

PREDICAMENT OF REFUGEES IN JEAN ARASANAYAGAM'S SHORT STORIES

DR. CHARU C. MISHRA

Asst. Prof. (English)
K.G. Arts & Sc. College,
Raigarh (C.G) (INDIA)

ABSTRACT

The world has been observing the plight of the refugees in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka and in some European countries. The refugee is a man who 'belongs nowhere'. The refugees, who enter a foreign land stealthily seeking refuge, are addressed to as 'dollars' till they are able to pay for the scanty services they barely need and thereafter they become just 'waste material' (not men) ready to 'usurp someone's share.' The world is trying its best to cope up with the problems of refugees, but often it is either helpless or mute spectator of the tragic human drama.

The plight of refugees that Jean has described two decades earlier is sadly being viewed in recent days in most part of the globe on account of intolerance toward ethnic, religious and minority 'other'. Jean Arasanayagam has been a spokesperson of the Tamil refugees who had been unwitting victim of the three decade long ethnic war in Srilanka. Her stories recount the horror of alienation and displacement and untold humiliation meted out to them apart from the tales of hunger, poverty and miserable living conditions. Looking at the enormity of crisis the world is facing today, this paper aims to analyze the ordeals of refugees in the stories of Jean Arasanayagam.

"To be stripped of citizenship is to be stripped of worldliness; it is like returning to a wilderness as cavemen or savages.... They could live and die without leaving any trace. (Hannah Arendt)

"Those pouring in from the no-fire zone were shrunk and sick old men and women with little children clinging to them. Barefooted and empty-handed they could hardly walk." (Frontline May 22, 2009)

The quote above puts us to relive the suffering among the refugees in the short stories of Jean Arasanayagam and the reader feels as if he were watching the scenes being enacted live again and again before his naked eyes. The world has been observing the plight of the refugees in Iraq, Afghanistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka and in some African countries. Everywhere there are



stories of displacement, poverty, hunger, humiliation and harassment. The refugee is a man who 'belongs nowhere'. Jean Arasanayagam has been a literary spokesperson of the refugees and her stories abound in the concepts of alienation, ethnicity, and horror of displacement and humiliation apart from hunger, poverty and poor living conditions.

What (plight of refugees) Jean has described one or two decades earlier is still being enacted in some countries – quite pathetically in her own country as well. Problems of displacement are occurring on account of ethnicity, religious hatred and marginalization of minorities. The world is trying its best to cope up with the problem, but sometimes it is helpless. Greed, hatred and animosity overpower the spirit of human rights and public welfare.

It is the duty of literary writers to bring the truth of suffering to light to awaken the masses against the atrocities on refugees and to get a curb on human rights violations. Justice Markandey Katju, hon'ble judge of the Supreme Court of India says,

“Art and literature must serve the people. Writers must have genuine sympathy for the people and depict their sufferings. They must inspire people to struggle for a better life, a life that can be really called human existence, and to create a better world, free of injustices, social and economic. Only then people respect them.” (The Hindu, Dated Aug 18, 2008).

Jean, as a writer, has been doing this literary service for mankind for decades. She describes the suffering of the displaced, of the minorities and leaves it for the readers to draw conclusions or to make corrective steps themselves.

Jean talks of separation; she describes the deep-rooted loss of belongingness and the inner sufferings of the refugees as she herself a Burgher, married to a Tamil has been in a refugee camp in 1983 where she has experienced the agony of being an 'alien'. Sometimes she holds her marriage with a minority Tamil accountable for attracting the ferocity of the majority Sinhala community:

“I ventured out into my garden once again but it did not feel the same. I felt a great loss of freedom. Was it because I was married to one of the 'other'? I felt I was cut off from humankind, that I bore an invisible brand which made me experience a sense of fear and shame because of that bonding with my marriage.” (Page 51, Quail's Nest, In The Garden Secretly And Other Stories)

Sometimes she finds it very difficult to sort out a particular hypocritical factor responsible for making people 'refugees', only the poor or the helpless become the victims of such subversive forces:

“We’re living in a country rent apart by forces of violence, ethnicity, subversive elements, violations of every right under the sun. There’s the huge power struggle going on behind the scenes so that it’s never clear who the real enemy is. It is a society where the assuming of mask is easy. Not monstrous vesmuhuna, but bland, smoothly hypocritical masks. The man who is most vile, most corrupt, looks like a sage or an innocent householder.” (Page 102, Man Without A Mask, All Is Burning)

Whenever war breaks out, it is not only the soldiers or the parties battling with each other but also the innocents who become victims without any of their faults or without any willingness to become a party. They have to bear the brunt of war; they have to leave the battlefield with their lives leaving behind not only their belongings but also their identity:

“But everywhere innocent people, uninvolved in the conflict, get caught up in the ‘crossfire’ that all-embracing euphemism used so often. Of course, in theory, one knows that civilian deaths are inevitable in any war. But I feel deeply uneasy. After all, now it’s our own country that’s being destroyed.” (Page 6, In The Garden Secretly And Other Stories)

Jean discusses the loss of identity in depth as it is only one’s identity that is the basis of his existence, that adds a value to his life and that makes him a ‘human’ being. Refugees have no personal identities – they are just ‘refugees’:

“Identity is still the burning question of the day in our part of the world; identity that separates and divides.” (Page 3, The Journey, All Is Burning)

A refugee loses his aim or purpose of life, his life is limited from hand to mouth – that too on the mercy of someone else as the protagonist who joins a band of refugees abode expresses his feelings:

“That journey of his, that Road to Perfection.....And ours? We are traveling on many unknown roads. Taking unfamiliar routes through alien terrain, crossing frontiers and borders. On and on we travel. To reach what destination and why?” (Page 2, The Journey, All Is Burning)

The refugees, who enter a foreign land stealthily seeking refuge, are ill treated like animals. They are addressed to as ‘dollars’ till they are able to pay for scanty required services and thereafter they become just ‘waste material’ (not men) ready to ‘usurp someone’s share’:

“We are not human beings to them....When we are handed over at the border for the next stage of journey to the next guide or agent, we are ‘dollars’. We

bear the irony. We're not people, we're money to them.” (Page 4, The Journey, All Is Burning)

During the exodus, there is no place for sympathy even for children, old-aged persons, crippled ones or women – all have to flee the battlefield paving their own path – a jungle rule – survival of the fittest:

“The old. The sick. The women and children. Walking. Just keep going. On and on. Mohan felt hardly human. The march had begun the previous evening at six o'clock. In the gathering dusk. The hour at which his daughter would have her evening meal. Listening to stories. And later, prepare for bed. Instead they were out on the road. Walking crawling. For mile upon mile. Stumbling. Faltering. Pausing. Unable to take even one step for half an hour at a time. Just standing still until he felt the movement begin almost imperceptibly, like a shudder running through the phalanx of bodies each one supporting the weakness of the other. Tottering against the spent body of the other. Hear the hissing breath. The stifled sigh. The silent wail.” (Page 126, Exodus, The Dividing Line)

Sometimes the weary, thirsty, hungry travelers have to wade through water and mud, sometimes through bushes and landmines braving the fear of gunfire and shelling. Even if they get any vehicle for their journey, it becomes a testing ordeal of patience and suffering:

“When the call finally came we were asked to get into the back of a huge container truck. It was already packed with heavy wooden crates. We could neither sit nor stand upright. We had to lie one on top of the other the way firewood is loaded in our country. The journey lasted for so many hours.” (Page 10, The Journey, All Is Burning)

There is filth, squalor, fear, restlessness and helplessness in refugee camps. There is equality of a peculiar kind – everybody is equal, no one has any separate identity, everybody is on the undesirable mercy of an authority and everybody has an uncertain future:

“What mattered most here was life, even it was to be lived in all this squalor where you would creep like an animal into a lair and feel your pelt prickling with instinctive fear. Civilization meant nothing here. Philosophers were absent. So was political theorizing. You delved deep into the hitherto undiscovered springs of your primeval psyche to find the source of pure and absolute energy. Or else there was a new defeatism you had to accept. You had to succumb to the strength of brute force; allow your flesh to cringe. At all costs, this must never happen.” (Page 393, Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning)

Even in such a pitiable condition, there is struggle for space, there is competition for survival:

“Those nurses who were bent only on their close and intimate act of survival, who resented the intrusion of even a fellow-sufferer, were safeguarding territory. From them one could not hope for any act of self sacrifice out of purely voluntary self abnegation. With ill grace they had shifted and shortened their piece of newly won space. Demographic maps were being set up in this classroom. Neighbours in newly formed human settlements need not necessarily be overfriendly.” (Page 396, Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning)

Families are separated, children are left orphan, and nobody knows where the other members of the family are. There is endless mental and physical suffering for refugees:

“A baby, four days old, slept beside its mother. The father? Lost somewhere, perhaps dead or perhaps he had deserted mother and child. No one questioned. No one knew or cared. The young mother still groaned, she hadn't got over the rigours of labour and child birth. She asked for rags, old clothes to cover herself and child with.” (Page 397, Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning)

And

“Only the children continued to wail in hunger. We were left to comprehend the dark spaces of the soul. Hands stretched out for bread. There was little else to place in them. The apathy of sitting for terminable hours; the acceptance of a condition against which there could be no aggressive protest. Being herded together like animals in the close, confined space, shoulder to shoulder, created an intimacy among the passive sufferers.” (Page 395, Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning)

There is no privacy even for women so that they may change or attend to their natural calls:

“We were beginning to learn what sweat and grime were as our clothes clung to our bodies. There was no necessity to change our skins. Others too had grown accustomed to the sight. We lived in full public view of everybody, sleeping, eating, talking, moving around, visiting each other's newly established territory. Queues were necessary. They formed everywhere, for food, for toilets. I was living in one set of clothes. There were no screens behind which one could change. (Page 396-397, Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning)

Insecurity is so deep-rooted that the refugees don't feel safe even in a camp where security is provided. Moreover, whenever any ethnic conflict begins, people are displaced in such great numbers that it becomes very difficult for authorities to provide basic amenities and enough security to them. This they understand well and this feeling makes them more unsafe:

*"No one pleaded for pity. Safety for our lives, especially for our children, was the main concern. Yet I myself could not fall asleep. I was alert for sounds, for every movement, every footstep. Anyone could walk in and do his will with us. There were only two men to provide security for the thousands of us who were in here. This was a prison although we could have, if we disregarded our safety, walked out. But walk out where? Into danger. The outside world was not the same world we were accustomed to. Even a look, a word, could stab us. But our wounds went deeper. We bore with us for life a bruised and tattered psyche." (Page 400, *Fear: Meditations in a Camp, All Is Burning*)*

People have to forget their routine life in a refugee camp; they are shifted from one place to the other as 'herds of animals'. They are doomed to adopt a new undesirable, unacceptable way of life for their survival:

*"For some time to come till we move to the next camp and the next there are unwritten rules to be followed. First you fit your life into a minimal space. You learn not to spread yourself on your belongings. There are invisible frames drawn round you. Dividing lines. Boundaries." (Page 173, *The Dividing Line*)*

The dividing lines become broader and broader, greater and greater as the man-made catastrophe leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the sufferers even when the ordeal is over:

*"Leaving the refugee camps, coming back to the old life, was it like water jumping for me. Going away from the familiar world and then returning to it, my identity changed. Assuming new personae. Disguises. I would never be the same again. I would spend the rest of my life asking questions. Taking on burdens of guilt. The unforgiven. Sending my daughter into exile." (Page 168, *The Dividing Line*)*

The exodus has begun once again; a humanitarian crisis has erupted again in Sri Lanka:

"The breaking of the three-metre-high embankment in the early hours of April 20 resulted in a flow of 1.15 lakh civilians into government-controlled territory over the next six days. It began as a trickle but turned into a flood within hours and grew into an avalanche over the next four days. On the day

the media team visited the area, more than 1.05 lakh people had crossed into government-controlled territory.” (Frontline, May 22, 2009)

Can human consciousness do something to prevent massacre, displacement and atrocity on the call (the portrayal of suffering) of writers like Jean Arasanayagam to put an end to such crises for ever? Urkhan Alakbarov asks the same question:

“So often the world sits idly by, watching ethnic conflicts flare up, as if these were mere entertainment rather than human beings whose lives are being destroyed. Shouldn't the existence of even one single refugee be a cause for alarm throughout the world?” (Urkhan Alakbarov)

There are optimistic solutions too when we pay heed to the call of intellectuals and writers as Sadako Ogata says:

"Refugee problems may often seem intractable but they are not insoluble. In our experience there are two basic prerequisites for solution: the political will of leaders to tackle the causes and to settle for peace, and international determination to push for peace and then to consolidate it. Consolidating peace means helping societies emerging from war to reintegrate refugees in safety and dignity, to rebuild their institutions - including in the field of justice and human rights - and to resume their economic development." (Sadako Ogata)

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