

Contemplation of Refugee Trauma as an outcome of Ethnic Cleansing; An Analysis of *Irregulars, Sea Prayer and Upavahana*

Sreekutty S

Ph.D Research Scholar
Central University of Haryana

Abstract

Merging Trauma narrative and Postcolonial ethnic conflict, this paper explores the representation of refugees in the contemporary realm. In the twenty first century the volume of migration and consequent demands have been severe, so sustainable developments in this matter requires the involvement of humanitarian organisations, legal systems, and health authorities. Extreme consequences of migration and the multi-culturalization of societies /nations leads to the articulation of 'genocides' and 'ethnic cleansing'. At one extreme, ethnic cleansing is closer to forced deportation and what has been called 'population transfer'. Both literally and figuratively, ethnic cleansing sometimes takes on genocidal overtones at the initial point of deportation but victims also often die in transit or in refugee camps at their eventual destination, and there is a tug of war between citizen and refugee. This paper entitled "Contemplation of Refugee Trauma as an outcome of Ethnic Cleansing; An Analysis of *Irregulars, Sea Prayer and Upavahana.*" endeavours to critically explore the effects of trauma on refugees leading to shattering of both their inner and outer selves. A reconsideration of such literature on refugee trauma should bring back a new room for further research that co-ordinate unified services for refugee needs.

Key words: Ethnic Cleansing, Trauma narrative, Refugee, Genocides, Postcolonialism, Existential crisis

The contemporary literary field gave a new light to the refugee account by merging trauma narrative with postcolonial racial conflict. It gave an alternative space for the discussion and manifestation of real life and its unquenchable dilemmas. As Derek H. Davis noted, "countless episode of ethnic cleansing qualifies the twentieth century as one of the darkest eras in human history" (693) and even the twenty first century confronts the same chaos and difficulties in a harder and deeper way. Extreme consequences of migration and the resultant multi-culturalization of societies /nations include 'genocides' and 'ethnic cleansing'. At one extreme, ethnic cleansing is closer to forced deportation and what has been called 'population transfer'. Both literally and figuratively, ethnic cleansing sometimes takes on genocidal overtones at the initial point of deportation but victims also often die in transit or in refugee camps at their eventual destination, and there is a tug of war between citizen and refugee. This century

certainly brought with it aspects of modernity that made ethnic cleansing more virulent, more complete, and more hateful. The development of the nation-state and the end of empires gave the State unprecedented power and means to attack and transfer large minority populations.

Drawing insights from these three contemporary short films *Irregulars*, *Sea prayer* and *Upavahana* which embodies how ethnic cleansing has devastated the human experience into futility. An attempt to expel a specific community, race or religion from its homeland in order to homogenous the land in a forceful manner is what ethnic cleansing intends to do. This dehumanising strategy never tries to support or maintain the exquisiteness of diversity. The goal of ethnic cleansing is the eradication of diverse culture and heritage of world into one hegemony. As moving beyond this forced removal, the discussion need to explore the power politics and its dialectical consequences in the human psyche. Hence these critically acclaimed short-films are a unique specimen for representing the recent traumatic events of ethnic cleansing specifically in Syrian civil war crisis and Rohingya issues of Myanmar. Those refugees have experienced, and continue to experience extreme violence, the grievous loss of family members, loss of identity and existential crisis as an out turn of ethnic conflict. Andrew Bell-Fialkoff in the introduction to their book *Ethnic Cleansing* (1999) point out that “ethnic cleansing can be understood as the expulsion of an ‘undesirable’ population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a combination of these (110). The complete elimination of a particular community or race from the homeland they lived for ages effects not only the external human environment but also the inner selves of every individual who is subject to this deportation and a special attention was needed for resolving the traumas. Alongside poverty, disease, shelter, illiteracy, impoverished social milieus etc., curb the social/emotional and cognitive development of each individual. In a similar vein, Drazen Petrovic’s article “Ethnic Cleansing - An Attempt at Methodology” draws upon how ethnic cleansing works as a strategy.

Italian filmmaker Palmieri’s celebrated short-film *Irregulars* (2015), is about the on-going catastrophe. Here the plot traces Cyrille Kabore’s harrowing journey as a refugee set against a hypnotic mannequin factory. His narration and the backdrop prompt a pejorative life of modern absurdist life. One of the leading figure in trauma studies Cathy Caruth, claims that “the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” a “new mode of reading and of listening” (9) that would allow us to pass out of the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience. Here the artificial model, mannequin’s traumatic silence really disturbs the listeners, who begin to think of the inventive reading to empower the so-called human model of nature.

The story is deeply personal tale; Palmieri met the real-life hero Cyrille Kabore, 20-year-old young refugee in Ghana. His story was so stirring and pitiful so Palmiere decided to document it. Since Cyrille was afraid that his family would see how sad and desperate he was, he didn’t want to appear in the film, so the director just recorded his voice. The question subsequently arose in Palmieri’s mind: “But what could I show instead of a blank black screen?” The answer was shown by the depiction of a mannequin factory as a symbol or

metaphor for dehumanization. The audience listens to his words as his actions, and slowly found a deep empathy to him. This intellectually stimulating mannequin's metaphor narrates Cyrille's harrowing journey across land and sea, the contemptible situation like clinging to the bottom of a highway-bound truck, and being held out of the water by his older sister after falling out of a capsized boat. This journey can be compared to the hundreds of thousands of refugees who painstakingly flee unsafe and oppressive forces in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East each year.

Drawing on cosmopolitan roots, postcolonial literary critics deal with issues of borders and border crossings, migration and diasporas — topics relevant to any study of refugee narratives. Postcolonial theory speaks to some degree to the refugee's experiences upon arrival in a new country. Homi K. Bhabha says that:

The transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees- these border and frontier conditions- may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such study would neither be the sovereignty of national cultures...but a focus on those freak social and cultural displacements... Which leads us to ask: can the perplexity of the unhomey, intrapersonal world lead to an international theme? (12).

In his writing, Bhabha glorifies migration of all kinds, using “exiles, emigrés and refugees... interchangeabl[y]” (Shemak 21).

Sea Prayer, an illustrated story animated in a virtual reality film by Khaled Hussein, the award-winning novelist commemorates the second anniversary of the death of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi. It apprehends the heartbreak of the Syrian refugee crisis through a poetic letter, from a father to the son, on the eve of their sea crossing to Europe. Hussein tried to rendering the life in Homs, Syria before the war, and that city's impulsive makeover from a home into a fatal war zone. The Syrian government, Russia, and Iran are trying to depopulate Syria of the Arab Sunnis, and thus change the demographic makeup of Syria. The Sunnis were the largest religio-ethnic group in Syria, mostly inhabiting a very fertile strip of land from Aleppo to Damascus to the Jordanian border. Those Sunnis who are still there, even after five years of civil war, are now being forced to move to areas near the Turkish border. Due to the Syrian war of ethnic cleansing, the mass population were deported to other countries.

Here the story narrates the father talked to his sleeping son about the peaceful times in the city of Homs, which had a mosque for its Muslim citizens and a church for Christians, along with a bazaar full of gold pendants and bridal dresses. He was recalling his grandfather's house in Syria, the stirring of olive trees in the breeze, the bleating of his grandmother's goat, the clanking of the cooking pots. The lives of two generation; Marwan (son) and the father, constituting the wretchedness of conflicts in the inner soul are depicted.

In the first section the father saying good things about the country they are leaving. Then gradually comes to the grim points that there were protests, seize and bombs spitting

from the sky. The country gets into the ugliness of war - the part which this toddler Marwan has been partially aware. The setting of the story is beachside and it is night time, people miserable like them are waiting for a ferry or boat which will take them to some other land where they possibly will find home and hope. The father is agonised that his son's innocent childhood has been scarred by protests, starvation, bombs and death. Despite all its grim reality, however, ends with the father's prayer, revealing the power of infinite hope.

Ethnic cleansing is the enforced removal of ethnic or racial groups from a given territory by a more powerful ethnic group, with the wicked determination of making it ethnically homogeneous. The engagement with the refugee has declined over the years because the world considered them as a burden rather than a human being. In the Rohingyas issue also facing a sectarian violence due to the ethnic conflict between Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya muslim communities. Troubled by the dilemma of Rohingya immigrants, the Delhi University students have made a short film titled '*Upavahana*' in pali script, and means 'washed away', which is provide a glimpse into the harsh reality of the destitution faced by these people. The development of the nation-state and the end of empires gave the State unprecedented power and means to attack and transfer large minority populations.

Like the *Irregulars*, The Rohingyas concerns deployed through using ants as a metaphor in *Upavahana*. It shows the struggle of the refugees who live in a deprived conditions in camps, far away from home where they risk genocide. Indeed, figurative expression displays how Rohingyas have been forced to flee Myanmar. The deportation of ants from one sand castle to another, lead to the refugees in a traumatic stage. The resulting situation, marked the aspects of 'in betweenness'. In "a catastrophic age" such as ours, according to Caruth "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures" ("Trauma" 11). With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community. This situation intensifies much more aspects of ethnic homogenisation by nationalism. As synoptically define by Andrew Bell-Fialkoff in their book *Ethnic Cleansing* (1999):

Nationalism, too, as a kind of modern religion, contains quasi-spiritual aspects that lend to its most extreme manifestation a desire to "purify" the nation of "alien" groups. The important difference between modern ethnic cleansing and the patterns established in the Middle Ages is that in religious cleansing a population often had the choice of conversion. In purely ethnic cleansing that option does not exist; a population must move or die (111).

Although Rohingyas, Syrians and countless other refugees from different countries — all have one thing in common: the pain of not being able to go back home and be reunited with their families due to these ethnic conflicts. In the light of the explication made before, it can be ascertained that what arises in the research is the reality of postmodern life, often absent from mainstream media. Aihwa Ong's key argument in *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (2003): "refugee and citizen are not irreconcilable opposites". Rather she writes, 'the refugee and the citizen are the political effects of institutional processes that are deeply imbued with sociocultural values' (p.79). A reconsideration of literature on refugee

trauma should bring back a new room for further research that would co-ordinate the consolidate services for the needs of refugee.

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