

# Longing for Belongingness in ‘Refugee Camps’: Bone Sparrow

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## ABSTRACT

The article aims at witnessing a substantial number of human sufferings at the extreme level, which is imputable to various reasons, since the ages. ‘Refugee Crisis’ is one such situations of human suffering which, ever questions the existence of humanity, the exercise of democratic principles and safety of state frontiers etc. If the world is not in a position to provide proper living conditions for the destitute by saving them from displacements and forced removals from their home countries, this phenomenon certainly gives rise to the necessity of a deep understanding and an extensive study of the refugee people and their deplorable state globally, so as to impart certain way outs for the incessant predicaments of human mobility. In this context, it is learnt that *Bone Sparrow* is one of the most venerated works of the writer Zana Fraillon, from Australia, which deeply delves into the grave conditions of the refugees living in the detention centers of Australia, and assiduously examines how difficult it is for them to acclimatize to the armed environment of such centers without having any liberty.

**Key words:** Refugees - human mobility – asylum seekers – displacement – Bone Sparrow – detention centres – immigrants – Rohingya people – boat people – UNHCR.

## INTRODUCTION

From the time immemorial, human mobility has become quite common in most of the societies. Different factors pertaining to this mobility have received an intensive scholarship and a deep understanding on a larger scale among the literary circles. When traced back to history one can find mobility in different forms- humans beings tend to move from one place to another in the process of a search for better survival conditions, when living becomes difficult in their places; like search for good food, escape from harsh climatic conditions, persecutions, sometimes voluntary displacements and sometimes forceful displacements due to political uncertainties, social unrest, civil wars etc., and also apart from these, different other factors have given rise to various types of mobility, thus creating the migrants throughout the world. This triggered the dispersion of people belonging to various races, from their home country to an unknown land, crossing the international borders to seek shelter or refuge. Hence the word refuge is as familiar and common as the word migration, but the difference of meaning between these two words depend upon the understanding and perceiving of history. Refuge situation is different from the situation of economic migrants and climate migrants as the refuge condition reflects the breakdown of basic relationship between state and citizen. People become refugees when the hostile conditions of their nations result in forced displacements, apart from the migrants who voluntarily move out from their native countries with proper paper work either to study or to seek better employment opportunities in the developed nations. Therefore, in contrast to this migrant situation, refugee condition needs a scholarly discernment from a historical perspective, thereby, contemplating the functioning of humanitarian concerns. In this regard, certain historical studies tell us where we came from, who we are and where we are heading. In one of the prominent books about refugee studies, *Refugee Journeys: Histories of Resettlement, Representation and Resistance*, it has been referred to “an eminent social historian Peter Stearns, in 1989 published a document on the website of the American Historical Association, says, “History helps us understand change and how the society we live in came to be...

the past causes the present and so the future” (Neumann qtd.in Silverstein 213). These lines give a deeper sense to understand the migration of the people from one place to another under various circumstances and also to assess the factors which have escalated the situation of the refugee crises throughout the world. Violence, armed conflicts, persecutions etc., force the people to leave their countries with no option but fleeing. According to the facts presented by Amnesty International, globally, there are nearly forty-five million people living as refugees who had fled from their countries under the situation of severe violation of the human rights. Hence, the human migration which was once a natural phenomenon, became a political phenomenon in the wake of the two world wars. In the entire refuge situation, quite naturally, women and children are considered as the most vulnerable sections who often become victims to such dangerous circumstances, thus being deprived of the basic right of living as a human being. Zana Fraillon, in this context of refugee people, makes her work, *Bone Sparrow*, a worth reading with her sensible portrayal of the minute details of the people living in the detention centres with a depiction of the psychological insights of the characters thus dealing with an intense sensitive refuge situation.

## Analysis

While comprehending the text *Bone Sparrow*, and recognizing the efforts of the writer to explicate the actualities of the refugee situation within the context of Australia, certain key factors have to be considered regarding the state of affairs of the global refugee crisis and the apprehension of the perception of the developed nations towards the acceptance of the refugees from different corners of the world. The horrors of the two world wars had accelerated the need for the formation of United Nations in the year 1945, and its immediate task is to settle nearly sixty million people who were displaced from their home countries due to the dreadful situation of the world wars. In the aftermath, United Nations created United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in the year 1950, thus framing some guidelines about the refugees and their acceptance in other countries, in the form of Refugee convention, which was duly signed by 145 countries. According to the work *The Global Refugee Crisis: Fleeing Conflict and Violence*, this convention has defined the refugees as, “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” (Sammartino, 2019). Hence, the convention frames, certain rights to which these refugees are entitled to, so that they can have the basic right to survive in the countries in which they are being sheltered. Moreover, seeking asylum in any country is not illegal according to the convention and in fact it is a basic human right. Australia is such a nation which is handling an ample number of refugees under various circumstances. As Europeans formed the majority of the migrants in the country, since its colonisation, the later developments in the territory, made the rulers to end the White Australian Policy (the policy which favoured only the Europeans to migrate to Australia), thus integrating the other races from various parts of the world, under different guises as immigrants, asylum seekers, displaced people, refugees etc. Regarding this situation of Australia, Klaus Newmann, an honorary professor at Deakin University, in his notable work, *Across the Seas*, states that, “Australia is a country that is marked by two key themes, Indigenous dispossession and immigration” (Neumann 2015). These lines depict the rate of immigration in the form of migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach Australia, through the boats from the neighbouring nations, thus being termed as “Boat People”, though the term originally refers to Vietnamese refugees who fled their country through boats and reached different other countries, including Australia, following the end of Vietnam war in the year 1975. Later, the term has generally being applied to many people from the other countries like China, Malaysia, Pakistan, India etc., who flee their nations for various reasons. In the text *Bone Sparrow*, Fraillon writes about such kind of boat people ‘Rohingyas’, an ethnic minority community from the state of Myanmar who reached Australia through boats trying to seek asylum in the country and then staying in the detention centres.

Specifically, the book, in detail, deals with the complexity of the lives of refugees and their detention system from the perspective of a young boy Subhi who is the narrator of the text. Through his narration, reader of the book comes to know about his life behind the fences and experiences as a refugee and also understands how the writer presents this boy as the voice of other refugees not only in Australia but elsewhere. He was born in the detention centre itself, as his mother and sister have fled from Myanmar decades ago but father, still being imprisoned in the country. Therefore, Subhi doesn’t know anything about the outside world, and he imagines everything from the stories said by his mother ‘Ma’ and sister ‘Queeny’. The only world Subhi encounters since his birth is, the detention centre, people who are living as refugees in the centre, the fence surrounding the centre, Jackets(guards) moving here and there guarding them, restricted life without any freedom. Dealing with the text,

Fraillon touches every minute detail of the lives of the refugees and the sensitivity which reflects the policies of the Australian government and its approach towards these people. As a writer she succeeded in making the readers to develop an empathy for the characters especially towards the young characters, Subhi and also Jimmie, a girl from the other side of the fence and a good friend of Subhi. Though both of them belong to different worlds, they have many similarities despite of some differences. Jimmie is a motherless child and feels the absence of a mother's love; in contrast, Subhi feels the physical presence of his mother Ma, but sometimes she remains passive due to her sickness, which makes Subhi to be devoid of the love of a mother even in her presence. Despite of such kind of emptiness in their lives, both Subhi and Jimmie's love for stories makes them to develop friendship for each other. As Jimmie lacks the skill of reading, she depends upon Subhi to know about the stories written by her mother. Naturally, Subhi who love stories befriends Jimmie and helps her to feel the love of her absent mother through the stories and he personally develops curiosity in Jimmie and her stories as she is from the other side of the fence, "When other people tell me their stories, they're from far away. Stories from other countries and other times. Stories of getting here. But no one has a story from just Outside. None of us knows what it is like just on the other side of the fences. But Jimmie does." (Fraillon 78) In fact, stories play a powerful role in the text, as they weave in to different other stories being with in the main story. Why Subhi is so interested in the stories that are narrated by her mother, leads to the answer about his determination to know about his past, about his Rohingya community etc., thus searching his own identity through the stories. On the other hand, *Bone Sparrow* is also the story of the violation of human rights, as the writer depicts it clearly in the following words: "Most people have their boat ID as their number. Maa is NAP-24 and Queeny is NAP-23. But I was born here. So, I have a different ID. DAR-1, that's me. The 1 is because I was the first baby ever born here" (Fraillon 11). Identity in the form of names is the primary right of every human being, but that identity has been replaced with numbers that were supposed to be allotted to the people in the detention centres. Also, the guards' brutal behaviour, unhygienic food sometimes filled with worms, lack of proper medical facilities etc, portrays the infringement of the human rights. The authorities always focus on maintaining the secrecy about the detention centres by not allowing the media into the centres. Whenever there is a supervision by the government officers, manipulation becomes a common practice to produce a positive report about the well-being of the refugees, thus hiding the reality about the harsh treatment being meted out on the detainees. "With the passing of a new law in the Australian Parliament it is now a criminal offence to disclose the mistreatment of refugees in detention" (Fraillon 231), this gives rise to the question of establishing the detention centres adjacent to the local communities and what is the attitude and approach of the community people towards the refugees in real? Such question insists on the need to have awareness of the refugee situation even the offshore of Australia; the need to have humanitarian concern towards the displaced people under various circumstances, thus recognising the basic right of everyone for safe living.

On the other hand, the novel is a clear depiction of the trauma and psychological suffering of the refugees in the detention centres. Being ignorant of the outside world, with minimal facilities and poor supplies, always surrounded by the Jackets and fences everywhere, refugees have to face very obnoxious situations at the centres. The uncertainty of their acceptance in the alien communities pushes them into a world of silent suffering thus becoming traumatic and sometimes turning violent against the guards when it is unbearable for them to come up with the situations, just as Queeny's attempts to unveil the ugly reality of the detention centre, the hunger strikes at Alpha camp, Eli's death in the hands of Beaver, the guard, and also Subhi's remarkable decision to take a stand for what happened to Eli and to speak about it to an outsider etc. This reflects the pathetic reality of the refugees throughout the world and especially exhibits the reality of the children in these detention centres who are being deprived of the basic childhood gifts and are prone to violence, exploitation and harsh realities instead of experiencing the pure innocence, familial bond, love and care. But here Subhi is somewhat an exception, having mother and sister to take care of him; but however, he feels dejected at times when his Ma suddenly remains silent when he expects some warmth from her. Though Queeny his sister, completely takes his side quite often, substituting their mother whenever needed, the void of parental care and the difficult reality makes Subhi and at the same time Jimmie to thrive on their memories and fascinations. While Jimmie living outside the fence, thinks about her mother in the absence of her father's love and care, who works all the day without having proper care for Jimmie; on the other hand, Subhi living inside the fence relies on his dreams of the Night Sea and on the stories narrated by his mother, imagining his father and his relationship with him as a son. He thinks of his father in his dreams and imagines, all the treasures that he finds in the Night Sea, were actually being sent by his Ba. Thus, Subhi who never knows anything about outside world except the detention centre, imagines his father, his

community, his language, and different other worlds from the stories of Jimmie, unknowingly developing some kind of hope regarding his future and also trying to build some kind of identity of his own. In fact, the negative circumstances they experience in their daily lives, make these people to develop resilience while overcoming the loss and adversity, thereby recreating their lives with new identities in the unknown territories. Gail Theisen-Womersley, a South African clinical psychologist and a Senior Staff Counsellor for UNHCR, in her book, *Trauma and Resilience Among Displaced Populations*, regarding the studies of traumatic disorders among the refugees, expresses that, “Rather than portraying displaced individuals as “passive victims” suffering from mental health problems, critics have argued that attention should be given to the resistance of refugees and the ways in which they interpret and respond to experiences” (Womersley 2021). Here, we can consider Queeny’s attempts of secretly taking the photographs of the situation in the detention centre and sending them to the outside world with the help of Eli. Undoubtedly, she is completely aware of the manipulation of the facilities that are being provided for them and also the shortage of the supplies, and also how they are being concealed during the time of the arrival of government officers, thus making everything invisible. Despite of remaining as a passive victim, and enduring everything in silence, Queeny has chosen the path of resistance and protest by taking the photographs and trying to make everything visible to the rest of the world about the reality of the detention centres. She expresses, to Subhi that she no longer wants to remain as invisible, “I’m sick of being a dead rat, Subhi. I’m sick of being invisible. I’ve had enough. And now, if only a few people see, it will mean I’m not invisible anymore. D’you get it?” (Fraillon 96). The exceptional role of Queeny in the story symbolises the spirit of fighting for their rights as human beings even in an unknown territory. Her dynamism, bold encounters with the guards to save her brother, becoming a teacher and teaching basic life skills for the children in the detention centre when the Government allotted teacher fails to make the presence due to lack of funds etc., and many other, makes Queeny an unforgettable and the most remarkable character in the text. Subhi recalls the skills taught by his sister when she becomes sick, “Queeny taught me about all sorts. About how to swim and how to ride a donkey and how to climb trees. And even though there was no river or donkey on trees, she’d still make me practice, imagining as best we could” (Fraillon 87). From these lines it is obvious of how this young girl being strong enough and even despite of all the ramifications, made the children to learn something out of imaginations, thus getting them ready to confront the real world if ever and whenever the tide turns in favour of them. This indicates her strong will, for living with hope as one day they’d have a normal life like other people living outside of the fence.

The migrations of such people fleeing their countries because of forced displacements and finding a shelter in a foreign territory emphasizes the gravity of the absence of freedom of living among the most vulnerable races throughout the world. In such contexts, the modern states’ laws, policies, concerns towards these people sometimes shoves them into a kind of insecurity thus giving rise to a moral panic. Hence the concept of freedom is very much insisted in the text right from its title, *Bone Sparrow*. At one instance Queeny warns Subhi that sparrow is the symbol of death; but Jimme, a friend of Subhi, by giving him an amulet in the form of a sparrow carved out of a bone gives a positive perspective about the bird as if it carries all the souls and stories of everyone in the family and holds them as one bond. Though this is the interpretation given in the text about the amulet bone sparrow, Fraillon used it as the title to insist on the significance of freedom for which a bird is meant for. Just as birds fly without any borders and symbolises freedom, similarly in view of Fraillon, every human being is entitled to such kind of freedom to inherit the right to live on this planet. In contrast, the situation and the lives of the refugees can be perceived as shackled with the strict policies of the nation-states, thus making them to be devoid of the freedom to live, in the guise of providing shelter. If this basic right of freedom for everyone without any bias, is said to be studied and examined, in this context, the words of Donna R. Gabbacia, professor of immigration history and the director of the Immigration History Research Center, are to be considered, which she has stated in her chapter, ‘Time and Temporality in Migration Studies’ from the book *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*, “Migration and mobile persons came to be problematised conceptually only during the formation of a modern international system of nation-states in the centuries after the 1648 treaty of Westphalia” (Gabbacia 40). This treaty in actual has become the source for the modern international relations, by establishing the principle of territorial sovereignty, thereby granting the complete legal and political authority to a state to govern its own territory and borders. In course of time, this phenomenon has led to a heavy surge of certain state of affairs like refugees, asylum seekers, migrants etc., in the wake of the displacements from different corners of the world, thus curbing the free movement among the territories. The recurring images of the sky, stars, Night Sea etc., in the text symbolise the urge for freedom and also the imaginations of Subhi,



“Someday I’ll learn Rohingya for myself so I’ll be able to talk it without even trying to think how... Someday my ba will figure a way to get free, to get out of Burma, and then we’ll all of us be together” (Fraillon 37), depicts the importance of the freedom of thinking and developing hope, by looking forward even in such dire some circumstances. On the whole, Fraillon portrays the reality of the refugees in the Australian detention centres, with reference to the work and support of UNHRC and also, she has given a brief discussion about the refugees in the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States as well, in her *Afterward*. In fact, she gives a horrendous depiction of the plight of Rohingyas, the community from which she has created the character of Subhi, in the following lines, “The Rohingya are being hunted into extinction. Governments worldwide are aware of this. They are aware of the plight of these people. Yet when a boatload of Rohingya was left stranded in the middle of the sea, no government in the world agreed to help. It has since been suggested that these people were forced onto that boat and were killed if they did not board. Those who did get on the boat were then towed out to sea and left to die. And the world watched” (Fraillon 170), which makes the reader to be aware of the seriousness of this crisis, the world has been encountering.

## CONCLUSION

New and ongoing humanitarian crises continue to erupt, with most terrible consequences across the globe. Hence, no more, the predicaments like the refugee situations can be treated as an elephant in the room. There is an emergence of real need for a better understanding of the scope, scale, causes and consequences of the forced migration with the help of certain case studies. Whether it is Fraillon with her *Bone Sparrow*, or Kausik Barua with his *Wind Horse*, or Sara Novic with her *Girl at War*, and many other writers, with their works on the lives of the refugee people, they delve deep into the tragic experiences of displacement and dispossession. With an advocacy of such scholars and writers, the refugee and forced migration studies as an academic discipline, has developed into global field of interest with thousands of students worldwide studying displacement either from traditional disciplinary perspectives or as a core component of newer programmes, thus, focusing the research on advocating in favour of refugees’ needs and rights. According to *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, “One of the most important developments during the 1980s was the emergence of refugee and forced migration studies as a distinct field of study and policy analysis, the establishment of new research and teaching centres and policy institutes. These included the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford, the refugee programme at York University in Toronto and the Refugee Policy Group in Washington DC; European Council on Refugees and Exiles considerably strengthened their coverage and advocacy efforts for refugees and asylum seekers” (Fiddian 3), thus initiating the necessity of addressing the thematic of refugee narratives and giving the voice for the voiceless victims. Because, living with certain identity, dignity and self-respect irrespective of the country they belong to, is the fundamental right of every individual which cannot be deflated by any political system. Hence, it is essential to consider the refugee people as individuals beyond their labels they get once they cross the borders of their countries. This paper concludes by insisting on the lines taken from the website of Amnesty International “Each human being has more than one identity. “Refugee”, “migrant” and “asylum seeker” are only temporary terms; they do not reflect the whole identity of women, children and men who have left their homes behind to start a new life in a new country.”

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