

A Refugee Study: Humanitarian Crisis in Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*

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Abstract

*This paper explores the plight of Tamil Refugees who are trapped to depart their ancestral land and suffer a humanitarian crisis through an analysis of Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*. Tamil refugees have been living horrendously displaced lives from the early 1980s to the present in different parts of the world, particularly in Canada. This study uncovers the Tamil refugee humanitarian catastrophe to sustain their lives, resulting in a stateless population after being excluded from their inherited Land in Sri Lanka as a consequence of ethnic conflict. So, this paper adopts the theoretical frameworks of Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, and Thomas Nail to reflect the precarious situation of Tamil Refugees. Additionally, it embraces John Locke, Richard and Zapata Barrero to address this issue and the plight of Tamil Refugees. This paper concludes that Tamil immigrants are extremely dehumanized by portraying the obvious evidence of the protagonist Mahindan, who is intertwined in the perplexing legal process of Canada. Similarly, Tamil refugees are under a severe humanitarian crisis, thrown into such a situation to fight against the necessities of life, such as a lack of food, unsafe drinking water, insecure shelter, and harmful insects. While travelling, they have to take the risk of a life-threatening perilous journey on a wrecked boat and again inhuman imprisonment inside detention centres, to mistreatment after landing in Canada. Thus, they are in anxiety, frustration, pain, and misery, being excluded from the political sphere in both the Native and host countries.*

Keywords: Nation States, Displaced, Non-citizen, Human Rights, Homo Sacer, Ethnic Conflict, Bare Life, Political Sphere.

Introduction:

The refugee study has been one of the glaring issues throughout human history. The issues of immigrants and refugees are not new, not just in every part of the world, but also in the past and the contemporary era. The 21st century is likely to be a time of immigrant crisis across the globe, as theorist Thomas Nail argues in his book *The Figure of the Migrant*, which is the century of migration. Nail insists, "The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant not only because of the record number of migrants today but also because this is the century in which all previous forms of social expulsion and

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migratory resistance have reemerged and become more active than ever before” (Nail 7). In his view, compared to previous centuries, this era is marked not only by a record number of migrants but also by increased social exclusion and conflict during migration. As Nail asserts, in this era, millions of Tamil refugees of Sri Lanka have been displaced across the globe due to civil disputes between two ethnic groups: Sinhalese and Tamil from the early 1980s to the late 200s.

Sandra Ponzanesi, a researcher, in her research article “*Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age: (Re)Mapping Connectivity and Belonging*” discusses that in the contemporary period, border security surveillance against immigrants and refugees has been transformed into a digitalized platform “Given the complexity of humanitarian challenges, technological innovation is often seen as a quick fix . . . the logic of securitization—biometric technologies are a way through which states control their borders and ensure security. Biometrics makes refugees legible and controllable” (Ponzanesi 553). According to Ponzanesi, technological innovation is excessively used to ensure border security which seems to be strictly relevant in the case of Tamil immigrants. Canada implements its immigration policy by digitising to scrutiny the flow of Tamil refugees. The protagonist, Mahindan, is refused more than a dozen times in Canadian asylum admissibility due to the strict immigration record and technologized surveillance of the Canadian government.

The Paper’s topic is designed to analyze the real-life story of the fictional characters of the novel *The Boat People* to reveal the plight and humanitarian crisis of stateless Tamils in both their Native Country, Sri Lanka and the host country, Canada. Mahindan is the protagonist war victim Tamil widower who has to flee to Canada by a cargo boat to save his life with his six-year-old son Sellian. Mahindan, along with more than five hundred fellow Tamils, set a perilous ocean voyage to Canada and landed on Vancouver Island, dreaming of receiving asylum in a peaceful country. However, soon after landing on the Canadian Island, they undergo different investigations and are detained in different camps, suspected them terrorists, especially people without any rights.

Critic Hanna Arendt, in her book entitled *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of Rights of Man. The Origins of Totalitarianism* argues that the refugees lose their “right to have rights” after being displaced by suspending their political space in a state. Arendt’s point is “The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man” (Arendt 267). This stated line shows that the crisis of an individual man is connected to the entire crisis of the state’s legacy to rule over. Here, the Tamil minority also became non-citizens in their ancestral land, Sri Lanka, after the conflict with the Sinhalese and lost every political right in the early 1980s. So, Tamils launched a struggle to ensure equal rights and, later on, an independent Tamil Eelam State. The dissatisfaction of Tamils shifted into a civil war and ended in 2009, resulting in a refugee crisis. In other words, the humanitarian crisis emerged after the Tamil became illegal stateless people and were excluded from the basic civil rights. Bala presents, “This is the thing, the interpreter said. As far as the law

is concerned, you have no status. To stay here, you must first become a refugee, and this is a little complicated” (Bala 25). In her understanding, Tamils are dejected wherever they happen to visit as refugees due to being out of the political sphere.

In addition, in the eyes of the sovereign laws and political space, Tamil refugees are out of the public space, deserving a limbo status between the natural rights *Zoe* to political rights *Bios*. Giorgio Agamben in his book entitled *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* claims that the displaced life of a refugee is the bare life, which means hanging in between natural life *Zoe* and political life *Bios*. He argues “That bare life (the human creature) which in the ancient regime belonged to God and in the classical world was clearly distinct as (zoe) from political life (bios), now takes center stage in the state’s concern . . . a state makes nativity or birth (that is of the bare human life) the foundation for its own Sovereignty” (Agamben 116). For Agamben, stateless people hang in between human rights and civil rights because they are excluded from the political space. The life of a refugee is not counted as real life with political excess. In Sri Lanka, Tamils also lose their political space and are turned into bare lives, living among human beings. They, in fact, cannot go out of human society like beasts, but have no political excess and space to gain the citizen status of a state like other human beings.

Aristotle, furthermore believes that human beings are political animals and that to achieve human excellence for well-being, we must participate in a city. For Aristotle, “Anyone who is without a polis (apolis), not by luck but by nature is either a poor specimen or else superhuman” (quoted in Elden 43). According to him, a person without a city or polis is either a beast or a god. It makes clear that without politics, a person is either below humanity or above it. So, Tamils are not regarded as perfect human beings after 1982 because they are totally excluded from the circle of political involvement, and they belong nowhere on the earth. They are apolis because they do not have their city to join in political affairs.

Statement of Problem

The novel *The Boat People* depicts the heart-wrenching problematic status and plights of Tamil refugees, capturing the realistic picture of the consequences of the civil conflicts between the two ethnic groups. The civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009 and its long-term traumatic impact on the lives of common people. Mainly, the minority of Tamils are dehumanized and forced to be non-citizens and refugees in different parts of the world. The protagonist, Mahindan, is portrayed mercilessly as an outsider in both countries, Sri Lanka and Canada, who is unable to receive the natural life as a human being; rather, his life is under a severe humanitarian crisis. So, it is a situation of bare life because the state’s control over every sphere of life private to public. This limbo situation of Tamil Refugees uncovers the true refugee crisis of the 21st century in South Asia to the North American continents. The article would pose these research questions to uncover the true plights, misery, and suffering of the

Tamil refugees in different parts of the world. How do Tamil immigrants bear the severe humanitarian crisis as a consequence of their displaced position? What solution would be more effective to minimise the Tamil immigrant crisis on the real ground, negotiating in both countries, Sri Lanka and Canada?

Objective

1. To examine the humanitarian crisis through the representation of the major fictional characters.
2. To offer a solution for the Tamil refugee crisis through the implementation of political negotiation.

Literature Review

Sharon Bala's novel *The Boat People* has been a subject of criticism for several critics. They have discussed it using distinct methodologies, giving diverse interpretations. Most of them have analyzed it through the views of civilizational conflict and its consequences, biopolitics, and so on.

Two scholars, Bradimore and Bauder, in their research article entitled "Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People: Tamil Refugee Migration in the Newsprint Media", examine the coverage of Tamil Refugees in Canadian print media by going through some articles published in October 2009 and January 2010 in national newspapers in Canada. They expose the misrepresentation of Tamil immigrants in Canadian media. They claim, "These headlines presented the event as a matter of security rather than discussing migrant welfare and contextualizing human smuggling as a human rights issue. Particular words worked to frame both the event and the people involved within this discourse of security and crime . . .". (Bradimore and Bauder 19). For them, headlines of print media could not cover the true discussion, picking up the issues of migrant welfare, human smuggling, and human rights. Being biased, the printed media focuses on the issue of security. Tamil immigrants and immediate events are portrayed as being associated with security and crime.

Similarly, David Matas another critic, in his article entitled "Protecting Boat People", observes the systemic victimization of Tamils. He tries to reflect on the organised oppression against Tamil immigrants after the end of the civil conflicts under the sovereign laws. A huge number of Tamils sacrificed their life due to the systematic victimization against them. Matas mentions:

The Canadian legislation is bad in principle. But it is even worse in context. It says to the Government of Sri Lanka, go ahead, mistreat the Tamil minority. We don't care. Because the legislation was introduced in response to the Tamil arrivals, the legislation sends a message to Sri Lanka that we are not concerned about the mistreatment of your Tamil population. We are more concerned about our own borders and entry policy than what happens to Tamils back home. (Matas 5)

Actually, in both countries, the Tamil minority are victimized. The Sri Lankan government ostracizes them within the nation, and Canadian legislation also seems to be unfair in the case of Tamils in the name of the rule of law and sovereignty. Canadian legislation negatively responds to them without contextualizing their misery.

Scholar Maryse Jayasuriya, in her research article entitled “Legacies of War in Current Diasporic Sri Lankan Women’s Writing”, views how South Asian literature based in Sri Lanka is linked to the quarter-century-long military conflict and war. The long-standing civil war of Sri Lanka has had a deep impact on current diasporic women’s writing. She depicts the impact through a reference to the novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. “In the novel, Sylvia Sunethra saves her Tamil tenants, who nonetheless pack up and leave the house, a nod towards the Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka following the violence of July 1983 and the start of the ethnic conflict. As Munaweera’s narrator recounts” (Jayasuriya 3). Her focus is on the characterization in the literary text, where characters are designed to show the miserable condition of women due to war. Tamil tenants are shown as vulnerable who escape, leaving their houses and turning into refugees after the ethnic violence.

Researchers Leenders and May, in their reviewed article entitled “Thinking through Refugee Objects – A Case Study of the Sri Lankan Bremen”, argue that the decades-long civil war resulted in an increasing number of illegal. So they believe the Sri Lankan government seems to be unable to ease the tension in the right way by marginalizing Tamil for years, both politically and economically. “In recent decades, both Sinhalese and Tamils have sought refuge in Australia . . . Though the majority of those that seek asylum are Tamil, Sinhalese who illegally leave Sri Lanka (or assist Tamils to leave) face vilification and jail should they return” (Leenders and May 445). They show that after the conflict in Sri Lanka, both Sinhalese and Tamils wandered for refuge in Australia. A large number of Tamils who seek asylum are illegal immigrants due to a strict verification process even in the host country.

Another Scholar, Dr. Kailas Aute, in his article entitled “Asylum /Refugee Diaspora and The Rise of Sri Lankan Tamil Literature”, views the Tamil immigrants’ crisis as going back to the root of conflict and the unfair asylum policy against them in different corners of the world. He believes Tamil refugees are the true victims of the ethnic strife between the Majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils for political representation. He points out:

The Sri Lankan Tamil asylum-seekers also employed eccentric methods when they were detained by hard-line asylum policies in the respective countries. The multidimensionality of relations outside Sri Lanka has further helped in their migration and settlement. The post-1983 scenario created a setting to live an accomplished family and community . . . Being born and bred outside Sri Lanka, the second-generation Tamils, though curious about their traditions and customs, they are culturally more of West than Tamil. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the West has political and economic interests in Sri Lanka. (Aute 4)

As per Aute historically, Tamils have been detained, imposing several hardline policies in several countries. After the 1980s, despite being scattered in different places, Tamils often kept in touch with each other in their community. However, new-generation Tamils are culturally westernized, though they are much more curious about their tradition and culture.

Scholar Pradip Sharma, in his article entitled “The Politics of ‘Bare Life’ in Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People: A Biopolitical Perspective*”, discusses the novel from the issue of humanity and bare life. In his view, the traumatic life of five hundred survivors is the true reflection of the pathos of immigrants. For him, the power of the authority that controls the survivors violates their human rights. “The power processes of the authority over the survivors that has spread onto grass root to violate the human right of the refugees who turn to be stateless in the democratic regime” (Sharma 69). In his observation, the authoritative power limits the life of the immigrants, violating human rights. The five hundred stayers are inhumanely exploited in their everyday lives.

Darisa Beautell in his article entitled “The Paradox of Hospitality in Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People*”, raises the issue the hospitality for immigrants. In his analysis, Tamil immigrants are mistreated depending on the existing legal system of Canada. In fact, how Tamil refugees are misunderstood shows the very paradoxical nature of a democratic country. “The constant repetition of the words safe and safety in this chapter runs counter to the actual brutal story, undermining the suggested dichotomous pattern between Canada and Sri Lanka” (Beautell 74). He emphasizes the terms safe and safety a lot, which seems sarcastic considering the harsh reality faced by Tamil immigrants. The underlined phrases do not adequately cover the grim reality of what happened to Tamil refugees in both places, Sri Lanka and Canada.

The aforementioned critics largely underscore the Tamil Refugee crisis in Sri Lanka and Canada, restraining ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils due to political issues. They largely emphasize the inhuman consequences of civil war, portraying the Tamil immigrants’ humiliated condition in several parts of the world. I do not outright disagree with them because they seem to be practically right in their arguments. At least they navigate the plight of the Tamil from past to contemporary days, showing the devastating impact of civil insurgency. However, this article strictly focuses on the humanitarian crisis faced by Tamil refugees and the solution to the refugee crisis, examining the civil war in Sri Lanka to the perilous journey of five hundred displaced Tamil immigrants in Canada. In other words, a humanitarian crisis and bare life of Tamils due to their excluded status in both native and immigrated countries. It offers solutions to the issues with the assistance of the concept, with the respective theorists.

Research Methodology

This article analyzes the real plight of Tamil immigrants through the theoretical lenses of Hannah Arendt, *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of Rights of Man*. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Gorgio Agamben *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and*

Bare Life to uncover the Tamil refugee crisis and to employ Richard Zapata, Barrero's *Utopian Political Theory and Migration without Borders* and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* to offer a solution to the Tamil immigrants' crisis in the contemporary world.

Humanitarian Crisis

In Balal's novel *The Boat People*, the protagonist Mahindan, his son Sellian, and other major characters truly reflect the humanitarian crisis as they deserve a miserable status throughout their life either in their ancestral places or the visited land. Basically, Tamil immigrants and their true pathos of humanitarian crises can be seen in three sections. The first step of the humanitarian crisis of Tamils is in their native land Sri Lanka right after they become noncitizens, which leads them into a group of five hundred travellers on a boat the second point of the crisis and final stage of the crisis is the disgraceful status of Mahindan and his six-year-old son Sellian in the host country Canada. In every situation, Stateless Tamils are treated by the authorities like non-human objects, and they are destined to fight against the severe scarcity of fundamental human needs to sustain their lives. Hannah Arendt clarifies how stateless people come to the point of a humanitarian crisis. She explains, "The stateless people were as convinced as the minorities that loss of national rights was identical with loss of human rights that the former inevitably entitled the latter (292). For Arendt, the nationless minority loses both national and human rights. In Arendt's claims, Tamil refugees also belong to the minority losing both fundamental rights, whose everyday fight isn't for the big accomplishments but for the basic needs of life.

The ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese drives Tamils into the position of being stateless. They are thrown as a consequence into the condition of facing a life-threatening humanitarian crisis within their ancestral land, Sri Lanka. Arendt claims the nation-state cannot provide basic protection for those who are outside of government and the political sphere. She comments, "The nation-state incapable of providing a law for those who had lost the protection of the national government transferred the whole matter to the police" (287). For Arendt, the nation-state does not ensure a law for non-citizens; rather, their matters are transformed into the police. So, to be protected from the national government, everyone should be within the political space. The implication of this concept on Tamils is that at the peak of the civil war, Tamil minorities are converted into non-citizens. The government establishes temporary military checkpoints on their land that seem to restrain their everyday movements instead of providing protection. "Mobility was another thing they'd lost when the ceasefire ended. Government land and LTTE-controlled territory were now divided by razor wire, a mile of no man's land in between. Anyone crossing from one side to the other had to clear both army and Tiger checkpoints" (60). Tamil residential areas are divided, expanding the razor wires after the cease-fire. The common people are trapped by both forces, the LTTE and the existing government. So, the confined situation of Tamil is ostensible evidence of a humanitarian crisis. They are not permitted even to move freely by crossing the border lines, though the Tamils have been on the land for centuries.

Similarly, Tamil minorities are thrown out of their ancestral area. The Sinhalese government strategically forces them to leave their inherently occupied place. The government implicitly drives off “That was their plan, you know Uncle said. The government, they wanted us to leave the capital, they were the ones who arranged for the boat. They wanted all the Tamils in one small corner, trapped like animals” (196). In this reference, it is clear that the existing government drives Tamils away from their birthplace. They are treated as animals instead of citizens. Tamils are exploited by the Majority of the Sinhalese, even by seizing their property and land, which reveals an extreme situation of humanitarian crisis. Theorist Aristotle’s view is strictly implied on the critical condition of Tamil minorities. As he cites, “Rather a citizen is someone who is eligible to take part in the offices of a polis and polis is therefore a multitude of such people adequate for self-sufficiency” (qtd 45). For Aristotle, only citizens are eligible to take part in a polis for formal activities. But here, Tamils have to bear a life-threatening circumstance as outcasts because they are non-citizen, though living in their own country.

As Aristotle claims, Tamils are pushed out of the excess of the government’s affairs. Sinhalese’s brutality is narrated as follows. “The Sinhalese had chased us out of the South because they said it was their land and their soldiers were occupying the North, our ancestral land. Setting fire to houses, businesses, beating people indiscriminately. No one could control them, or the Sinhalese didn’t care to” (269-269). In this narration, the powerful Sinhalese forcefully erase the Tamils’ ancestral land using military power by ravaging the Tamils’ property, such as setting fire, destroying houses, and looting their business. Furthermore, displaced Tamils are bound to struggle with a severe lack of life-sustaining substances such as food, shelter, security, and so on. They starve as wanderer, building temporary tents to spend a few days looking for a bleak future. In Tamil refugees’ lives, in fact, remains nothing, neither history nor land, house, security, respect, property, identity, simply their bodies. They are portrayed:

From inside his tent, Mahindan could hear a family building a shelter, erecting a frame of coconut planks and twine over the hollow they had dug in the ground. Their hammers kept a steady beat. The women called instructions to one another as they tied palm fronds together for the roof. *Tighter, tighter! No, that one is too small.* (218)

In this description, the protagonist is not in his permanent safe house; rather, he is building a tent to spend a few days and nights. He erects temporary tents using coconut in an open field. It is not only the misery of a family but rather the entire displaced Tamil community. The steady sound of the hammers and helpless pleading for life signifies the terrifying condition of the Tamil refugees.

The exhausted protagonist, Mahindan, represents all stateless Tamils who are in a situation to fight against mosquitoes, hunger, fatigue, dirty clothes, and so on. Mahindan utters. “A mosquito landed on his arm, and he didn’t have the energy to swat it away.

Exhaustion . . . Where to find water? What to eat? Was it safe enough here to stay another day? Knowing that all the worry and effort might be for naught. At any moment, calamity could fall from the sky” (219). Such panicked notes unveil that Tamil’s daily routine isn’t to see the progress and luxury of life but to wander in search of water, food, and a safe place to be alive. The bitter truth is that they waste their energy in a fight with insects and in constant fear of calamity, which means that they are living half-dead lives after the civil conflict, even in their ancestral land.

The displaced Tamil refugees set out on a precarious journey in a wrecked boat that represents the realistic portrait of a humanitarian crisis. Mahindan, a widower, strives to continue his life with his young son, escaping from his war-torn native land, Sri Lanka, to Canada. To begin a journey means to move forward in life, thinking for the future generation, which is a reflective story of five hundred boat people. The agonizing travel since the first step is not less to feel their suffering. Bala writes, “Sellian was slight. Six years old and barely three feet tall. How little space the child occupied, coiled into himself, his thumb in his mouth. How precarious his existence, how miraculous his survival” (2). These lines expose the critical condition of a small six-year-old child who is struggling for his existence. A very young boy, Sellian, is moving elsewhere in a crowded boat, not even getting spacious space to sit, whose portrait is easy enough to understand the pathetic condition of all others. Sellian’s existence is precarious, stirring in the perilous journey on the ship.

In addition, the entire condition of the ship makes it not hard to comprehend the depth of the misery of the immigrants who happened to undertake their risky journey from Sri Lanka to Canada. The boat condition is “The boat- a six-meter freighter, past its prime and jerry-rigged for five hundred passengers cruising through calm waters groaning under the weight of too much human cargo. Mahindan held on to the railing, rubbing a thumb against the blistered rust” (2). The critical parts of the boat explicitly notify that there is no sign of comfort or luxury to travel because five hundred passengers are forcefully kept as human cargo. The protagonist, Mahindan, holds onto the railing, being panic which is plentiful to recognize the torturous struggle of immigrants between life and death.

The five hundred immigrants who land on *Vancouver Island* in bare feet are enough to grasp their life-threatening situation. All passengers are strewn everywhere like dead bodies; women, especially, are shabby due to the lack of sanitation. The depiction of them:

There were voices and bodies everywhere. Women plaited their hair over one shoulder. Men pulled their arms through their T-shirts. Most were barefoot. People pressed up around him. The boat creaked and Mahindan felt it list as everyone crowded in. They stood shoulder to shoulder people on both levels of the deck, hushing one another, children holding their breath. (4)

This portrayal captures the pathetic condition of Tamil immigrants. There are no spacious seats inside the boat. Rather, they are strewn like dead bodies. Particularly, women are shown with braided hair over the shoulders, walking barefoot. Both men and women are in a perplexed condition because they stand shoulder to shoulder. The striking panic point is that children hold their breath due to suffocation, which is the grim misery situation of all Tami refugees.

Regarding the migrant people, Thomas Nail says migratory figures hold vulnerable identities. They do not have stable, self-deserving, frequently transformed positions in society. Tamil immigrants also resemble Nail's defined figure because they move frequently from one destination to the next destination facing panic situations. Nail cites, "Migration is the spectrum between these two poles and the figure of the migrant is the one who moves on this spectrum. In this way, migratory figures function as mobile social positions and not fixed identities. One is not born a migrant but becomes one" (3). For him, immigrants hold mobile status as Tamils have fleeting identities from Sri Lanka to human cargo to Canada as asylum seekers. Quoting Nail's words, Tamil refugees are not born but made due to ethnic conflicts, which cause them to form vulnerable positions. They are mistreated like animals by both the majority of Sinhalese and the Canadian authorities.

At the Canadian border, Tamil immigrants are forcefully regrouped by security forces into separate sections to control them. They are simply ordered to make a line and follow the instructions because they are legal people, but stateless masses. The security personnel enforced, "The Men and women were separated and forced into orderly queues. The adults had their wrists and ankles shackled. Mahindan understood the way the guard fitted the two ends of the cuffs together, careful not to pinch kin that the task was performed with regret" (11). In these lines, the Canadian authority imposes them to be in separate groups for men and women. The adults are chained like infamous criminals and violators of human rights. Without any mistake, they are ill-treated similarly to animals, which is the point of humiliation, frustration, life, and death.

Another situation of a humanitarian crisis is when all Tamil men are thrown into the bathroom to wash their bodies in a crowded group. To have a shower inside a narrow bathroom in a crowd after many days is not desirable for anyone. Even in such a situation, the protagonist, Mahindan, seems to be happy to bathe in the group, which shows their realistic painful condition. The obligation is "The men were taken to the bathroom, where they washed in groups. When it was Manhidan's turn, he stripped, unbuttoning his shirt . . . It had been months since he'd changed his clothes. Removing them felt like peeling away a filthy layer of skin" (21). In these words, Mahindan describes his pitiable condition that while washing his clothes, he feels his filthy skin's layer peel away from his body. Although Mahindan has to bathe in a crowd without maintaining privacy, he is more than happy because he gets the chance to clean his body, not after many days but months.

The picture of the women's prison shows an even bigger crisis of Tamil refugees in Canada. This misery of women is largely linked to the view of Arendt, who argues that the stateless are destined to live under absolute lawlessness. She points out "They had lost those rights which had been thought of and even defined as inalienable namely the rights of man. The stateless and minorities, rightly termed 'cousin-germane', had no government to represent and to protect them . . . as law, or under conditions of absolute lawlessness" (269). For Arendt, there is no one to protect non-citizens because they have no government. So, in the case of Tamil women detainees, there is no one to show any concern and hear the pain of Tamil women who are imprisoned as illegal non-citizens in the host country. The critical condition of hostages is "We have come from the women's prison. The thing is . . . Savitri is not well. She has caught some illness? Mahindan asked. He took deep steadying breath. Alarm came easily these days and took great effort to dispel. She has been very low Sam Said. Not eating, sleeping" (148). In the Tamil language, they tell about the disappointing situations of women inside the prison. Giving reference to a sick woman of Savitra, all imprisoned women's condition is very low. She is the mother of two children, but eats nothing and sleeps as well for many days.

The final portrayal of the humanitarian crisis in the novel *The Boat People* is the miserable status of Mahindian, the protagonist who is destined to confront numerous perilous incidents on an everyday basis. Initially, the civil war shifted him, along with the entire Tamil community, to a marginal position in Sri Lanka. After being stateless, Mahindan's critical days visibly start with a dilemma of life. Bala writes, "Some of the men still chuckled to themselves. Mahindan rubbed the fabric of his sweater. He felt his arm inside the sleeve, the soft cotton against his skin. I am not an animal, he thought. And for the first time in a long time, it felt like the truth" (23). In these expressions, the protagonist, with other Tamils, seems to be confused not about the past but about their present and the future. They are in a situation comparable to compare of animals due to the conflict and out of political space in their land. Mahindan realizes that their status is no more than that of an animal, which seems to be somehow true.

Mahindan is obligated to spend many days with his son in an open field. If we borrow the idea, Giorgio Agamben, Mahindian is a true Homo Sacer who is out of the political space, which means out of human jurisdiction. Agamben claims "In the case of Homo Sacer, a person is simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law, Killing was permitted implied that the violence done to Homo Sacer did not constitute sacrilege... it is licit to kill the sacred man" (69). For him, a non-citizen is permitted to be persecuted. Here, Mahindan is also out of human authority alike to the mythical figure Homo Sacer. Holding a six-year-old son as an unfortunate father, Mahindan has only one option is to sleep in the open fields, not a single night but several nights, even without thinking of the security of life. Mahindan is fated to spend "For months, he and Sellian had trudged along the roadside, the sun burning relentlessly. They had slept in open fields, longing for shelter, four concrete walls, and a roof. Protection from falling shrapnel.

A reprieve from the sun” (143). As a starved illegal immigrant, Mahindan wanders for many months on unsafe roadsides, streets, and fields. It is not his wish, but his stateless circumstance draws him into such a risky place. His death affects no more as Homo Sacer because he is not under the protection of the government. The house with walls, a roof, and full protection is merely in his fantasy. Thus, Tamils are bound to sustain their life in constant terror.

Arendt likewise defines the condition of stateless persons and their relations to the government. She claims that stateless people require an international agreement for their legal status, as they are already out of the security of the national government. She states, “The term stateless at least acknowledged the fact that these persons had lost the protection of their government and required international agreements for safeguarding their legal status” (279). In the case of Mahindan, the government is not responsible for him because he has already lost his right to protection. So, with a sense of insecurity, he makes the precarious journey to Canada, but neither his country nor his journey on the boat is safe for him. In a conversation with another Tamil who is travelling to Canada, Mahindan reveals the risky travel by boat and the uncertain future of all immigrants. Mahindan converses:

Here is not safe Mahindan said. He waved his hand toward the fence and added, the boat might be a little dangerous, but at least it is a chance. I have never left this country the man said. Being on the water, it makes me vomit. Mahindan was incensed and terrified. How had he survived, this man whose only instinct was to lay down and die? (309-310)

In this talk, Mahindan clearly states that they are not in a safe boat, but for them, it is a chance to travel. It shows how piteously Tamils are conditioned to leave their country. In response, the next man informs that he feels seasick, but there is no alternative to his journey. In his terrified face, Mahindan is traumatized after looking at his vulnerability, which is almost like a dead.

Mahindan flees to Canada with five hundred Tamils and arrives in Canada, hoping to be a legal refugee following the asylum reviews. However, Mahindan is imprisoned without any privileges due to unfriendly legal provisions against refugees. An officer informs, “Mr. Mahindan is being held in a prison with restricted privileges, Gigovaz said. His six-year-old son is living among strangers. It is important to consider the psychological toll on the child, particularly of separation and detention” (56). As the immigration officer, Gigovaz Magindan, is thrown in prison, restricting even his basic needs. Not only Mhaindan but also his six-year-old son is with strangers. It is a situation against the right to life because there is no one to talk about his human rights and the emotional impact that his child bears during his stay in jail.

The visible humanitarian crisis is additionally mirrored in the meeting of Mahindan and his son, who exchange their affectionate embraces. Although they lack food, shelter

and other essential needs for life, they seem to be happy when they are together with the courage to set up more journeys. Mahindan acts “Mahindan could feel Sellian’s heart knocking against his chest. He pictured their important papers, identification cards, and vaccination records concealed in the folds of Chithra’s wedding sari. He reminded himself of the changes of clothes . . . The tent poles, the sleeping mats” (205). Being emotionally overwhelmed, Mahindan could feel his son’s heartbeat. All important documents are folded in his dead wife Chithra’s wedding sari. Clothes, including tent poles and sleeping mats, are packed, which signifies the critical condition of Tamil immigrants in the world.

Mahindan often loses his consciousness in Canada, which is an outcome of the austere humanitarian crisis. He even behaves like an abnormal person, uttering senseless words. He screams, “Illai! Mahindan screamed in Tamils. The door handle was jammed. His heart slammed in his chest. Illai! Illia! He banged on the window and frantically searched his memory before the English word came to him: Help! Help!” (281). He anxiously expresses through his body gestures what he intends. He seems to utter the words repeatedly without being conscious. He exclaims for help, psychologically being very low due to the complex life in the immigrated land.

In addition, concerning psychological trauma, theorist Cathy Caruth, in her book entitled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, defines trauma as persistently repetitive recurrences, which can make it difficult for survivors to fully comprehend what happens. She explains, “Trauma is characterized by its insistence, often manifesting as repetitive memories or flashbacks that can overwhelm the survivor’s capacity to process the event fully” (Caruth 27). As Caruth states, the protagonist Mahindan seems to be psychologically more vulnerable in every situation in Canada. He feels consistently insecure in every moment, whether meeting or departing with his son Sellian, being traumatised and overwhelmed by repetitive flashbacks and dilemmas. In a hallucination, he utters to his son, “What has happened? Mahindan asked hands-on ships. Teachers sent us home, Sellian said with a shrug. Something is happening at the United Nations. At the mention of the United Nations, Mahindan’s panic whooshed in” (203). In his inquiry, Sellian responds that his teachers sent him from the school. Taking the references to the United Nations, Mahindan expresses his traumatic condition relating to the panic memories of being helpless in the present situation.

Solution

In the 21st century, particularly since the early 1980s, the Tamil refugee crisis has been one of the major refugee crises, as millions of them are forced to be scattered in several countries facing austere humanitarian crises due to their status as non-citizens. To address the Tamil refugee crisis, this paper precisely emphasises the political solution through the diplomatic negotiation of the native country, Sri Lanka and the host country, Canada. The protagonist, Mahindan and all Tamils became stateless refugees due to the political upheavals that caused a violation of their natural rights. Tamil refugees’ natural

rights are actually suspended for political purposes. John Locke, a theorist, in his book entitled *Two Treatises of Government*, claims all human beings are born free, having double laws: one is absolute freedom, and the next is inheritance in the family by enforcing these double laws, the Tamil refugees' dilemma would be solved. Locke argues:

Every man is born with a double right. First, a right of freedom to his person, which no other man has power over, but the free disposal of it lies in himself. Secondly, a right before any other man, to inherit, with his brethren, his father's goods. By the first of these, a man is naturally free from subjection to any government, though he is born in a place under its jurisdiction. (Locke 189)

According to Locke, these two rights of every man could solve the problem. First, rights cannot possible to be snatched by others and in the case of the second, it is not necessary to be limited only to particular areas just to be born in a particular country and legal state, which would be truly applicable to address the Tamil refugee crisis.

Locke also emphasizes the idea of natural equality based on birth, which would be more applicable to solving the Tamil immigrant crisis. Locke stresses, "Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of Nature, equally with any other man, or number of men in the world . . ." (141). In his view, every man is born with the full right to enjoy. So, Tamils are also born with absolute freedom, like the Sinhalese and even Canadian citizens. Every Tamil is free to delight in freedom in the law of nature. But unfortunately, their inherent rights are restricted in the name of sovereign law and the nation-state. Thus, to address the humanitarian crisis of the Tamils, Locke's idea of natural laws would be adopted. And for its implementation, both countries could have political negotiations.

In connection with Locke, the practical execution of the provision of the Refugee Convention of 1951 would also minimize the Tamil immigrants' crisis. Particularly in Article 26, freedom of movement is clearly stated regarding the refugees. It ensures that "Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully in its territory the right to choose their place of residence and to move freely within its territory subject to any regulations applicable to aliens generally in the same circumstances" (Article 26). According to this article, refugees should be accepted wherever they would visit as their choice following the existing norms and values. If so, Tamil immigrants should be accepted into Canada for their residence, employing the provisions under the refugee conventions. If the provisions are followed, even in Canada, there is enough room for Tamil refugees.

Furthermore, the Tamil immigrants have to suffer at innumerable points due to the unequal border issues between Sri Lanka and Canada. They are directly thrown into Canadian detention centres, which causes a humanitarian crisis. Theorist Richard Zapata Barrero, in his article titled *Utopian Political Theory and Migration without Borders*, advocates for a utopian approach to the refugee problem. The idea of borders becomes less

rigid, and the focus shifts towards creating spaces where everyone, including refugees, can fully participate in society. He suggests, “Utopian political theory serves as a critique of the present, aiming to uncover the injustices of current political arrangements by envisioning radically different possibilities” (Barrero 52). Applying this theory to the Tamil refugee crisis would be resolved. Here, envisioning and striving for a world where refugees are not seen as outsiders but as full participants in a global community, transcending traditional notions of citizenship and statehood.

The idea of Barrero, therefore, the open border, and the disappearance of borders would be practical in the Tamil immigrants’ crisis. On pragmatic grounds, minimizing the border disparity literally refers to the downsizing of the refugee crisis. Barrero proposes, “In the first place, there is the supposition that the debate about ‘open borders and closed borders’ implies a debate about a borderless world or ‘the disappearance of borders’” (7). For him, there is no doubt that the world without borders would be a substitute to narrow down the immigration crisis, promoting the free movement of all human beings. It seems to be more relevant in the case of the Tamil refugee crisis in Sri Lanka and Canada. However, the truth is that it is possible to make free movement only through diplomatic discussions between countries.

Despite the geopolitical challenges and sovereignty concerns, Canada, as the host country, would solve the Tamil refugee complexity by embracing the nation’s pragmatic notion of world humanitarian responsibilities. In their book *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Robert Jackson and George Sorensen argue that states are intertwined with international humanitarian responsibilities based on human rights. They write, “States are important, but so are human beings. Statesmen and stateswomen have a national responsibility to their own nation and its citizens; they have an international responsibility to observe and follow international law and respect the rights of other states and they have a humanitarian responsibility to defend human rights around the world” (Jackson and Sorensen 52). For them, state authorities should be responsible for protecting the human rights of the world by depending on their views, Canada also would feel the humanitarian responsibility with Tamil immigrants and Sri Lanka.

Regarding a geopolitical pragmatic scenario, additionally, Andrew Heywood, in his book entitled *Global Politics*, discusses practical considerations of the interstate relations associated with international law by highlighting ethical and humanistic grounds which would be implementable in the relationship between Sri Lanka and Canada to address the Tamil refugee crisis. Heywood emphasises, “. . . a clearly positive and assessment of the role and importance of international law. This stems from the belief that human beings are imbued with rights and guided by reason. As the international sphere is a moral sphere, core ethical principles should be codified within a framework of international law” (Heywood 340). Borrowing, in Heywood’s words, negotiating diplomatically with Sri Lanka, Canada would pacify the Tamil refugee crisis, providing shelters for them by adopting the moral, ethical and humanistic framework of International law.

Conclusion/ Findings

The novel *The Boat People* is the true reflection of the Tamil refugee crisis of this contemporary time, which genuinely reflects the anxiety, pain, suffering, and plights of five hundred boat people as a mirror in different countries, particularly in Canada. This Article concludes with the findings behind the Tamil immigrants' crisis. Two factors, political as well as civilizational, seem to be the major reasons that turn Tamils into non-citizen even in their ancestral lands, causing a severe humanitarian crisis. To be more precise, as evidence, the minority Tamils waged a civil war from 1983 to 2009 against the majority Sinhalese in Sri Lanka to influence the mainstream politics by forming the government in their favour. Political issues, therefore, play a major role in triggering the ethnical tussle, which results in a large number of Tamil statelessness.

The displaced Tamil refugees have to deal with grave humanitarian crises in many parts of the world, mainly in Sri Lanka, while travelling insecurely to Canada. In Sri Lanka, they are deprived of basic needs like food, water, security, fighting harmful insects, and climatic adversities. Would Tamils be just here on the earth to fight against the insects? It sounds very sarcastic, but the answer would be yes, they are destined to do so, which is evident in their real-life story. In their journey, they are bound to cross many days bearing even life-threatening risks and challenges. They would almost live half-dead lives due to not getting any humanitarian assistance in both countries, Sri Lanka and Canada.

Tamil refugees are forced to endure daily suffering as a result of the absence of necessities for survival. Whether in the case of the Immigration Refugee Board, the Women's Prison, or Mahinda's custody, they are imprisoned by force without realising human sentiment or basic needs. Furthermore, the mistreatment of Tamil immigrants by RMC authorities is a clear indication of the humanitarian catastrophe. The horrendous situation of Mahindan is that he finds himself acting instinctively like a person experiencing mental illness following thirteen unsuccessful efforts to get the status of refugee in Canada.

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