



## Mobility and Globalization: Reconfiguring the politics of identity in *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk and *Less* by Andrew Sean Greer

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### Abstract

*This article carries out a comparative study of Flights by Olga Tokarczuk and Less by Andrew Sean Greer in terms of mobility affecting the identity of individuals in a global world. It also throws light upon the idea of motion and how it complicates the relationship between an individual and his identity under the influence of globalization. Both novels have been selected to undertake the present study based on common themes. The study discusses how the novel Flights indicates that real life takes place in motion. The study is qualitative. The interpretation has been used as a research methodology. The novels have been analyzed in the light of "Globalization and cultural identity." Handbook of identity theory and research by Jensen, Lene Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, and Jessica McKenzie. The study also discusses how the state of motion affects the emotional side of an individual. The study critiques a comparative study of two widely discussed novels. Though, both novels seem entirely different and diverse in their approach to the idea of mobility. Both present the story employing different narrative techniques. However, traveling unifies the thematic structure of both novels. The characters are found traveling. Traveling affects them at the external level and it also influences their internal selves. It also demonstrates how modernity plays its role in a global world. "We 'live' our gender, our sexuality, our nationality, and so forth as publicly institutionalized, discursively organized belongings... This is what I mean by saying that modernity is the harbinger of identity." (273)*

**Key Words:** Globalization, identity, mobility, narrator, traveling

### Introduction

The premise of this article is to analyze novels in terms of mobility affecting the identity of individuals in a global world. It also throws light upon the idea of motion and how it complicates the relationship between an individual and his identity under the influence of globalization. According to Jensen, et al. (2011), "Globalization...has swept like a flood tide through the world's diverse cultures, destroying stable localities, displacing peoples...obliterating the differences between locality-defined cultures which had constituted our identities." (269) Two novels have been selected to undertake the present study. It discusses how the novel *Flights* indicate that real life takes place in motion. The study is qualitative in nature. The interpretation has been used as a research methodology. The novels have been analyzed in the light of "Globalization and cultural identity." *Handbook of identity theory and research* by Jensen, Lene Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, and Jessica McKenzie. The study also discusses how the state of motion affects the emotional side of an individual. The study critiques a comparative study of two widely discussed novels. Though, both novels seem entirely different and diverse in their approach to the idea of mobility. Both present the story employing different narrative techniques. However, traveling unifies the thematic structure of both novels. The characters are found traveling. Travelling affects them at the external level and it also influences their internal selves. It also demonstrates how modernity plays its role in a global world. "We 'live' our

gender, our sexuality, our nationality, and so forth as publicly institutionalized, discursively organized belongings... This is what I mean by saying that modernity is the harbinger of identity.” (273)

*Flights*, the Man Booker International Prize winner in 2018 is a fragmentary novel by the Polish author Olga Tokarczuk. It was translated into English by Jennifer Croft. “Tokarczuk portrays an original type of a character acting in such conditions –a modern nomad that can be an emigrant, a refugee, a traveler, or a homeless person.” (7) It reflects a unique narrative technique. The story is told by a nameless female traveler. A female narration makes the traveling experience unique as it is different from conventional modes of narration. According to the novelist, traveling is perhaps “any movement an illusion, all of us traveling in place.” (118) “Tokarczuk stated that the translation had given *Flights* a second life.” (113) *Flights* doesn’t seem to be a novel. It contains a variety of stories narrated randomly. It emphasizes the arbitrariness involved in its narration. The story is not connected. It mainly talks about human anatomy and moves to the importance of motion in human life and how it takes to a world that is larger than ones’ world. The idea of mobility is represented at various places when narrators talk about traveling and floods the narrations with mentions of journeys, maps, roads, boats, and airports, roads.

*Less*, the Pulitzer Prize winner for Fiction in 2018 was written by American author Andrew Sean Greer. It is a satirical novel, accompanied by the gay writer, Arthur Less who undertakes a journey to attend literary events as his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday is approaching. The book relays the experiences of Arthur Less. The novel also hints at several other themes which include mobility, traveling, romantic love, gay marriages, and aging for a gay. In *Less*, we find the concerns of Americans keeping in view their identity. Americans give respect to their cultural identity. They name their things to keep them recalling. This is part of their culture as it is said in the novel, “People think of Americans as easygoing, but in fact, they are all dead serious, especially about their local culture.” (26) In the novel *Less*, the protagonist is marked out for shame not only by others because of his queer identity but also by himself as an unsuccessful individual. (117)

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The novel, *Flights* reflects the central theme of mobility even in its narrative techniques. However, it doesn’t follow a linear way of storytelling. Its non-linear structure makes it a unique narrative piece. However, it also mingles various other techniques in narrating the story of the novel. The novel, *Flights*, consists of tales that can stand on their own. The shifting narrative technique also symbolizes the movement from one mode of narration to another mode of narration. It is a combination of reflections and meditations and beliefs. It is one of the most recurrent themes of the novel that, “Mobility is reality” (202). Each chapter in the novel revolves around the quest for immortal life and it is the essence of human existence. As it is said in the novel about the random nature of traveling, “She complained that it was, of course, impossible to travel in a straight line.” (94) Traveling is not systematic. It follows its own path and keeps the travelers moving and in a constant state of motion. There is a constant mentioning of travel psychology with reference to traveling and movement in the novel, as we see in the novel that “A fundamental concept in travel psychology is desire, which is what lends movement and direction to human beings.” (66) Travelers step out to undertake a journey when they have a strong

yearning to do so. We find different characters who met the narrator while she was traveling. She discusses her traveling experiences.

Homosexuality in *Less* is also a movement from conventional gender binaries to unconventional, and unorthodox themes. Arthur struggling with aging is also a shift and movement toward old age. *Less* is found constantly in motion. He is found traveling throughout the novel. Mobility in all aspects becomes a central theme in the novel. It has been noticed that people have some fears, and they are occupied with the thought of those fears. The novel talks about Less' obsessions with aging and its fear from the very outset of the novel as it is said, "The pose of a young man. His slim shadow is, in fact, still that of his younger self, but at nearly fifty he is like those bronze statues in public parks." (7) Even he seems to fail to be a true representative of his own community. At one place, another novelist sidles up to Less and tells him, "It's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you're a bad gay." He fails to perform his duty as a gay writer. As his friend continues, it is their duty to depict the beauty of their life to the world. Being a gay writer, Less couldn't present his inner thoughts, the deepest emotions, and unique identity to the readers. The novel tells us the stories about the loneliness, shame, and remnants of the past that are haunting the protagonist. The remnants of the past cover a large part of the novel. The novel is mostly set in the past. The narrator goes back to the past to narrate the story of the protagonist. His mobility and state of motion keep the novel alive and help readers to follow the plot. He keeps on visiting cosmopolitan places of the world.

At a literary festival in Italy, where he's almost close to receiving an award, he is criticized that he has failed to represent his community as in Arthur's debut novel, the gay hero returns in the end to his wife. Arthur is not a gay enough writer, it appears. *Less*, the novel demonstrated that his traveling to various cosmopolitan cities of the world makes him a citizen of the whole world where he can find his space as a gay.

The novel, *Flights* takes a shift from conventional novels as this novel moves away from the traditional mode of storytelling. It is a collection of travelers whose experiences of mobility find their voices in short stories amalgam of meditations, fragmentary tales. It reflects multiple voices. It becomes a metaphorically global landscape where all voices are given importance. "Our world and our lives are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity." (270) The employment of movements in the lives of character is emphasized over and over as it is said in the novel regarding movement that traveling man moves "to someone from nowhere, every movement turns into a return since nothing exerts such a draw as emptiness." (77) This return is a return to the past and connecting the present to the past.

Traveling becomes a unifying theme that unites Tokarczuk's miscellaneous voices free of space and time. A strong urge to slip through space and time is found in writers scarcely found on maps or in guidebooks. The novel emphasizes the idea that tourist guidebooks are inadequate to travel. These guides restrict the wonderful experiences of traveling. The novel also discusses the infinity involved in the notions of time and space and its boundless and limitless world that is impossible to explore for an individual for how much anyone travels "there is no end, nor any destination. There are no temporal and spatial boundaries to traveling. And the same might apply to space – since we are all identically removed from infinity, there can also be no somewhere – nothing is truly anchored on any day, nor in any place." (332) The lectures at airports demonstrate that the world has become a global village and it was also said in the novel that, "of them explained to me that it was part of worldwide." (65) The novel also makes an attempt to

define traveling experience where a person tries to explore what is yet unexplored and also tries to define that “every distance is infinite in itself, each point launching a new space that cannot be surmounted, and of course, any movement an illusion, all of us traveling in place.” (41) Travelling is exploring. To explore new horizons and new worlds is the sole purpose of traveling. And it makes traveling a strong wish among the travelers.

The theme of movement from one genre to another and its fusion and mingling humor with sharp poignancy characterize the diction of *Less*. Arthur Less is occupied with the idea of aging. Aging is movement from one period of time to another. It highlights the movement from one stage of life to another. He is preoccupied with the idea that he is probably among the first ever homosexual ever to attain old age. His anxiety aggravates when he is left behind by his boyfriend who moves ahead and is about to get married to another younger man. In a scene at a party in Paris another cosmopolitan place, Less is told that in fact, he is not a bad writer, rather he is a bad gay writer. His identity as a gay writer, and as a gay receives a might blow upon such harsh criticism.

His movement from one cosmopolitan city to another continues. It shows that the world is open and welcoming for him. The world is welcoming to people like him. One chapter takes place in Germany, where Less thinks of himself as a professor who speaks German fluently whereas the language was taught to him by a woman from Yorkville. His realization of an expert user of the German language also proves false in Germany. The novel also hints at the idea regarding uncertainty involved in traveling. Nobody is sure about the mode of travel unless one travels. As we see in the novel when it is said that, “It is hard to know how someone else will travel.” (101) Nobody can tell this before he travels.

Arthur Less success undergoes a decline and all these realizations he comes across during his traveling experiences. The mysterious narrator tells us that Arthur is the first homosexual of his kind to grow old. Arthur as a novelist is also not going well. Even his first book was a moderate success.

It becomes difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction in *Flights*. It is moving away from conventional genres. It employs essay style, tells fictional stories, and uses fictionalized histories. The length of chapters also varies ranging from 30 pages to a paragraph or two. The whole book is interconnected between two main themes: travel and the preservation of the human body. The boundaries of the real and the imaginary appear to be blurred. It is altogether more intricate, less cohesive, and far stranger. The most essential themes of the novel are fictional mobility and curiosity. The narrator, like her characters, is always on the move. “Flights” glorifies and celebrates the sites of mobility which include airports, cities, hotels, and trains.

The physical movements, mortal body though replete with the existential preoccupations in *Flights* are central themes and it also addresses the meaning of home. The novel doesn't only talk about the motion of human beings who are in a constant state of motion and traveling. It also talks about the movement of the body and its motion as it is said in the novel that “He who rules the world has no power over movement and knows that our body in motion is holy, and only then can you escape him, once you've taken off.” (225) As we find it in the novel, “The guy I met on the train was traveling, like so many of them, in search of his roots. His was a complicated journey: his grandmother on his mother's side was a Russian Jew.” (49) Generally, the purpose of traveling is to explore, to dig out, and find out identity. It is a novel of intuitions.

It is full of multiple ideas. There are multiple voices. She has made an attempt to collect all those voices within the scope of a novel. It is a cacophony of voices that makes this novel more complex and more philosophical. At an airport, the narrator sees a slogan plastered on a glass wall: "Mobility is reality." (202) It represents some advertisement of a cellular company.

*Less* decides not to attend the wedding of his ex-boyfriend and moves away from the place and undertakes a journey to avoid it. His escapism finds its relief in mobility. He accepts the invitations of *all* he's received from around the world which include a hodgepodge of teaching assignments, and reading. He searches the room for exits, but life has no exits. Exits are means of mobility and movement to escape. But he fails to escape everywhere.

His identity receives a mighty blow when at a science fiction convention, he's mistaken for a woman. "It is a common assumption that identity-formation is a universal feature of human experience. Castells seems implicit to take this view when he writes: "Identity is people's source of meaning and experience." (271) Travelers look for meaning in their life during their traveling experience.

In Mexico, another cosmopolitan place he finds himself on a panel from hell being asked, with the realization of not being a genius. He arrives at an award ceremony in Italy only to discover that the winner will be chosen by high school students. In the book, "Less" is always referred to by his last name, which strengthens the idea of being less, not enough. His quest for identity continues and his less side receives enough blows. We are told by the narrator that Arthur Less is also a writer who is less successful than his peers. Gay men in terms of their identity are no longer struggling to find their place in the societies that had rejected their ancestors. However, his identity finds an uncomfortable space during his traveling experiences. And Gay fiction talks about their personal, emotional trauma that haunts the gay community today, as opposed to examining the narrative of the societal outcast.

"Flights", a bland but understandable choice in the mostly smooth translation of Jennifer Croft. The *bieguni*, or wanderers, are an obscure and possibly fictional Slavic sect who have rejected settled life for the existence of constant movement. Life in motion has become their way of life, and they feel quite comfortable in the way they live. They are following the oldest traditions of the traveling yogi and they love to live the way they have been living for centuries.

Airports in the global world have become very important. Their role in the mobility of people and their interactions have been instrumental. As the novelist says in the novel, "But now airports have emancipated themselves so that today they have a whole identity of their own...It is widely known, after all, that real life takes place in movement." (47)

Wikipedia, which Tokarczuk rightly lauds as a "wonder of the world," a project to gather the entire globe's knowledge. In this way, it is the mobility of knowledge from each individual that is transferred to another individual, and in this way, it makes a global world and knowledge produced at one place mobilizes another place and it changes the overall structure and mode of learning. The novel talks about various incidents that occurred from the seventeenth to the twentieth century where some are fictional while others are historical (165).

*Less* comes across another fear and it becomes the cause of anxiety for him. His aging indicates a gap between Arthur and Robert, and Freddy and Arthur. Arthur Less is a writer who at the novel's opening is approaching his 50th birthday. This figure 50 is instrumental in his life and signifies the mobility of certain individuals who may leave him behind. As he was deserted by his former lover. Less is reminded of when he had been the younger lover of a poet and



novelist Robert Brownburn. Less is reminded that living with Robert was less than idyllic, as Arthur himself remained in the shadows of Robert's thriving literary career. He asks himself if he'll ever be loved that way again. Less finally asks the question he's been trying to evade if he was too old to meet someone. There is such strong valuation of youth and perfection in the gay community gives additional weight to the message of unconditional love. This also shows the limitations in the lives of the gay community regarding their age and major shifts or indication of moving of loved ones from their lives.

Western countries have a large age gap compared to 8% of married heterosexual couples (Lehmiller, 2010), they are still susceptible to social disapproval. The author uses large age gaps between Arthur Less and his two lovers, the older Robert Brownburn and the younger Freddy Pelu. Robert Brownburn ends the relationship with Arthur Less, falling prey to the perception that age differences cannot be ignored, and are not desirable. *Less* novel demonstrates the human tendency to travel as a means of escapism. However, future events show that nobody can run away from the inevitability of circumstances. Mobility doesn't take one's worries away from one's mind. Your motion in an attempt to avoid bitter realities at times brings you closer to more bleak realities. Less recalls a day of losing his ring in the grocery store, and how, in telling Robert about it, Robert saw Less's infidelities written across his face. "That's what it was like to live with genius". His act of losing the ring was an indication of his moving away from Robert.

*Flights* has the quality of a dream. Its rambling nature strengthens the reveries involved in the plot of the novel. The rambling technique characterized by its unique narration makes the novel more complex. It also emphasizes the idea of motion and its significance in human life. It focuses on the idea that motion signifies change and change is important in life as it is said in the novel, "a thing in motion will always be better than a thing at rest; that change will always be a nobler thing than permanence... that which is in motion is able to last for all eternity." (3)

When Arthur Less learns that Freddy is going to marry someone, he uses this as an opportunity to travel alone. His traveling to multiple cities is essentially an entry into the global world which changes his identity altogether. He becomes a global citizen. He interacts with many people on the way. He feels comfortable in socializing with people and has learned all the etiquettes of traveling as a global citizen as we see in the novel "Less, by now fluent in global sign language, understands this is a private bus company and the Kyoto city council has left him a ticket." (157) He agrees to attend some literary events in New York, a conference in Mexico, a reception of awards in Italy, and a teaching opportunity in Berlin. The loss of Freddy prompts Less to re-evaluate his relationship with Robert who inspired him, but they broke up in the end. This mobility of people continues. People come and leave.

The journey from pessimism to hope is also a journey of mobility. As life moves on, hope in life doesn't cease to exist. It demonstrates a degree of hope. Only after returning to his home (in San Francisco) his place of belonging does he feel a sense of closure. He meets Freddy and it is told in the end that he is the narrator of the story.

The global journey allows him to reexamine his relationship with his former lovers. In Japan, he meets his former (older) lover, Robert, who once inspired him, and has served as Less' sole inspiration for homosexual life after age 50. Less reunites with his supposed enemy and Freddy's father, Carlos. When they meet, Carlos tells him that he believes that people's lives are half-comedy and half-tragedy and that those just appear at different times. His supposed enemy also undergoes an emotional journey to realize the nature of the relationship between *Less* and his son.

In *Flights*, the shrouded woman is one of the *bieguni*, and her monologue provides the most powerful voice of the novel is about pauses. If someone pauses, he will be petrified. Journey makes us wise as it is said in the novel that “perhaps they will reveal some unexpected wisdom of the journey.” (149) There is no end to the journey of life though people get the impression that “there are some who believe that we have reached the end of our journey.” (318)

Freddy, the narrator complains that Less is always writing “gay Ulysses.” Ulysses says so much about him and his traveling obsession. The journey becomes an inadvertent quest for the meaning of love in his life. While sitting at a bar in Morocco on the eve of his birthday, Less’s female friend, also recently dumped, ponders whether love is “walking the fucking dog so the other one can sleep in” or if “it’s this earth-shattering thing. It shows that sometimes mobility leads to displacement.

Less is looking for a purpose in his life. Followed by break up with his lovers, Less winds his way around the globe — riding a camel in Morocco, trapped in a Christian retreat in India — we learn more about this tenderhearted man who goes about his life “like a person without skin.” His existence becomes the biggest question mark in his ever-traveling life.

It is pertinent to mention that Less seems to be a passive character. Though he is moving from one place to another, yet his movement doesn’t make him a dynamic character. However, his reveries, and thoughts of his past lovers keep the story moving. He seems to be in search of true love and his escapism leaves him unable to face his fate.

The book alternates between Less’s trip in the present to memories of his youth — mostly memories involving nostalgia or regret. This shift in past and present is also movement and presence of past in present and the haunting experiences of past.

*Flights* is a novel about the acceptance of “fluidity, mobility, illusoriness”. After all, Tokarczuk reminds us, “Barbarians don’t travel. They simply go to destinations or conduct raids.” Traveling is the central theme in the novel that keeps the story moving and makes the readers move with its episodes.

*Flights* moves from national to transnational, from present to past, from short story to essay, and from fiction and fact. There are shifts and movements from one idea to another and from one episode to another. Tokarczuk’s novel “ponders upon implications of a globalized world on local realities as well as the resistance that local intermingling may put on notions of global verisimilitude.”(156)

Totalitarianism seems safely in the past in this book, the movement of people a natural right. “Fluidity, mobility, illusoriness — these are precisely the qualities that make us civilized,” she writes. “Barbarians don’t travel. They simply go to destinations or conduct raids.” This sentence transforms the purpose of the novel from local to global. She gives a strong message to all.

The author of *Less* consistently reminds the reader of the imperfections of Arthur Less. He refers to the character in the prominent title and ubiquitously throughout the story using the character’s surname: ‘Less,’ or ‘Arthur Less.’ This shows his incomplete identity which proves inadequate to overcome his imperfections as a complete human being. Character and plot are used to reveal about the act of seeking for identity by analyzing the character’s action and emotion toward the conflict. (68)

The decision to refer to the character’s actions with ‘Less’ on a meta-level in the title, as well as throughout the story – ‘Less said,’ and ‘Arthur Less did’ – continually reaffirms the character as *less, less*

than, not enough. In Japan, his hosts change even his name to less than Less, spelling it as “Dr. Ess”. He undergoes identity crises through the course of action. *Less* is a picaresque novel. It is replete with satirical episodes. The structure of the novel mirrors Less’s round-the-world trip traveling and exploring the world. Each chapter reveals a new country and opens new horizons to explore. At each place, he comes across new obstacles, and interact with new people. Less drags along his emotional baggage from place to place, and any random event can trigger a memory from his past with Robert or Freddy or from his childhood; he is never alone. During his journey, his memories haunt him like anything.

### Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that both novels discuss the common theme of traveling and the role of movement in the lives of the characters. There are elements in both novels which characterize the constant state of motion and its repercussions in the modern cosmopolitan world. Mobility and globalization are recurrently used themes in both novels. In both novels, characters are scarcely found talking about their sense of belonging and cultural roots. When they are part of a global world, they associate themselves as part of the same world. They turn out to be citizens of the whole world. No instances have been found to strengthen the argument against the notions of globalization as a threat. Both novels present a world full of opportunities for cultural engagement. These novels seem to neglect the politics of identity in the global world. The celebration of diverse cultures has been demonstrated. The novels portray the western notions of globalization. All characters are comfortable with their surroundings as part of a global world unaffected by their personal identity. There is a blurring of boundaries between different genres, fact and fiction, and different narrative techniques. Travelling unifies and connects both novels, and both novels present traveling as a means of cultural engagement.

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