beings whose lives are shaped by memory, loss, power, and law. In doing so, literature becomes a vital tool for critique and reform. It bridges the space between formal provisions and human experience, and it reminds us that the ultimate purpose of law should be the protection of dignity, belonging, and humane coexistence (Gupta and Tomer 47).

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