

The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Study of A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea

Sini. K

Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, Amal College of Advanced Studies, (aided by Govt. of Kerala & affiliated to Uty. of Calicut), Myladi, Nilambur, Kerala-679329

ABSTRACT

The Syrian refugee crisis is one of the most complex humanitarian emergencies of modern times. It has led to the displacement of more than 12 million Syrians since 2011. Melissa Fleming's *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* portrays the painful reality of an ignored community around the world called the refugees. It deals with the victims who had gone through the traumatic situations of a refugee. The study is focused on the refugees in Syria and their bitter experiences in their own country during the political violence and experiences of them while seeking asylum by forced displacement to another country. This paper throws light on the insights of refugees' lives, the psychological stress and the trauma of being separated from their family and ancestral heritage, the inexpressible experiences in refugee camps, and the constant struggle of normalizing their life. The sudden pain and trauma from the nostalgia of the memories haunt them and never leave them at peace. Although the return journey to the native land, works as a solace it generally becomes impossible for most of the refugees.

Keywords: Refugees, Trauma, Memory, Violence, and Asylum

INTRODUCTION

Literature and arts have been persistent in transforming the preferably unheard into powerful voices. The refugee writers across the globe, revealing the moments of resilience, trauma, and uncertainty of their lives, have a vivid message that all refugees have a human story to convey, it is important to understand and empathize with our fellow human beings who have been forcibly migrated to other lands in search of their existence. To understand the real experiences of refugees it becomes mandatory to listen to those who were themselves refugees and who witnessed the experiences of refugees. Their writings stand as an aid in providing relief to the refugees and other victims of oppression and violence. It is an attempt to trace the dreadful journey and look forward through their reception, resettlement, and estrangement.

Millions of stateless people are deprived of nationality, basic rights, essential education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement. It can be said that every two seconds, an individual is converted to a Refugee. Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, the Middle East, Yemen, and Nigeria are some of the countries noted for a large number of refugees. The people who acquire the status of refugees are abandoned permanently and their journey of dehumanization begins with that. The existence of refugees is as old as the existence of human beings. Their stories and their plight have never been a significant part or issue for historians.

Refugees are a particular group of the population that often experience extreme traumatic circumstances including death, war, and loss. This position is often ignored or pushed aside in favor of focusing on their impact on our society. What is often diminished are the horrific experiences that have forced this group of people to leave everything behind in search of safety. They often have had to flee with little more than the clothes on their back, leaving behind homes, possessions, jobs, and loved ones.

When they enter another country for their future they will be turned into Asylum seekers. An Asylum seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. Every year, around one million people seek asylum. When they enter another country they have to go through different problems like homelessness, identity crisis, poverty, joblessness, rapes, insecurity, low wages, otherness, and lack of rights. Their life will be filled with full of difficulties from the moment they become refugees till their death. They are even treated as terrorists too from the hosting country.

The Syrian refugee crisis remains the world's largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. In Syria, we could witness the worst humanitarian tragedy of our world with half the country's population displaced. Some have fled to Europe, but the vast majority live in countries neighboring Syria like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. This paper is focused on the refugees in Syria and their traumatic experiences in their own country during political violence and experiences of them while seeking Asylum by forced displacement in another country. *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* written by Melissa Fleming is about the witnesses of victims who were gone through these traumatic situations. Through this narrative, we can understand the painful reality of an ignored community around the world called the refugees.

The Syrian civil war started when a major conflict broke out on 15 March 2011, after a forceful crackdown on peaceful student protests. The conflict has continued and accelerated as government troops, armed rebels, and external forces clash, take territory from each other and vie to hold it. The consequences are tragic for civilians, particularly for children. The Syrian civil war started with peaceful protests. Young people took to the streets in Syria's southern city, Daraa, in March 2011, seeking government reforms. The movement was part of the social media-fueled Arab Spring that swept through the Middle East and North Africa. As protests spread through Syria, they were countered by strong government crackdowns and increasing violence from both government forces and protesters. By the following year, Syria was embroiled in a civil war, with the Syrian military opposing a growing number of militant groups. The conflict has torn apart the lives of millions of Syrian children and families as government forces and militant groups fight to take and rule territory, resulting in what is now known as the Syrian refugee crisis.

A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea is an autobiography written by Melissa Fleming that deals with various catastrophic events that are faced in a refugee's life. Melissa Fleming, the head of communication and chief spokesperson for Refugees (UNCHR), is working to draw attention, drive empathy, and generate support for the world's 65 million refugees and displaced. It is a book that is emotionally charged and an eye-opening story of a young woman, Doaa Alzamel who represents the millions of unheard voices of refugees and who risks everything in a desperate search for the promise of a safe future. It sheds light on the most pressing humanitarian crisis of our time, and it paints a vivid, unforgettable portrait of the triumph of the human spirit.

The story opens with Doaa Alzamel floating in the sea amid the wreckage of the ship. Her husband is already dead, and she clings to two babies, trying to keep them alive. Doaa has traveled from Syria, where she was born and raised. She has a lifelong fear of the water after nearly drowning as a child. This scene shows the true horrific scene that happened while they travel to Europe on asylum seeking a better future.

Doaa's parents are Shokri and Hanaa. Shortly after in 2012, the Arab spring spreads the revolution across Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The Syrian refugee crisis is the result of a March 2011 violent government crackdown on public demonstrations in support of a group of teenagers who were arrested for anti-government graffiti in the southern town of Daraa. The arrests sparked public demonstrations throughout Syria which were violently suppressed by government security forces. The conflict quickly escalated and the country descended into a civil war that forced millions of Syrian families out of their homes. A decade later, more than 12 million people have been displaced and entire generations of children have been born in exile.

Begin to realize that all her belief about her country was wrong. She begins to attend the protests and nearly gets caught. The country's weakened governance, as well as the destruction of its social services and institutions, make Syria a textbook case of a fragile state. Later government releases the boys because of protests from the people and they found that the boys are cruelly mistreated by the police. Demonstrators began to add their original demands of ending corruption and the emergency law.

Peaceful Syria became a land with bombarding, tear gas, dust, dead bodies, and blood. In June 2012, a missile destroyed Shokri's barbershop. Doaa also took part in the protests as she could. In April 2015, the government sent a military into the city and placed it under lockdown. The soldiers smashed down the doors and torture people in public parks. They lost their privacy in their homes too. Anyone who took part in a demonstration was then classified as a terrorist by the state. She was certain that they knew that she and her sisters had been out demonstrating and were trying to scare them into confessing. Soldiers of the Syrian government troubled the Syrian citizens. Shokri feared that the soldiers might kidnap the girls in front of him. They kept a knife for their protection. Fear of getting raped, arrested, and harassed was there everywhere. No one was safe under all this madness. They understood that they would never have a peaceful life in Syria again. The family then decided to flee to Egypt.

Doaa's family was a part of the first wave of Syrians' flees to Egypt. Since the conflict began in 2011, most of them came to join Syrian friends and family who were working there. Others had business connections or other personal networks that

could offer them shelter. Most of the refugees relied on personal savings, found odd jobs, or opened a business, and many were able to become self-reliant. That was the hope of Doaa's parents too, but soon after they arrived a bigger influx of refugees brought more competition for work, making it harder to meet the end.

The streets of their new neighborhood were filthy and smelled of decaying garbage, stray dogs and cats ate from piled up rubbish in the streets, and flies buzzed around the trash that seemed to be everywhere. Street lamps and trash bins were missing. Doaa wondered that their land in Syria prided itself on cleanliness before the civil war. She was longing for their homeland. When the asylum-seekers reached here they became traumatized by a lot of problems including their identity. Even though they had many things in their future as barristers they hope for a better future. The shy and fearful change of Doaa forced her to be strong to support her family when her father became sick. Unemployment was another major problem, even though she found a job there for a low salary in a factory.

General Abdel Fattah el-sisi orchestrated the coup that swept Morsi out of power, and overnight attitudes towards Syrian refugees in the country changed, swept up in the same wave that overthrew Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Since Morsi had been welcoming Syrian refugees, people believed they were part of this movement and were his supporters. Syrian refugees got a message from authorities that, "if you are a man, you should return to your country and solve your problem there. If you interfere in Egypt, you will be beaten by thirty shoes." In Middle Eastern culture, hitting someone with a shoe is considered to be belittling, and to Syrians, hearing this threat was both frightening and insulting. Egypt's open-door policy came to an end with announcements that would be required for any Syrian to enter the country and any Syrians already in Egypt who did not have proper residency paperwork would be arrested and possibly deported.

The atmosphere in Egypt for Syrians changed dramatically during this time. They got no more friendly greetings in the streets just cold staves. Without a work permit in Egypt, Doaa struggled through day shifts for low wages. As the months passed, she was getting more and more scared. One day, a motorcycle gang tried to kidnap her on the street. The war in Syria that drove her family away was in its fourth year. The people who once welcomed them in Egypt had become weary of them. The girls began to get harassed whenever they left home, they became aware of the sexual harassment that was pervasive in Egypt. They understood that they have no future in Egypt and they planned to go to Europe to seek asylum. Doaa's fiancée promised to take her safely to Europe where they would marry and build a new life. Doaa knew the risks. It was in August 2014 when more than two thousand migrants and refugees had already died crossing the Mediterranean. She did not know how to swim, but for the second time in her life, she felt she had no choice but to flee. After a clandestine process, they departed for the beach at night with hundreds of other refugees. But the police were waiting. After a night of running, the police threw Bassem and Doaa into a local jail. Despite their failure, they resolved to try again. After another failed attempt and another short stint in prison, Bassem and Doaa tried again. This time, they reached the boat. The smugglers were crueler and rougher than ever and jammed the refugees onto a cramped old boat, dodging bullets as they traveled out into the Mediterranean. After two days at sea, she started to get worried, and on the third day, she told Bassem: "We will never reach the shore. We will all sink."

Within minutes, the boat capsized and sank, with 300 people trapped below deck. "The sea went black," said Doaa. "I heard people screaming, and water crashing. I felt like I was going to drown." She watched the propeller cut a child into pieces. Miraculously, Bassem found a water ring. There were corpses everywhere. The 100 survivors came together in small groups and prayed for rescue.

Doaa watched as men took off their life vests and drowned. Sensing his end was near, a Palestinian approached with his nine-month-old granddaughter, Malek. "Please take the baby," he said. "I am very tired." Then he gave up. Bassem had also reached his limit. His last words were, "I am sorry my love. Please forgive me." He drowned before her eyes. Later that day, a mother struggled towards Doaa with Masa, an 18-month-old girl. "Save her," she said, "I will not survive."

Doaa, the nineteen-year-old who could not swim, who had just watched her fiancé drown, was now in charge of saving two fledgling lives. They were crying, agitated, hungry, and thirsty. She told them stories and played with them. Another day passed, and then another. On the fourth day in the sea, Doaa saw a merchant boat. For two hours she shouted. They spotted her with searchlights in the dark and extended a rope – astonished to find a young woman clutching two babies. Malek died in the boat's clinic, but Masa pulled through. Doaa's heroism was praised in the Greek media. On 19 December, one of Greece's most respected institutions, the Academy of Athens, gave her an award for bravery.

UNCHR calls refugees the most vulnerable people on Earth and they are incredible survivors too. The simple truth is that refugees would not risk their lives on a journey so dangerous if they could thrive where they are. And migrants fleeing grinding poverty would not be on those boats if they could feed themselves and their children. Nobody would resort to handing over their life savings to smugglers if they could apply to migrate legally.

There are many reasons why people around the globe seek to rebuild their lives in a different country. Some people leave home to get a job or an education. Others are forced to flee persecution or human rights violations such as torture. Millions flee from armed conflicts or other crises or violence. Some no longer feel safe and might have been targeted just because of who they are or what they do or believe – for example, for their ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or political opinions.

These journeys, which all start with the hope for a better future, can also be full of danger and fear. Some people risk falling prey to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Some are detained by the authorities as soon as they arrive in a new country. Once they are settling in and start building a new life, many face daily racism, xenophobia, and discrimination.

People are driven to embark on the dangerous journey across the sea feeling that they have no other way to escape countries reeling from conflict. The main problem is that there is no system in place for them to safely claim Asylum and seek protection before reaching Europe. They are risking their lives by travelling through the dangerous sea route. They do so in the most difficult conditions, often at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers that load them like objects in containers. There are risks at every stage of the journey. Refugees and migrants drown at sea, dehydrate during desert or sea crossings, fall victim to kidnapping and extortion, torture, and rape, and are beaten, shot, and killed by criminals or border officials. How they move in each stage of the journey becomes a tradeoff between risk, chance encounters, and often sheer luck.

While they face the dangerous border crossing, they do not consider stopping or going back because, as another Syrian refugee told, “If you make the first step you can’t go back”. Having spent so much money, time, and energy, and having already been through so much, refugees and other migrants cannot imagine giving up mid-way, all their efforts coming to nothing. So, they attempt what they hope to be the safest and most reliable routes and modes of transport. This often depends on what they can afford to pay smugglers.

Women are abused at every stage in the process of displacement; the Territorial Army of the displaced and arriving countries demands favours, mainly those who deal with the policies and rules. Even the women cannot complain about the abusers, and they are bound to live with abuse wrapped in patriarchy. Like, A female refugee must show a medical certificate to prove that they have been Raped, and this medical certificate applies to all female refugees no matter which culture, social class, family status, or age they belong to. Women tolerate trauma as refugees during the period of their migration and settlement Period, as well as traumatic experiences stay with them till their survival. According to UNHCR, female refugees are more vulnerable in asylum and camps, where there is neither not much financial support nor the social and cultural institution that structures ethical and moral standards. Smugglers behaved very rudely towards the girls. They touched on their body parts. Some get raped too. But no one asks about this. No one can question them. They are suffering as they long for life.

This paper throws light on the insights of refugees’ lives, the psychological stress and the bitterness of being separated from their family and ancestral heritage, the inexpressible experiences in refugee camps, and the constant struggle of normalizing their life. The sudden pain and trauma from the nostalgia of the memories haunt them and never leave them at peace. Although, the return journey to the native land, works as a solace booster which generally becomes impossible for most of the refugees.

REFERENCES

- [1]. ———. 2014. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum Applications:
- [2]. ———. 2014. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum Applications:
- [3]. ———. 2015. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum Applications:
- [4]. ———. 2015. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum Applications:
- [5]. 2013.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 3/2014. Luxembourg:
- [6]. 2013.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 3/2014. Luxembourg:
- [7]. 2014.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 3/2014. Luxembourg:
- [8]. 2014.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 3/2014. Luxembourg:
- [9]. 23-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14240/jmhs.v2i1.23>
- [10]. 23-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14240/jmhs.v2i1.23>
- [11]. 24. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/11/sweden-refugee-policy->
- [12]. 24. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/11/sweden-refugee-policy->
- [13]. Amnesty International. 2014. Struggling to Survive: Refugees From Syria in Turkey.
- [14]. Amnesty International. 2014. Struggling to Survive: Refugees From Syria in Turkey.
- [15]. Applications: 2012.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 5/2013.

- [16]. Applications: 2012.” Population and Social Conditions: Data in Focus 5/2013.
- [17]. Asylum System and EU Immigration Law. Oxford: The Migration Observatory,
- [18]. Asylum System and EU Immigration Law. Oxford: The Migration Observatory,
- [19]. Ayoub M. and S. Khallaf (2014), “Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Challenges of a Politically Changing Environment”, The American University in Cairo, School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
- [20]. Bardens, John, Melanie Gower, and Ben Smith. 2014. “Syrian Refugees and the UK.”
- [21]. Bardens, John, Melanie Gower, and Ben Smith. 2014. “Syrian Refugees and the UK.”
- [22]. Bardens, John, Melanie Gower, and Ben Smith. 2014. “Syrian Refugees and the UK.” Commons Library Standard Note SN06805. London: UK House of Commons Library.
- [23]. Bergeron, Claire. 2014. “Temporary Protected Status after 25 Years: Addressing the
- [24]. Bergeron, Claire. 2014. “Temporary Protected Status after 25 Years: Addressing the
- [25]. Bitoulas, Alexandros. 2013. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum
- [26]. Bitoulas, Alexandros. 2013. “Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions on Asylum
- [27]. Brennen, Yermi. 2013 “Sweden’s Refugee Policy Sets High Standard.” Aljazeera, November
- [28]. Brennen, Yermi. 2013 “Sweden’s Refugee Policy Sets High Standard.” Aljazeera, November
- [29]. Brown, Don. *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.
- [30]. Challenge of Long-Term ‘Temporary’ Residents and Strengthening a Centerpiece
- [31]. Challenge of Long-Term ‘Temporary’ Residents and Strengthening a Centerpiece
- [32]. Chatty, Dawn, and Cynthia Orchard. 2014. “High Time for Europe to Offer Temporary
- [33]. Chatty, Dawn, and Cynthia Orchard. 2014. “High Time for Europe to Offer Temporary
- [34]. Commons Library Standard Note SN06805. London: UK House of Commons
- [35]. Commons Library Standard Note SN06805. London: UK House of Commons
- [36]. Costello, Cathryn, and Emily Hancox. 2014. Policy Primer: The UK, the Common European
- [37]. Costello, Cathryn, and Emily Hancox. 2014. Policy Primer: The UK, the Common European
- [38]. Documents/Final_Syrian%20refugees.pdf.
- [39]. Documents/Final_Syrian%20refugees.pdf.
- [40]. Eurostat, European Commission.
- [41]. Eurostat, European Commission.
- [42]. Eurostat, European Commission.
- [43]. Eurostat, European Commission.
- [44]. Fleming, Melissa. *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*. Hachette UK, 2017.
- [45]. for-europe-to-offer-temporary-protection-to.
- [46]. for-europe-to-offer-temporary-protection-to.
- [47]. HUGO (2014), “Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration Research” Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Center.
- [48]. Kullab, Samya. *Escape from Syria*. Firefly Books, 2017.
- [49]. Library.
- [50]. Library.
- [51]. London: Amnesty International.
- [52]. London: Amnesty International.
- [53]. Luxembourg: Eurostat, European Commission.
- [54]. Luxembourg: Eurostat, European Commission.
- [55]. of Global Affairs and Public Policy. <http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/cmrs/>
- [56]. of Global Affairs and Public Policy. <http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/cmrs/>
- [57]. of US Humanitarian Protection.” Journal on Migration and Human Security 2(1):
- [58]. of US Humanitarian Protection.” Journal on Migration and Human Security 2(1):
- [59]. opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cynthia-orchard-dawn-chatty/high-time-
- [60]. opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cynthia-orchard-dawn-chatty/high-time-
- [61]. Orhan, Oytun. 2014. “The Situation of Syrian Refugees in the Neighboring Countries: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations.” Ankara: Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM). [http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/ Files/201452_189ing.pdf](http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/201452_189ing.pdf).
- [62]. Oxford University.
- [63]. Oxford University.
- [64]. Politically Changing Environment. Cairo: American University in Cairo, School
- [65]. Politically Changing Environment. Cairo: American University in Cairo, School
- [66]. Protection to Refugees from Syria.” openDemocracy, October 2. <https://www.>
- [67]. Protection to Refugees from Syria.” openDemocracy, October 2. <https://www.>
- [68]. sets-high-standard-2013112485613526863.html.

- [69]. sets-high-standard-2013112485613526863.html.
- [70]. UNHCR (2013) "The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. Geneva": UN Refugee Agency.
- [71]. UNHCR (2015a), "Syrian refugees in Lebanon", Quarterly snapshot January - March 2015
- [72]. Yazbek, Samar. *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*. Rider Books, 2015.
- [73]. youb, Maysa, and Shaden Khallaf. 2014. Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Challenges of a
- [74]. youb, Maysa, and Shaden Khallaf. 2014. Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Challenges of a