

Representing Pain: Refugee Bodies as Sites of Trauma

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Abstract:

The impact of trauma on the bodies and psychology of refugees is long-lasting; their bodies become emblematic of the sort of ‘control’, ‘management’, and ‘disciplining’ they undergo. And, when human bodies are trapped in a condition of immense physical and mental violence, such a scale of violence is counterproductive to any healthy way of living. This vicious atmosphere gives rise to human beings with traumatized psyches and survival-phobias. This research paper, in the form of an image essay, studies the refugee condition; it attempts to study the trauma of detainees in Manus and Nauru islands¹ in the Pacific region of Australia, and also looks into the traumatic condition of the Rohingya refugees living in some refugee camps in Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir. The asylum seekers in the Australian islands are mostly Muslims, which includes Kurds, Turks, Syrians, and Rohingyas. The paper begins with defining the term “refugee” etymologically and representing the refugee as a mobile site/body of pain and trauma. To define the term “refugee”, this paper also includes the ideas of Giorgio Agamben who problematizes the existence of a refugee-body as “bare life”. Taking cue from the theoretical insights of Elaine Scarry’s *Body in Pain*, this paper points towards the nature of pain as being a feeling that fractures language. Alongside highlighting that language as a medium fails to express and represent trauma/pain of refugees in its entirety, the main focus of this paper is to bring to limelight the fact that a refugee body is a site/carrier of trauma and pain. And, such pain/trauma is not fully expressed by the language in which they express and talk about this trauma to the outside world and their pain/trauma is not wholly represented by theoretical interventions. The essay attempts to put this argument by reading some pictures and interviews of refugees in the light of various refugee theories. Employing some refugee theories like Kunz’s Kinetic Model of Refugee Theory, Mollica’s Trauma Theory, Burstow’s Feminist Trauma Theory, the paper attempts to represent them as “bodies in pain”, and as ‘sites’ which are not able to express/represent/mediate their pain/trauma in its entirety.

Key words: refugee, refugee theories, Nauru, Manus, body in pain, bare-life.

The word “Refugee” is not new that has crept into the frame all of a sudden but is a term that has a dense etymological and historical origin. The word “Refugee came directly from the French word ‘réfugié’ with a very specific meaning; it referred to Protestants who fled France following the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, the law that granted religious liberty and civil rights to the Protestant Huguenots for nearly a century” (“The Origin of ‘Refugee’”). But, it is also to be noted that after this incident, “within a decade, refugee was being used more generally in English to refer to anyone who was forced to flee to a place of safety, often because of danger or persecution because of religious or political beliefs” (“The Origin of ‘Refugee’”). This displacement of humans from one place to another is often accompanied by human rights violations and various forms of violence. The UNHCR defines refugees as “persons who are forced to flee their home countries to escape serious human rights abuses and other causes of prolonged and emotional distress” (qtd. in George 380).

These processes of displacement of humans turn them into the categories of refugees leading to “immeasurable and long lasting” effects of trauma; such a level of trauma proves “shattering to both

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their inner and outer selves” (Steel 60). This traumatic experience of refugees seems to be an endless affair as “every day the basic rights of refugees are violated in countless countries around the world, and an increased number of refugees are exposed to disasters, incidents of extreme trauma and ongoing physical, sexual and psychological oppression” (qtd. in George 379). Not only are the individual physical sufferings and pains traumatic for their survival and existence as refugees, but their experiences of extreme violence, the grievous loss of close family members, loss of identity, and poor health conditions as a result of violence/war are equally included in their traumatic existence. Being displaced sites/bodies of trauma, “refugees also face a lack of autonomy in their host countries (White 2004), where they are virtually powerless and regarded as a threat by the powerful (Hyndman 2000)” (qtd. in George 379).

Giorgio Agamben, a biopolitical theorist, gives an extra spin to the existence and formulation of a refugee body/life. He represents the refugee as “homo sacer”; an individual who is trapped in various political processes. His political theory represents the refugee as a figure that exposes the fictitious accounts of national sovereignty, human rights, citizenship, and as a modern biopolitical subject or ‘bare life’, regulated within a ‘state of exception’ outside of the ‘normal legal framework—the camp. In his biopolitical thought, “Agamben notes that a state of exception is created by the modern state where a special or exceptional beings are interned, ghettoized, demarcated within camps, regulated, and sacrificed to produce (paradoxically) the normal legal structures of a state by an implication of the biopolitical order” (Lemke 3). The life of a human being constrained by the politics of a state and by political culture is termed as “bare life”, and the state/camp she/he lives in is called “state of exception”. This state of life turns the refugees into bodies where torture and pain reduce them to “trash” or “scum” (Lee, “We Refugees”). These “capitalistically devalued” are subjected to physical torture, psychological harassment, sexual abuse, which leads to bodily pain and mental trauma. These pains are expressed via ‘irrational’, ‘meaningless’, and ‘vague’ shrieks and cries, which reflect the fracturing of language as an incomplete medium to express that pain and trauma. Regarding this, Elaine Scarry writes, “Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story it tells is about the inseparability of ‘the difficulty of expressing physical pain’, ‘the political and perpetual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty and the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or more simply, the nature of human creation” (Scarry 3). Elaine Scarry says that pain and torture have an immediate effect on the human body, and so “physical pain happens, of course, not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we each day make our way, and who may at any moment be separated from us by only a space of several inches” (Scarry 4).

To express and understand physical pain and the related trauma is an equally complex process; as to represent the ‘feelings’ of pain in words and expressions is a problematic condition. The refugee body as a site of pain and trauma, and also the witness/intervening voice of that pain, do not find a medium to express the bodily and psychological ‘aches’ of a refugee in its entirety. Elaine Scarry writes:

When one speaks about ‘ones’ own physical pain’ and about ‘another person’s physical pain,’ one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct order of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is ‘effortlessly’ grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot not be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is ‘effortless is not grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and, finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the ‘it’ one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual ‘it’). (Scarry 4)

In this manner, Elaine Scarry puts forth the inexpressibility of an entire feeling of trauma and pain of a living body by means of language. He problematises the structure of language and questions its fractured state and its failure to express pain in a ‘rational’ manner. And, more so highlighting the gaps in language as being an incomplete medium for expressibility of pain in general, and specifically in case of women refugees, Elaine Scarry argues:

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. ‘English’, writes Virginia Woolf, ‘which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache [. . .] The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once turns dry. (4)

This failure of expressing the pains/trauma via language and theorizing is equally true for the refugees being dealt in this study. But, this incompleteness is not to be turned into a hindrance to represent these voices of pain by underestimating and undervaluing the small proportion in which language and theorizing expresses these. This paper attempts to give that ‘fractional’ representation to the pains and trauma of Nauru-Manus and Rohingya refugees, knowing the fact that such an expression would be “shadowy” and “incomplete”. The motto is to bring to limelight such acute instances of pain and trauma, which in their “shadowy existence” and “incompleteness” fracture our sense of being, of language, and of pain.

Such an intense trauma and pain of refugees is basically an outcome of various social, political, and religious constraints which get deeply embedded into the individual psychology/experience of a refugee turning her/him into an archive/site of pain. The refugee phenomenon is a global one now, and this crisis of ‘creation’ of refugees has led to various theoretical interventions aimed at categorisation of refugees. One such theory of refugee classification is Kunz’s Kinetic Model of Refugee Theory which provides valuable insights on the perception of refugees towards their spatial displacement and their transformation from citizens of a nation to ‘disowned/unowned’ sites of trauma. Kunz is of the view that, “the flight and settlement patterns of most refugees conform to two kinetic types—anticipatory refugee movement and acute refugee movement”ⁱⁱ. Elucidating these two categories of refugees, he defines anticipatory refugees as people who anticipate danger and opt for migration. He says, “anticipatory refugees sense danger early, thus allowing an orderly departure before the crisis occurs. They are often accompanied by their entire family, with their resources intact, and have prepared for a new life. Anticipatory refugees leave as soon as they find a country willing to take them” (qtd. in George 380). In acute refugee movement the resulting displacement of people is the result of: an overwhelming push where people are forced to leave their homeland on a moment’s notice. They are unprepared for the journey and concentrate simply on surviving the disaster zone. As little thought is given to the consequence of flight, there is an increased risk of acute refugees experiencing or witnessing traumatic events, and they are therefore more likely to require help coping with their struggles. Once a place of asylum is reached, often in a state of shock acute refugees have a difficult choice to make: return home, seek to remain in the place of asylum, or accept another distant resettlement opportunity in a strange land. (qtd. in George 380)

Trauma Theory is another refugee classification theory which seeks biological explanations of trauma and pain of refugee bodies. Richard Mollica (2006) talks about the trauma of refugees in his theory and postulates that the refugees as survivors have an “innate capacity to heal themselves in conjunction with medical psychological intervention. There is a healing force hidden in all of us that is always striving for survival” (qtd. in George 382). Unlike, Kunz’s refugee theory the theories of refugee trauma focus mainly on the biological aspects of pain and trauma, and also highlight various tracks to heal it. Mollica is of the view that, “it is critical for healing that victims of violence play an active role by not only telling, but also interpreting their trauma stories. Storytelling coaches (e.g. doctors, social workers, therapists) should guide survivors as they navigate through the horrifying details during the storytelling process” (qtd. in George 382). This insight proposes that storytelling and expressing trauma in words serves as a healing process for the refugee bodies/lives. Another theoretical spin in Refugee Theory comes with the feministic approach, which argues that the existing theories of trauma exclude women and their pains related to their displacement. Burstow, a feminist refugee theorist, bases her view on the argument that Trauma Theory “only considers the experiences of the dominant class—white, young, able-bodied, educated men—to the exclusion of the daily struggles of traumatized women in society” (qtd. in George 382). Resisting a

biased system of representation of trauma and pain in various Trauma Theories, Burstow highlights the marginalisation of the weaker and marginalised sections of a refugee community. She argues that, “people who have experienced trauma know the reality of our current world. By labeling these individuals, the medical model forces them to accept the societal norm that the world is a safe place, even as women continue to lie in an abusive and patriarchal society” (qtd. in George 383). Like Burstow, various post-colonial feminists argue about the stereotyping and ‘objectification’ of women in their existence as refugees. The post-colonial feminist refugee theorists argue:

‘That rather than addressing border control, states should pay more attention to protecting women in situations of vulnerability’ (Crosby 2006). Sexual harm has become the primary reason to restrain the movement of women, with little consideration for their motivations to move or the diverse experiences of migration. Female refugees have become bodies, victims to be saved and contained [. . .]. (qtd. in George 383)

The discussion of these refugee theories brings to limelight some considerable variations, but the main strand that exists in these theories is that, “refugees are the uprooted (Handlin 1951), suffering losses of every description, including social identity, place, family, livelihood, and support systems, and most struggle to find their way in a new, often hostile, environment with a foreign language and customs” (383). It is this very dense strand of refugee trauma and pain accompanied by the feministic proposition of an “othered experience” of women refugees that are represented in this write-up. The refugee detention camps in Nauru and Manus islands of Australia, and the Rohingya refugees camps in Jammu (India) belong to the category of “acute refugees” and are a real-life extension of these refugee theories.

The Nauru and Manus islands in Australia are witnessing an acute condition wherein thousands of refugees have been detained and put in camp-like detention centers. The main issue is that it is being done in a secret manner and hidden from the external eyes (See Fig. 1 & 5). It is found that “harsh conditions, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of vulnerable people, reinforced by ongoing refusals to accept complaints of mistreatment, have created a situation which shames Australia and undermines the rights and dignity of individuals and families” (“Condition and Treatment” 3). The detainees in such detention centers are subjected to indiscriminate and torture: The UN Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture who visited Nauru in 2015, was unable to discuss the team’s findings for confidentiality reasons. The Chair, Malcolm Evans said however that there are ‘grave concerns around the entire set-up’ for asylum seekers: The idea of holding all of those seeking asylum in closed institutions [. . .] of this nature—with no real understanding of what their long-term future is likely to be—is bound to be a cause of great distress. (4)

The level of torture inflicted on the detainees is not limited to detention only but includes physical and psychological harm also (See Fig. 2 & 3). “In the middle of 2016 Guardian Australia published the Nauru files: more than 2, 000 incident reports recording things that had happened in Australia’s refugee gulag on Nauru. The incident reports—made by people directly or indirectly employed by the Australian government—contained reports of assaults, sexual abuse, self-harm, and child abuse” (Burnside, *The Guardian*). (See Fig. 4)

Children, known as “transitory children”, often turn out to be the targets of sexual harassment and abuse, “in September 2014 a teacher reported that a young classroom helper reported that a young classroom helper had asked for a four-minute shower instead of a two-minute shower. Her request has been accepted on the condition of sexual favours. It is a male security person. **She did not state if this has or hasn’t occurred.** The security officer wants to view a boy or girl having a shower (Burnside). This incident is a testimony to the ‘objectification’ of women and their sexual abuse detained in these camps. It can be noticed that the victim of this sexual abuse fails to express her trauma by means of words as she does not say whether any such instance of sexual torture took place.

The government at times makes moves to transport these traumatized bodies to new accommodations within the local community but that too does not work (See Fig.6). Reporting such an incident in the Manus island, Ben Doherty writes, “men are unwilling to go as ‘there is a great threat of violence from the PNG army, and the Manus island community has made it very clear it

doesn't want the men to move into accommodation closer to town" (Doherty, *The Guardian*). Depicting his condition, Abdul Aziz Muhamat, a Sudanese refugee at Manus island, express his traumatic existence as a refugee, his survival, the torture and pains he suffers, and how he resists the Manus camp system as an emblem of bare life (@Aljazeera).

Visiting a Rohingya refugee camp in Jammu proved out to be an equally complex revision of the refugee crisis. Catching the first glimpse of me, a few camp-dwellers looked confused, moving haphazardly as if I had come to harm them or force them vacate the dingy shacks they are living in. Then it took me a few minutes to make them understand that I have come there to represent them and talk about their problems and pains. They gathered around me with their naked kids, a lot of these, and I thought of asking them about their movement from Burma to Jammu. Noor Fatima, a lady in her thirties, began to complaint about water shortage without my asking anything. Living with her six kids in a little shack, she refuses to be photographed because the young ladies are not allowed [or are culturally bordered] to do so by their families. When I asked her about her migration from Burma, she began to show the scar in her right palm and said, "See, what they did to me. It was a terrible journey, I lost my father. And, now the *gujjars* and Hindus are forcing us to leave this place. They are deliberately polluting the water that runs through a little stream nearby. See, my daughter's teeth are broken, they torture our babies so that we leave the place." Finding herself in an inexpressible state, she just opened her hand showing me the scar so as to express her trauma. When I talked about any kind of sexual exploitation, she looked a little worried and said, "It doesn't happen here but there is a nearby camp where ladies are being sexually exploited". (See Fig. 7 & 8)

Zareena Khaton repeats the same tale, and when I ask her whether she has any memories of her place, she says, "obviously, we live on that. We were forced to leave." And when I enquired of her whether she wants to go back home, she was like, "no we were forced to leave, I do not want to go back". I said if the condition becomes stable, would you like to return, and with a shine in her eyes she replied, "Obviously yes" (See Fig. 9). Another young girl, Takara Begum, who turned out to be a married one with two kids lost her parents while coming to India. She also does not want to go back and says, "They kill". She said that she does not revisit the memories of her home-country and she does not miss that place any more. She says, "they forced us to leave because we are Muslims, burnt our homes, where will we go?". Another woman, Mukeema Akhtar, has seven kids and lives in the same camp; she has the same worries as other women. She lost her two sons in Burma and is too scared to return there. Now, what she is worried about is that the locals are harassing them, they do not have access to basic amenities of life, and about the poor wages of her sons who work as domestic labours. She says, "the rain water enters our polythene shacks, we do not have food at times. If someone is ill, we do not have any health facilities. But, still it is better to be alive here than to be dead there" (See Fig. 12).

The level of pain these refugees have experienced is masked in the trauma that lives in them and that in its mobility goes with them wherever they go. Their expression of such painful memories and current struggles in a condition of trauma seems to be a "shadowy" account of that "real pain" they encounter. Language, shrieks, cries, scars, tears, amputations, and theorizing in a way are incomplete media of expressing their pain/trauma, but these are the only tools left with all of us to give a representation to such life events and experiences. The truth is that being a refugee is all about survival and sustenance in an acute condition of trauma and these people are living examples of that. This is what the movements across borders can land us in; a 'citizen' in a blink of an eye becomes a 'migrant' or a 'refugee'. What one is left with is a kit of memories which at times is a solace and at others a traumatic experience. A survival wherein one finds the humiliation/torture a little better than death keeps the people going within the fluctuating refugee politics. The factors that are at the base, and which reduce human life/human bodies to mere categories of citizens/migrants/refugees need a revision. And, this needs to be pondered upon quite seriously because physical wounds and pains may heal but internal pain/trauma haunt forever.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ Nauru is an island republic in the South Pacific. It is 4, 000 Kilometres away from Sydney. It was first used by Australia as a place of detention from late 2001, after the Tampa episode, until 2007. It was again reused in 2012 as a place/camp where families and unaccompanied women and children refugees are sent. The Manus island is a place of detention for unaccompanied men refugees.

ⁱⁱ In his 1981 version of this theory, he includes the concepts of majority-identified, event-related, and self-alienated refugees. Majority-identified ones are those who are opposite to and resist social and political happenings in their home nation. Event-related refugees are the ones who belong to a specific group/community against whom there is a prevalent discrimination. And there is a third type called self-alienated refugees who leave their country because of various personal reasons. (George 380).