

Refugee Crisis and the Necessity of an Ethical Resolve: An Analysis of Select Documentary Graphic Novels

Jisha Alex

Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Farook College, Calicut, India

Abstract: As a pertinent issue that disrupts the social psyche, discussions on refugee crisis are apposite in the contemporary society. Though the problem is broached very often by activists and thinkers, the urgency of the issue is seldom palpable to the public. In order to understand the horrors of destitution, it is necessary to look closer into their lives. This paper analyses lives in the refugee camps as represented in Joe Sacco's documentary graphic novel *Journalism* and Kate Evan's *Threads From The Refugee Crisis*, and how these artists juxtaposes bleak living conditions in refugee camps and popular contempt and suspicion toward the pouring refugees to accentuate the necessity of serious deliberations for an ethical resolve. The article borrows from Giorgio Agamben's concepts on refugee crisis and human rights to establish the inevitability of dilating laws to frame more inclusive ones to make room for the unfortunates.

Keywords: Refugee, Homo Sacer, Nativity, Sovereignty, Human rights

Introduction

"...no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land".

_ Warsan Shire

The world is witnessing the greatest exodus of modern times with millions of people undertaking perilous journeys in search of lands, safer and less hostile. They are asylum seekers fleeing ethnic religious hatred, war and genocide. This research paper tries to analyse works of Joe Sacco and Kate Evans in the light of Giorgio Agamben's concepts of state of exception and his thoughts on refugee crisis. In *Journalism*, Sacco pieces together snippets of some striking testimonies of refugees on the run to save themselves from war and other internal conflicts. It can be counted as a representative work of comics journalism, a genre popularized by Joe Sacco. Kate Evans in her documentary graphic novel, *Threads From the Refugee Crisis* successfully captures the issue of refugee crisis in a gripping and compelling visual verbal narrative, speeding urgent insight and enjoining the world to deal fairly with the victims. She portrays vividly, life in the Calais Jungle, a refugee and migrant encampment in France, which became a springboard for people hoping to make their way to U.K.

In most cases migrants are vilified and denigrated by propagandists and people easily believe in them without knowing the truth. Before going into details, it is necessary to understand where these people come from and the reasons which forced them to escape their homelands and embark on a dangerous journey, risking their lives. It is the need of the hour to educate people the gravity of the crisis. For example, Eritrea is the single biggest source of refugees crossing from Libya to Europe. Of those migrants who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015, Eritreans formed the fourth largest national group, behind Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis. According to the UN agency reports 5000 people leave every month, the reason being the totalitarian rule, without a constitution or proper judicial system under which people have no claims to freedom and personal choice.. The indefinite national service allows "government to control every aspects of a civilian's life from age of sixteen or seventeen. Where you live, your daily routine, and how often you see your family_ all this is decided by the government" (Kingsley 45). In Nigeria people are forced from their homes due to insurgency under Isis alley Boko Haram, whereas in Somalia there are regions were al-Shabaab is fighting a civil war against the government leading to the displacement of another million people. The condition of Afghan, Syria, and Iraq are no different.

Giorgio Agamben's take on Refugee Crisis

The condition of refugee is analogous to the Homo Sacer of Giorgio Agamben's concept of state of exception- human life caught in the sovereign ban, who belongs to the threshold of political community. He is "excluded from the religious community and from all political life...anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in a perpetual fight or a foreign land" (Homo Sacer 82). In his later essay, "Beyond Human Rights" explains the ties between the sovereign and native, goes on to deconstruct the very notion of human rights which is limited by territorial limits, and expounds the necessity of dismantling it for an inclusive law which accommodate denizens and refugees. Nation states presuppose human rights as the prerogative of its citizens. Considering the refugee crisis, Agamben writes: "-all the solemn evocations of the inalienable rights of human beings notwithstanding- have proved to be absolutely incapable not only of solving the problem but also of facing it in an adequate manner" (Beyond 30). Instead, nation states try to get rid of the pouring refugees and resort to inhuman measures to torture and control them and in most cases refuse asylum and expel them at the earliest.

Often, the world is too hostile to the case of these people, and unwilling to accept the influx of refugees as their numbers are increasing day by day. The protection of those inalienable human rights is possible as long as it pertains to the citizen of the nation state. Human rights ought to be equitable and disbursed impartially among all human beings. But nation state "makes nativity or birth the foundation of its own sovereignty" (32). Refugee narratives have significant role in educating the world regarding the lives of itinerant people bearing the brunt of war and communal violence. The narrative techniques used by Sacco highlights the predicament of the unfortunate people who live in bleak circumstances haunted by memories of violence and consumed by the worries of everyday life.

Representation of Refugee Lives in *Journalism and Threads From The Refugee Crisis*

In preface to *Journalism* Sacco writes, "A cartoonist assembles elements deliberately and places them with intent on a page... "snaps" his drawing at any moment he or she chooses" (Sacco X). Sacco's statement reminds of what Judith Butler says, "the frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (Butler xiii). Comic medium entitles the author agency to decide what is to be included, how the narrative should progress, and allows him to manipulate frames using varied techniques to enforce his argument with greater urgency.

In one of the episodes, Sacco portrays lives of African refugees forced to undertake hazardous journeys to reach the shores of Europe. From Libya they cram into barely sea worthy boats for Europe. In Malta, there is an influx of Sub Saharan refugees washed up to the shores on their way to Europe. Sacco analyses different dimensions of the issue to produce an engaging narrative addressing the concerns of migrants and the Maltese. The fears and apprehensions of the local people are vividly portrayed along with the engrossing accounts on miseries and hardships of migrants in an unwelcoming place. There is a growing anxiety among the natives about the rising numbers of African refugees roaming the streets of Malta. Maltese archipelago is a tiny strip of land with just 122 square miles and a population of 400,000 and it is quite evident that with more and more migrants occupying the land, Malta is experiencing a demographic shift. This is a threat to the natives who fear that with few more thousands of Africans landing on the soil of Malta, they will invade the land.

On the other hand, plights of migrants are woeful. Only the fortunate ones land safely on a shore when thousands of migrants perish in the sea. Once they reach Malta, they are taken to detention camps where they are treated almost like criminals. Due to security reasons, the Maltese government insists on a period of detention to ensure that the migrants are harmless. Following the detention period which spans from one year to one and half years the asylum seekers whose applications are approved are released to open centers whereas the rest are subject to deportation. The immigrants released have to fend for themselves and once they find a steady job they are no longer eligible for any allowance. Their prospects dwindle and the hatred among the locals make it hard for them to find a job. When Sacco asks one of the immigrants why he does not enroll for the free job training and educational benefits Malta claims to provide he replies, "If I start school now... who will pay to feed me?...Our talents will die with us here" (Sacco 149).

Kate Evans portrays the pertinent issue brilliantly in *Threads From the Refugee Crisis*, disentangles individual from the mass giving voice to their stories, addresses the pitiable living circumstances in the refugee camps facing threat of deportation and foregrounds the necessity of serious deliberations in order to elicit viable solution for the crisis. In the process she does not sideline concerns of public regarding the pouring refugees that threatens the socio economic system of the host country. The paranoia turns to contempt and leaders frequently scoff at any suggestion that refugees are seeking peace and security. Evans juxtaposes intimate and sweeping accounts of refugee life with remarks of natives which spurt hatred and prejudice. By doing this she tries to manifest the helplessness of refugees and the necessity of more systematic ways to deal with the crisis. But nation states conceive refugee as intruder who “unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory” (Beyond 34). The governments try to ignore the real problem and hold on to their statistics which says that majority of migrants are coming due to economic reasons or with bad intentions. Most of the countries have similar arguments which are not grounded on facts. “... Prime Minister David Cameron described migrants as a ‘swarm’. Foreign secretary Philip Hammond called them marauders bent on over running European civilization” (Kingsley 41). In fact only less than quarter of them are running from poverty. Whether or not you admit them, they would reach in unprecedented numbers, for it is the natural instinct of every human being to run for safety in times of danger.

Comics is an inherently interpretive medium and the eye- witness record of Kate Evans is an exquisite example of comics journalism, worth reading and utterly compelling, for it captures the heart of the issue under discussion. Comics has a hybrid language in which words and images operate in conjunction. In the outset Evans gives a brief description of Calais city famous for its lace industry but as you turn the page the scene shifts to the Jungle the biggest encampment of refugees, and the author is struck by the overcrowded ghetto with no basic facilities. She first checks in as a volunteer, distributing donations and helping in constructions. She eats with refugees, listens to their stories, and analyses the living conditions in the camp. Evans’ sketches visualize the disturbing reality in comics medium, giving the reader a visceral experience of life in refugee camp. There are no proper sanitation facilities or drainage system; mosquitoes breed in the pools and drinking water is contaminated with faecal residues. There are a total of twenty four toilets for a population of five thousand which is no were near the 1:20 ratio recommended by UNHCR. There is no facility for discarding the waste piled up in the camp and babies are born into to this squirm and squalor which is not desirable for a healthy upbringing.

Children who made it to camps, hundreds of them unaccompanied or separated from parents, remain sober and absorbed in thoughts. The author tries to advocate the cause of those unfortunate children who braved through traumatic incidents. Focusing on one of those children for whom she is a making a portrait, she muses: “As I draw, I have no idea that this child has walked from Afganisthan over mountain ranges without food or water...That he’s been held in slavery in Turkey and nearly drowned in the Mediterranean...That his eyes have been damaged by French police tear gas. To me he is just a cute child” (Evans 111).

The refugees stuck in the limbo are desperately trying their luck with the trucks heading to U.K at night for there are no other options. People are afraid of any contacts with authorities for “if it can be proved that he entered Europe through another country, he will be refused asylum in the U.K” (16). Sick and wounded men even deny themselves the facilities at the local clinic for it keeps record of patients and take down their details. Even those people who have relatives in U.K ready to take them are not allowed to go. Some pay smugglers to take them to U.K and are very often cheated. Evans forges intimate connections and such conversations are visualized in the pages of her graphic novel to manifest the troublesome realities, fears and agonies of those people. For example, every time she visits the camp she manages to meet Hoshyar. When she met him for the first time, he had totaled up 120 days in the Jungle and he is worried as authorities have announced final eviction of the Jungle. His hope to join his uncle in Croydon is fading. The shipping containers constructed to accommodate them are insufficient and three thousand people would be left homeless. Evans writes, “The message is clear. People are expected to disappear” (59).

A Viable Solution

What is the solution for the issue? When Sacco and Evans champion the cause of refugees, they are simultaneously aware of the concerns of natives. Agamben says, “If the refugee represents such a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state, this is so primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of

sovereignty to crisis”(Beyond 32). Immediate action is imperative but it cannot happen unless inconsiderate bureaucratic apparatuses embrace a more humanistic approach toward the issue and dilate its human rights policies to include denizens, refugees and asylum seekers. It is not prudent to defer action heedless to the urgency of the situation. Also it cannot be implemented without the cooperation of all nations, for it is impossible for a few to inundate with the surge of people. Currently, poorer South Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries host majority of refugees whereas most of the rich European nations cast a blind eye on the issue, spend millions on border control and hide behind their secure borders, reluctant to partake in efforts to rehabilitate the unfortunates. It is necessary to discard those xenophobic reactions and consider the issue in a systematic way.

Among other issues, Sacco and Evans highlight two vital concerns of refugees: desire to reunite with relatives scattered in different places and exploitation of refugees in the hands of human trafficking gangs. If nation states have a liberal refugee policy which ensures the benefits of basic human rights, no refugee would be murdered at the hands of traffickers for ransom. There should be a transparent system for asylum application which gives appropriate attention to refugee claims and ensure basic health care facilities along with education to adapt to new circumstances. A positive intervention can change things for better and find solutions for the pressing issue. As Agamben says, “Only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is – only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable”(38).

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