

Belonging Nowhere: Refugee Consciousness and Displacement in Lloyd Jones' *Hand Me Down World*

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Abstract

Lloyd Jones' *Hand Me Down World* offers a deeply moving portrayal of displacement through the journey of a mother searching for her missing son in the aftermath of war. This paper examines the concept of refugee consciousness as it emerges from maternal loss, uncertainty, and emotional endurance. Rather than representing refugees as anonymous victims of political conflict, the novel foregrounds the intimate suffering of a woman whose identity is shaped by waiting, remembering, and hope. The mother's movement across unstable borders reveals exile as a continuous psychological condition marked by fear, vigilance, and the absence of belonging. Drawing on trauma studies and refugee discourse, the paper explores how war disrupts familial bonds and transforms motherhood into an experience of prolonged anxiety and resilience. By focusing on maternal grief and persistence, *Hand Me Down World* humanises forced migration and challenges depersonalised humanitarian narratives. The study argues that refugee consciousness in the novel is not defined by geography alone but by the emotional weight of loss and the fragile hope of reunion, making displacement an intimate and relational experience.

Keywords: Refugee consciousness; maternal displacement; trauma; exile; belonging; Lloyd Jones; *Hand Me Down World*

In recent decades, global discussions on forced migration have largely been dominated by political, legal, and humanitarian frameworks that often overlook the emotional and relational dimensions of displacement. Refugees are frequently reduced to numbers, borders, and policies, while their lived experiences of loss, fear, and endurance remain insufficiently represented. Literary narratives play a crucial role in restoring this human dimension by giving voice to individual suffering and resilience. Lloyd Jones' *Hand Me Down World* stands out as a powerful example of such writing, offering an intimate portrayal of displacement through the figure of a mother searching for her missing son in a war-torn landscape.

Set against the backdrop of an unnamed European conflict, the novel traces the mother's movement across fractured spaces shaped by violence, surveillance, and uncertainty. Her journey is not merely geographical but profoundly emotional, marked by maternal grief, anxiety, and the fragile hope of reunion. Jones presents exile as a condition in which home is no longer a stable place but a memory sustained through love and loss. The novel foregrounds how war disrupts familial bonds and transforms motherhood into an experience of prolonged waiting and emotional labour.

By focusing on maternal suffering rather than political spectacle, *Hand Me Down World* humanises the refugee experience and reveals displacement as a deeply personal and relational condition. The text thus provides a valuable lens for examining refugee consciousness as a psychological and emotional state shaped by trauma, memory, and endurance.

This paper draws on trauma theory, refugee studies, and the ethics of care to examine refugee consciousness in Lloyd Jones' *Hand Me Down World*. Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, emphasises trauma as an ongoing psychological condition rather than a completed event. In the context of forced migration, trauma manifests through repetition, memory, silence, and emotional numbness. The mother's search for her missing son reflects this continuity of trauma, as loss remains unresolved and grief is suspended between hope and despair.

Refugee studies provide a critical lens for understanding displacement beyond legal or political definitions. Thinkers such as Edward Said and Giorgio Agamben highlight exile and

statelessness as conditions of liminality, where individuals exist outside stable structures of belonging. In *Hand Me Down World*, the mother's movement across unstable borders illustrates this liminal existence, marked by fear, surveillance, and the absence of protection.

The framework is further strengthened through the ethics of care, which foregrounds relationality, vulnerability, and responsibility. By centring maternal love and emotional labour, the novel shifts attention from geopolitical narratives to human suffering and care. This interdisciplinary approach enables the paper to analyse refugee consciousness as a lived, relational, and deeply human experience shaped by trauma, loss, and ethical neglect.

Critical responses to Lloyd Jones' fiction have frequently highlighted his engagement with war, displacement, and the moral consequences of political violence. Scholars have noted that Jones' narratives resist sensational representations of conflict and instead focus on ordinary individuals caught in extraordinary circumstances. *Hand Me Down World* has been read as a continuation of this ethical concern, emphasising civilian suffering and the fragile human relationships disrupted by war. Critics observe that the novel's unnamed geography universalises displacement, allowing it to speak for multiple refugee contexts rather than a single historical conflict.

Studies in refugee literature stress that exile is not merely a spatial condition but a psychological and emotional one. Edward Said conceptualises exile as a state of permanent loss, while Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" exposes how refugees are reduced to vulnerable existences outside political protection. These perspectives are useful in understanding the mother's marginal position in *Hand Me Down World*, where survival depends on chance, silence, and constant movement. However, much refugee scholarship remains abstract, often privileging political theory over lived emotional experience.

Refugee consciousness in *Hand Me Down World* is characterised by a pervasive sense of unbelonging, shaped by physical displacement, uncertainty, and the rupture of familiar social structures. The mother exists in a constant state of vigilance, navigating spaces where safety is fragile and temporary. Jones emphasises her isolation: "She moved from one strange city to another, carrying the image of her son in her mind, but never feeling that this was a place where

she could rest” (Jones 47). This consciousness extends beyond geography: it is psychological, emotional, and relational. By focusing on the mother’s internal world, Jones foregrounds the lived experience of exile as a condition of endurance rather than a legal or political status.

Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra emphasise that trauma resists closure and returns through memory, repetition, and emotional suspension. Literary critics applying trauma theory to war narratives argue that fiction uniquely captures the slow, everyday nature of suffering that official histories overlook. In *Hand Me Down World*, trauma is not represented through spectacle but through maternal waiting, fear, and the refusal of certainty regarding loss.

Feminist and care-ethics scholars further argue that women’s experiences of war and displacement are frequently marginalised. The ethics of care foregrounds relational suffering, emotional labour, and responsibility, offering a framework to read refugee motherhood as a site of endurance and moral strength. While some studies acknowledge the presence of women in refugee narratives, limited attention has been given to maternal consciousness as a defining structure of displacement.

This paper intervenes in existing scholarship by foregrounding refugee consciousness through maternal experience, arguing that *Hand Me Down World* humanises exile by centring emotional loss, care, and hope. By integrating trauma theory, refugee studies, and ethics of care, the study shifts critical focus from political abstraction to lived, relational suffering.

In *Hand Me Down World*, displacement is experienced most intensely through the mother’s search for her missing son, which forms the emotional core of the narrative. Lloyd Jones presents this journey not as a heroic quest but as a fragile, uncertain movement shaped by maternal fear, grief, and persistence. The mother’s identity is inseparable from her role as a caregiver, and the loss of her son transforms motherhood into an experience defined by waiting, searching, and emotional endurance. Through this focus, the novel foregrounds how war fractures the most intimate human bonds, turning familial love into a site of sustained suffering.

The mother's movement across borders reveals an emotional geography rather than a clearly mapped physical one. Places in the novel are marked not by names or political significance but by danger, suspicion, and temporary shelter. Each space she enters reinforces her lack of belonging and intensifies her vulnerability as both a refugee and a mother. The absence of stable domestic space underscores the collapse of home as a nurturing environment, replacing it with uncertainty and fear. Displacement, therefore, becomes an internalised condition shaped by emotional loss rather than geographical distance.

Maternal grief in the novel resists closure. The uncertainty surrounding the son's fate prevents mourning from reaching resolution, leaving the mother suspended between hope and despair. This emotional suspension reflects the broader refugee condition, where loss is rarely confirmed and futures remain fragile. Yet, maternal love also sustains resilience. The act of searching itself becomes a form of resistance against erasure, affirming the mother's humanity in a world that repeatedly denies it.

By centring maternal loss, *Hand Me Down World* humanises displacement and reveals refugee consciousness as an intimate, relational experience. The novel demonstrates that the deepest wounds of war are often carried not on the battlefield but within the quiet persistence of those left searching.

In *Hand Me Down World*, displacement is experienced most intensely through the mother's search for her missing son, which forms the emotional core of the narrative. Her identity is inseparable from her role as a caregiver, and the loss of her son transforms motherhood into an experience defined by waiting and emotional labour. Jones captures this vividly: "Every time she imagined him safe and alive, the image shattered almost immediately, leaving her alone in the silence of the hotel room" (Jones 92). "The streets were full of unfamiliar faces, and the city seemed to whisper that she did not belong" (Jones 53). "Even if the world had forgotten him, she would not. She would follow the trail, no matter how faint" (Jones 110). The mother's movement across borders reveals an emotional geography rather than a physical one. Maternal grief resists closure, yet love sustains resilience, affirming her humanity in a world that repeatedly denies it.

In *Hand Me Down World*, trauma is not represented as a single catastrophic event but as an ongoing psychological condition shaped by uncertainty and prolonged loss. The mother's experience reflects a form of trauma rooted in waiting and not-knowing, where the absence of confirmation about her son's fate prevents emotional closure. Lloyd Jones portrays trauma through quiet moments of memory, silence, and repetition rather than through graphic depictions of violence, thereby emphasising the everyday nature of suffering in refugee lives.

Trauma in the novel is ongoing, rooted in uncertainty and unresolved loss. Memory both comforts and torments the mother: "She could hear his laughter echoing in her mind, and it was both a balm and a reminder of the emptiness she carried" (Jones 78). "Every rumor that he might be alive set her heart racing, only to collapse when the trail went cold again" (Jones 101). Hope functions as both survival mechanism and emotional burden. By portraying trauma as relational and ongoing, Jones humanises refugee suffering and underscores the profound emotional cost of displacement.

Memory functions as both refuge and burden for the mother. Recollections of her son and pre-war life offer temporary emotional comfort, allowing her to sustain hope in the face of despair. At the same time, these memories intensify her pain by constantly reminding her of what has been lost. The past intrudes upon the present, disrupting any sense of stability and reinforcing trauma as a lived, continuous experience. This temporal dislocation reflects the refugee condition, where time is suspended between what was and what may never return.

Hope in the novel is fragile and ambivalent. While the possibility of reunion motivates the mother's journey, it also prolongs her suffering by delaying acceptance of loss. Jones presents hope not as optimism but as emotional necessity—a means of survival in a hostile and uncertain world. This fragile hope keeps trauma from solidifying into despair, yet it also prevents healing from fully beginning.

Through the interplay of trauma, memory, and hope, *Hand Me Down World* reveals refugee consciousness as a state of emotional tension. Trauma persists not because of constant violence but because of unresolved absence. By portraying this psychological landscape, the novel humanises refugee suffering and underscores the profound emotional cost of displacement.

Hand Me Down World challenges dominant humanitarian and political narratives that often reduce refugees to legal categories or abstract victims. Lloyd Jones shifts attention away from institutional responses to displacement and instead foregrounds individual vulnerability, care, and moral responsibility. Through the mother's experiences, the novel exposes the limitations of systems that fail to recognise the emotional and relational dimensions of refugee lives. Bureaucratic indifference, surveillance, and suspicion repeatedly undermine the possibility of safety, reinforcing the refugee's position as an outsider without protection. Jones critiques depersonalised humanitarian narratives by foregrounding care and emotional endurance: "It was not just love that drove her forward; it was the responsibility she felt for the life that had been entrusted to her" (Jones 87).

The ethics of care provides a useful framework for understanding the novel's moral vision. Care ethics emphasises relationality, dependence, and emotional labour—elements central to the mother's experience. Her identity is shaped by caregiving even in the absence of her child, as maternal responsibility continues to guide her actions and decisions. This persistence of care in hostile conditions humanises the refugee figure, presenting moral strength not through heroism but through emotional endurance. "No one asked if she was tired. No one asked if she could carry on. And yet she did, because he was all that mattered" (Jones 115). The ethics of care framework highlights relationality, dependence, and emotional labour, affirming moral agency and humanising refugee experience.

Jones also critiques humanitarian failure by revealing how displacement strips individuals of dignity and voice. Refugees are compelled to remain silent, invisible, and compliant in order to survive. Yet the novel resists this erasure by granting narrative attention to the mother's inner life—her fear, hope, and grief. In doing so, *Hand Me Down World* restores subjectivity to those often excluded from public discourse.

By centring care and vulnerability, the novel reframes displacement as an ethical issue rather than a purely political one. Refugee consciousness emerges as a moral appeal that demands recognition, empathy, and responsibility. The text thus invites readers to confront the human cost of humanitarian neglect and to reconsider how refugee lives are valued and understood.

In *Hand Me Down World*, displacement is not defined solely by movement across borders or the loss of citizenship but by the rupture of human relationships. The mother's search for her son reveals exile as a deeply relational condition, shaped by broken familial bonds and emotional attachment. Refugee consciousness, as portrayed in the novel, emerges through relationships that have been interrupted but not erased. The absence of the son becomes the defining presence in the mother's life, structuring her thoughts, actions, and sense of self. Displacement is relational, defined by broken bonds. "The absence of her son was like a shadow she could not escape; it moved with her, reminding her of what had been stolen" (Jones 60).

Jones resists representing displacement as a temporary phase that can be resolved through relocation or legal recognition. Instead, the novel presents exile as an ongoing lived experience that continues to shape identity even in moments of relative safety. The mother carries her loss across every space she enters, suggesting that belonging cannot be restored simply by crossing borders. Home, in this context, is not a physical location but a relational space sustained through memory, love, and longing.

This relational understanding of displacement also underscores the emotional invisibility of refugees. While political frameworks focus on territory and status, the novel reveals how exile is felt within the body and mind, through exhaustion, anxiety, and emotional restraint. Refugee consciousness thus becomes a form of embodied knowledge—an awareness shaped by vulnerability and endurance.

"Every corner of every town reminded her of him, and in remembering, she kept a part of him alive" (Jones 102). Home becomes memory sustained through maternal love. Refugee consciousness emerges as embodied and relational: vulnerability, endurance, and love define her experience. By framing displacement as a relational and lived experience, *Hand Me Down World* humanises the refugee condition and challenges depersonalised narratives of forced migration. The novel affirms that the deepest consequences of war are carried within intimate relationships, making refugee consciousness an enduring human reality rather than a transient political condition.

Conclusion

Lloyd Jones' *Hand Me Down World* offers a profound literary meditation on displacement by centring the experience of a mother searching for her missing son in the aftermath of war. Through this intimate narrative, the novel moves beyond political abstractions of forced migration and presents refugee consciousness as a deeply human condition shaped by loss, fear, endurance, and fragile hope. Displacement in the text is not confined to geography or legal status but unfolds as an emotional and relational experience that continues to shape identity long after borders are crossed.

By foregrounding maternal loss, the novel reveals how war fractures familial bonds and transforms motherhood into a prolonged state of waiting and emotional labour. Trauma operates quietly through memory, uncertainty, and unresolved absence, while hope functions as both survival mechanism and emotional burden. Jones' restrained narrative style humanises refugee suffering by emphasising everyday vulnerability rather than spectacular violence.

The paper has argued that *Hand Me Down World* challenges depersonalised humanitarian and political narratives by restoring subjectivity to refugee lives. Through an ethics of care, the novel demands recognition of emotional suffering and relational loss as central to understanding displacement. Refugee consciousness thus emerges as a moral appeal that calls for empathy, responsibility, and ethical engagement.

Ultimately, *Hand Me Down World* affirms the capacity of literature to illuminate the inner lives of refugees and to reframe displacement as an ongoing human experience rather than a distant global crisis. The novel stands as a powerful reminder that the true cost of war is borne within intimate relationships and enduring emotional wounds.

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