



Surviving Displacement and Terror - Reading Alan Gratz's *Refugee* as A Cry for Home

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Abstract: Displacement is one of the key constructs of postcolonial literature. Displacement is caused due to several reasons prominent among them are political and cultural exploitation.

History shows several political changes that led to the displacement of innocent civilians fleeing to survive. Fear and terror transform these refugees in multiple ways. Refugee Literature focuses on the struggle of such people not just physically but also psychologically.

Alan Gratz is an American novelist and has won wide recognition for his *Refugee* published in 2017.

This paper aims to study how historical moments are brought back to life through literature to understand some of the great humanitarian crises and how it affected individuals.

Situations that lead to migration and displacement become exacerbating for people. The cry of such refugees is only for a sanctuary. The paper will also explore the trauma of the refugees.

Key Words: Survival, Displacement, Terror, Refugee, trauma & psychological

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Gratz is also the acclaimed author of numerous books for young readers which include *Projekt 1065*, *Prisoner B-3087*, *Code of Honor*, and *The Brooklyn Nine*. He dealt with the themes of trauma, war, oppression, injustice, and holocaust. His protagonists are mostly children or young adults who grow beyond their age displaying maturity and courage under circumstances of war, violence, and migration.

Gratz's *Refugee* is unique in its setting with three stories running parallel at three different timelines with a gap of not years but decades. The handling of such a setting requires immense skills on a writer's part to take the readers through the journey of trauma and displacement happening in three different countries. Safety and freedom is what these refugees seek. The process was never smooth and it demanded a lot of courage and endurance from these young protagonists.

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Refugee conditions and representations of those have been an area of focus in the recent past with civilians made to flee their homeland as a result of civil wars. In literary and artistic discourse, the valid

question is whether such literature is only meant to create awareness or should it be instrumental in bringing about changes in the lives of people all around the globe. Does literature fail when people get displaced due to wars, ecological catastrophes, economic crises, and much more? Awareness is created undoubtedly. But has it become action? Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2009) says, “... it is a well-known fact that literature never got anyone out of prison or reversed the course of a war. Yet it does provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalised horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence” (9-11).

Postcolonial studies prioritise the understanding and working of power structures in colonised nations. Disturbance in the world order - violence and dominance leading to civil wars has resulted in displacement. Refugee literature aims to study and highlight power politics. It intervenes and tries to disrupt the embedded notions in the minds of people.

The plot of *Refugee* has three different settings. The setting of Josef's story is the 1938's Germany under the Nazis. The second is set in Cuba in 1994 and the third in Aleppo, Syria in 2015. The novel can be put into the category of historical fiction. Narrated from the perspective of three children at different times and places, the novel throws light on the humanitarian crisis, courage, and struggle of these refugees seeking sanctuary.

1938 Germany was going through the outbreak of violence against the Jews in the form of persecution and destruction of synagogues and Jewish homes. Following which Jewish people were forced to adhere to the strict regulations laid by the Nazis.

Cuba in 1994 witnessed the mass migration of nearly thirty five thousand people to the United States following the announcement of Fidel Castro after the riots.

Syria in 2015 experienced the first air strike launched by Russia. Civilians were the most affected and mass migration was taking place.

Under these settings, Josef Landan narrates the house being invaded at night to terrorize Jewish citizens across Germany:

The shadows grabbed them again and dragged them into the living room. They threw Josef and Ruth on the floor once more and flicked on the overhead light. As Jose's eyes adjusted, he saw the seven strangers who had invaded his home. Some of them wore regular clothes: white shirts with the sleeves rolled up, gray slacks, brown wool caps, leather work boots. More of them wore the brown shirts and red swastika armbands of the Sturmabteilung, Adolf Hitler's “storm troopers.” (3)

Josef's father was arrested and taken to the Detention camp. They reunite months later in 1939 and try to escape Nazi Germany taking board the M.S. St. Louis, a ship that took Jewish refugees to Havana. It was a real ship that carried 937 passengers escaping the Nazis. They were expected to be given shelter in Cuba - few to live there permanently, others temporarily until they are moved to the United States or Canada. But to their disappointment, they were not permitted to embark due to political reasons. They were not just turned down in Cuba but were also in many countries and the Cubans rejoiced in that. To them, it meant that everybody in the world supported the Jews being treated this way secretly.

The characters on the ship were real - Captain Gustav Schroeder, Otto Schiendick - a kind of spy who carried information to the Nazis in Havana. Josef's father was acquainted with two more men who were really on board, Aaron Pozner and Max Loewe. Pozner was a Hebrew teacher who was a victim of Otto Schiendick and his firemen. Loewe was a Jewish lawyer forbidden by the Nazis to practice law. These men were tormented and humiliated in the camp and Loewe tried to end his life by jumping off the ship. These refugees who were turned down by the United Kingdom are in fact the lucky ones who escaped the Holocaust. Survivors of the Holocaust live in parts of Europe not intending to come back to Nazi Germany. They also sought refuge in Israel.

The next narrator is Isabel from Cuba who with her family fled from their homeland before Fidel Castro could stop emigration. In the course of their journey, they encounter a hurricane and a shark attack and they lose one of their shipmates. However, they reach Miami to begin life anew.

It was night, and a waning moon peeked out from behind scattered clouds. A warm breeze lifted Isabel's short curly hair and raised goose bumps on her arms. Fidel Castro had said that anyone who wanted to leave was welcome to go, but that was hours ago. What if he had changed his mind? What if there was a line of police waiting to arrest them at the beach? Isabel hefted the boat to get a better grip and tried to pick up her pace. They left the village's gravel road and hauled the boat over the dunes to the sea. All Isabel could see was the metal side of the boat in front of her face, but she heard a commotion behind her. There were people on the beach! Lots of them! She panicked, her worst fears come true, and suddenly a blinding light lit her up. Isabel cried out and let go of the boat. (60-61)

The history behind the 1994 crisis is Castro's announcement that people who wanted to leave Cuba can leave without being thrown into prison with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was a subtle way of handling protests. The protestors were given a chance to flee from their homeland.

Castro let people flee for five weeks during which about thirty - five thousand people fled to America. Americans objected the sudden overflow of Cubans and Bill Clinton came up with the decision that Cuban refugees caught at sea would be sent to detention camps. Cuban refugees were referred to as "Wet Foot, Dry Foot" (330) by Isabel to describe the situation. It is estimated that a large number of Cubans cross the ninety miles of ocean from Havana to Florida. Many die in the attempt by dangers in the sea, storms, attacks, starvation, and dehydration.

The third perspective is that of Mahmoud's whose family had to leave Syria in 2015 after a missile attack. The family travels through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. In Hungary, they are about to be sent back to Syria when Mahmoud and his family walk their way to the Austria border where it is Ruth, the sister of Josef who comes forward to help a new generation of refugees. The setting is 2015.

The historical background to the Syrian crisis is described by Alan Gratz as "... one of the most brutal and vicious civil wars in history" (332). The city of Aleppo is ruined as it housed a large number of rebels who were against Bashir - Assad.

Syria was under Russian attack when Mahmoud and his family left the country. According to the UN, more than 470,000 were killed since 2011. Thousands lose their lives on the cross-firing till date in Aleppo.

And those who survive often have nowhere to live. The *Guardian* newspaper estimates 40 percent of the city's infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. Whole neighborhoods lie in ruins. Markets, restaurants, shops, apartment buildings - nothing has been spared. Almost no one goes to work anymore, or to school. Every tree in the city has been cut down for firewood, and when they ran out of trees, the Syrians had to burn school desks and chairs to heat their homes. Hospitals, if they still stand, have no medicine or equipment to treat patients. (333)

With the large number leaving Syria, many nations have welcomed the refugees and many more started building walls and fences to stop their entry, that is, Hungary and Austria.

Alan Gratz deals with trauma and loss of faith and hope in these refugees. In the course of bringing out the lives of three children in three different periods and parts of the world. The incidents they have encountered in their childhood become a memory that traumatises them in the process of growing up. They grow up too early to become adults not physically but mentally. They grow up to survive, to decide for the stranded families.

A humanitarian crisis of this sort failed to unite the world and resulted in dehumanisation. Refugees were disconnected from their kith and kin, from their homeland, and were humiliated that resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder like in the case of Josef's father. Josef showed immense courage and maturity. He even slaps his father who decides to succumb.

Forced growth is what is witnessed in the attitude of children. Isabel displays a different level of maturity with her mother in the advanced stage of pregnancy. The journey of these children sees them draped in the mantle of their parents. According to the observations made in such circumstances was that no child was seen shedding tears while they were waiting for entry in long queues. Such was their courage.

Dehumanisation in a state of displacement is the worst that happened to these refugees. Josef who was a Jew was treated almost like an animal by his teacher while discussing physiognomy. In the case of Isabel, her poverty isolated her from others. Identified with animals she finds herself searching for crumbs like a street cat. In Mahmoud's case, he is marginalised for being a Shia Muslim in Sunni-dominated Syria.

Alan Gratz portrays the dangerous life of these refugees surviving boundaries, and borders, and a constant search for shelter, food, and other basic amenities.

...they begin a third life, starting over in a new country, one where they often do not speak the language or practice the same religion as their hosts. Professional degrees granted in one country are often not honored in another, so refugees who were doctors or lawyers, or teachers where they came from become store clerks and taxi drivers, and janitors. (336-337)

Alan Gratz handles real-life situations set against historical backgrounds to give a sample of the pain and suffering of refugees all around the globe. Kindness and empathy might soothe their wounds but such literature should be instrumental in bringing about changes in society.

Works Cited

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