

THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE : EXPLORING THE EXODUS

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Abstract

“And here is the biggest lie in the refugee crisis. It isn’t the faulty individual stories. It is the language of disaster often used to describe incoming refugees—deluge or flood or swarm. These words are lies.” - Dina Nayeri, The Ungrateful Refugee

People fleeing persecution and conflict have been granted asylum in foreign lands for thousands of years. The UN says - an unprecedented 70.8 million people around the world have been forced from home by conflict and persecution at the end of 2018. While we just picture an overcrowded camp, full of people and children, sick, shabby, food half-cooked, half-spilled, the lives of these refugees hold more into it.

In this paper, an attempt is made to understand these lives closely with the text “The Ungrateful Refugee” by Dina Nayeri. In this book, Nayeri weaves together her own vivid story with the stories of other refugees and asylum seekers in recent years, bringing us inside the daily lives and taking us through the different stages of their journeys, from escape to asylum to resettlement. In addition to this, some other examples are cited from other works related to refugees. Insights have been drawn from a comparison between the treatment given to refugees by the local people and the government of the nation they enter, then and now. With the pandemic covid-19 and an unsurprising spread of diseases at other days, because of their living conditions which affect their lives more than others’, a study is done of the circumstances they are bound to live in, with limited or no support and present a theoretical analysis of it.

Keywords: *The Ungrateful Refugee, Refugee Crisis, Covid-19, Asylum, Dina Nayeri*

Objectives

- Understand the reality of the refugee crisis
- Unfold the hidden reality with the help of accounts mentioned in literature
- Study about the process and problems involved in seeking an asylum
- Estimate and provide some solutions

Methodology

A theoretical analysis of the lives of refugees and problems faced by them with regard to a collection of real narratives mentioned in the book “The Ungrateful Refugee”.

Introduction

- **About the author and the book**

Dina Nayeri an Iranian American Novelist was eight when she became a refugee and had spent several years seeking asylum before she settled in an American asylum and later a citizen. Throughout her journey from Iran to America, she comes across many people from different backgrounds, coming out of it for several reasons. The book *“The Ungrateful Refugee”* recalibrates the conversation around the refugee experience. Nayeri pens down all such stories in the most transparent manner, possible. On the other hand, it brings several important issues related to the lives of refugees which go unnoticed and uncared, into notice.

- **Refugee Crisis**

It is defined as difficult and life-threatening situations faced by refugees moving out or entering a country. A crisis can occur either from the perspective of the forcibly displaced persons, or that of the receiving state, or both, but the problems faced by the later are considered the real major “crisis”, above human life at stake.

Every country in this political world is dealing with a serious refugee crisis with an ever-increasing number of incoming people and lesser resources and solutions. However, the refugees face severe adversities physically and emotionally. They are the victims of the crisis, not the creators.

Review of literature

“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark,” writes Warsan Shine. UNHCR refers refugees in need of resettlement to countries that accept refugees (Georgetown Law, 2009). *“Refugees must pass an interview and complete an extensive medical check and security clearance”* (Martin, 2004). While there is no accepted definition of the term integration, scholars have identified a wide variety of indicators, or measures, that policy makers and those working with refugees can utilize to assess refugee progress towards integration. The ORR focuses on three particular indicators of integration: employment, self-sufficiency, and English language acquisition.

Thesis Statement- This paper draws a closer insight into the refugee lives and how the narrative is different from that presented to us by the ignorant society we live in. Hence, it is an attempt to present the picture from the victim’s viewpoint.

Why- “Refugee Crisis”?

The UNHCR defines a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.” According to Amnesty International, there are many reasons why people around the globe seek to rebuild their lives in a different country. Millions flee from armed conflicts, violence, human rights violations, etc. Some no longer feel safe and might have been targeted just because of who they are or what they do or believe – for example, their ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or political opinions.

The first major international refugee crisis happened in the 20th century when more than 50 million people were displaced because of the Second World War. War doesn't only pose a threat to life but the collapse of economic and financial services make it difficult to earn a livelihood. Since the 1950s, many nations in Africa have suffered civil wars and ethnic strife, thus generating a massive number of refugees from different nationalities and ethnic groups.

In the form of religion, social, national, or political, persecution causes many to flee from their home country. According to Pew, 46% of refugees in 2016 who came to the US were Muslim and 44% Christian; 10% were other, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews.

Women and LGBT are the targets of killings, sexual and gender-based violence, physical attacks, torture, arbitrary detention, accusations of immoral or deviant behavior, denial of the rights to assembly, expression, and information, and discrimination in employment, health and education in all regions around the world.

It is estimated that more than 20 million people all over the world face food insecurity. Countries like Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen face extreme drought, and many from here become refugees, in search of stable food sources. Millions of people face extreme weather conditions such as droughts or floods. Adding on, Financial instability, uncontrolled inflation, lack of access to healthcare are often the major reasons for a financially driven refugee crisis.

The crisis doesn't end when they leave their country but begin. In hope of a better life in another country, there await several other challenges before them to seek a refugee camp, an asylum, and then citizenship. These problems include the following-

- **Housing at Refugee Camps**

In Sri Lankan refugee camps, a typical house is a small wooden one-room hut with a corrugated iron roof. In Jalazone, a Palestinian refugee camp, the households have 3-5 people per room, while some have over 5 people per room. French Refugee Camps, *"are plagued by rats, water sources contaminated by feces, and inhabitants have been diagnosed with tuberculosis, scabies, and post-traumatic stress."* A study conducted in refugee camps in Bangladesh found that camps that provided sanitation facilities had cholera rates of 1.6 cases per 1,000 people, while camps that had no such facilities had cholera rates that were almost three times greater. It can easily be concluded that the houses are poorly ventilated and overcrowded.

- **Health**

The most frequent health problems of newly arrived refugees include accidental injuries, hypothermia, burns, gastrointestinal illnesses, pregnancy and delivery related complications, diabetes, and hypertension. They are also exposed to psycho-social disorders, reproductive health problems, higher newborn mortality, nutrition disorders, drug abuse, alcoholism, increase their vulnerability to non-communicable diseases. Female refugees frequently face specific challenges, particularly in maternal, child health, sexual and reproductive health, and violence. Vulnerable individuals, especially children, are prone to respiratory

infections and gastrointestinal illnesses because of poor living conditions, suboptimal hygiene, and deprivation during migration. Social, economic, and political factors in the origin and destination countries of refugees influence their risks for infection with HIV and hepatitis viruses. However, to access proper treatment, their legal status is a barrier. As refugees, they have “no status” (pg13, Nayeri, 2019) in the country they come to. Also, it “takes hours” to make appointments with the doctors at the refugee camps and “need a translator” (pg132, 2019).

Camps often fail to provide the recommended amount of food, and access to proper water which leads to malnutrition. Traumatic experiences in the country of origin, compounded with displacement, loss, lead to severe depression, panic attacks, and debilitating forms of anxiety. According to several studies, many refugees suffer from PTSD which includes- persisting, recurrent and disturbing memories or flashbacks of a witnessed or experienced trauma, along with other symptoms such as negative thoughts and feelings, difficulty with concentration and sleep, feeling detached from people and current experiences, as well as exaggerated startle responses and reactive symptoms such as being irritable, having angry outbursts.

From unofficial refugee camps to legal settlements, the next step is to seek asylum and then citizenship in the country they choose to live in. Seeking asylum is the most difficult as it unfolds the manifold problems, perhaps the reality of the world and its most brutal face in times of need.

An asylum seeker is someone who claims to be a refugee but whose claim hasn't been evaluated.

Many books revolving around refugees have talked about the difficult process to undergo to seek asylum. Ben Rawlence in the book *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp* quotes –

“Caught between the ongoing war in Somalia and a world unwilling to welcome them, the refugees can only survive in the camp by imagining a life elsewhere. It is unsettling: neither the past, nor the present, nor the future is a safe place for a mind to linger for long (2016). This is where the reality resides and how far we are from reaching the same due to false narratives by different governments about the works done by them. The insights stated below are from the study of the refugee camps and asylums of western and highly reputed, developed countries.

- **Refugees – a prey to smugglers**

Profit-seeking criminals smuggle refugees across borders. When refugees cannot access the legal channels of migration, they are willing to take risks for a better life and are caught by smugglers and become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. They may suffocate in containers, perish in deserts or drown at sea while being smuggled because smugglers treat them as goods. There are many organized groups and networks operating as smugglers in different regions of the world. Some hospitality providers are one among them as it gives them an easy chance to make extra money with the help of corrupt officials and other individuals. Many refugees are abused or die on the way while many are abandoned en route without resources. *“Police often arrested (such) asylum seekers on the streets, handed them to authorities or left them on the mountain at the mercy of smugglers, stray bullets and the elements” (pg53, 2019).*

These issues pose a problem for other asylum seekers as well in proving themselves as a refugee and therefore undergo a long security check procedure. Two principal smuggling routes as per estimates lead from East, North, and West Africa to Europe and from South America to North America. Between 1966-2011 at least 1691 people died while attempting desert journeys and in 2008 alone a further 1000 deaths occurred as a result of sea crossings.

- **Interview**

The next step after applying for asylum and the security check is the interview. It is a complex process with multiple interviews, dozens of reviews, known as the United States Refugee Admissions Program. An important step in one's application for "refugee status" - it's a chance to put their case across to someone from the Home Office. They make a decision based on what one says. However, it is based on the story about the past that they narrate, which generally fail an individual from seeking asylum. Suffering from mental, physical, and emotional turmoil, the refugees need to make sure that they narrate all the incidents in the correct chronology and yet, if it is doubted, they will be rejected. *"When the refugee refuses to be original or specific her story fails; she is sent away"* (pg200, 2019). Moreover, there is a certain category of people that are selected. If a "rape victim" claims in the interview that they need help and that they are raped, which is why they ran and crossed boundaries, this might not get them a clear pass but, *"The government is targeting me. I am a threat to them,"* will. Because *"Then, you're a real refugee."* (pg179, 2019)

The interviews are not only difficult but humiliating. Especially for the LGBTQs where some are asked: *"to perform their gayness, to prove they have acted on it"* (pg182, 2019). Moreover, such processes take hours and days until they are satisfied which is not a common possibility because *"they're not looking to rescue. They're looking to reject."* (pg171, 2019)

- **Language differences**

Language is both a means of assimilation and a source of exclusion for refugees. They are torn between different languages when they cross borders. Language again is a deciding factor in seeking asylum. Those beneficial for the accepting country only are granted an asylum. Interpreters from the other country are often biased and don't translate the original information at times, that doesn't let individuals qualify. Young children too face issues because of multiple languages, *"There is no way to foresee what is their academic educational future, so they don't know which language to choose"*. (Sunaina Kumar, 2019)

- **Religion Test**

Religion is an important deciding factor in getting asylum and therefore, many convert their religion according to the beliefs of the country they are trying to get in, called as 'conversions of convenience'. There's an increasing anecdotal evidence of Persian refugees converting to Christianity from Islam – both in the UK and across Europe. The UK government has long implemented a test for asylum seekers in an attempt to establish if the claim of Christian conversion is genuine, which is generally the most difficult. Many are even taught to claim themselves as Christians in the interview, to get their applications

accepted. But to discourage this, Nayeri writes, *“Maybe we shouldn’t lose our minds if we see four Muslims walking down the street, one time.”* (pg201, 2019)

Despite all this, if they qualify, *“asylum seekers have 4 weeks; to find a home, a bank account & a job, or they face the streets”* (pg221, 2019). The government calls them sick and the locals of that country don’t treat them well too, for *“taking too much, wanting too much”* (pg167, 2019), also the *“carriers of disease and vermin”* (pg107, 2019) but they cannot dare to return because if they do, *“you’d see hangings, shootings, beheadings”*. (pg200, 2019)

Refugees in the Pandemic

During Covid-19, 168 countries fully or partially closed their borders, with around 90 making no exception for those seeking asylum. In the US: although testing is ostensibly free, refugees are less likely to be referred for it. Aside from the threats to health and access to asylum, the pandemic has also undermined the social and economic rights of refugees and the displaced. Being the most vulnerable populations, they were among the first to suffer the economic impacts of lockdown, losing their jobs and being evicted from their homes. Limited access to information due to language and cultural barriers, coupled with the marginalization of refugees, place them amongst the hardest to reach populations when information is disseminated. For many protracted crises due to conflict – including Afghanistan, Syria and Myanmar – returns are still not safe. Therefore, the pandemic has also thrown up new barriers to voluntary repatriation.

Estimated Solutions and Suggestions

1. Resettlement is a vital solution for the most vulnerable refugees – including torture survivors and people with serious medical problems.
2. World leaders also need to put saving lives first. States can stop deaths in shipwrecks and other issues en-route, by investing in search and rescue operations and helping people in distress.
3. Governments should combat all kinds of xenophobia and racial discrimination, investigate and prosecute trafficking gangs who exploit refugees.
4. People should be encouraged to donate essential goods and a sense of help and politeness should be inculcated in them towards refugees, if they come across any.
5. Educational institutions can offer scholarships to refugees.

Conclusion

“People are dying while governments spend billions on border control”, says Amnesty International. Refugees suffer through a lot beyond our imagination and need help, most importantly they need to be treated as humans. Refugees are *“not a deluge. Looking down from high above, an honest image isn’t a flood or swarm. It’s a small stream, or a thin, dying herd, finding its way onto a vast, fertile*

land. *What few broken and wretched lives the richest nations take in, they should do so graciously, as the chief consumers of the world's bounty*". (pg201, 2019) Hence, they should be rescued, helped and given shelters. Giving life and opportunity to someone is not being biased to others rather being equal to all humans with equal freedom to live.

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