

Language of the Oppressed: Boon of Nature and Curse of Humans in the Life of a Refugee

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Abstract

Refugees all over the world are pushed to a situation of being afraid to use their cultural identities as a result of the cruelty of oppression. Language is central in the identification of the oppressed group and this in turn, enhances the fear of using their language in public. Nature has always been a greater element than humankind, in treating all living things in the world with love and respect. Using silence as its language of communication, it provides itself in abundance to everyone and never discriminates anyone. This essay focuses on comparing and differentiating the life of refugees as a result of love existing in nature and hatred present in humankind, with reference to the memoir 'Little Daughter' by Zoya Phan. The memoir is analysed with an anthropogenic view of how a human with power and superiority can play a major role in destroying nature as well as other humans. It explains how the power of nature takes humans towards equality but, the power of humans is a trip towards destruction caused due to discrimination. The theoretical framework is constructed based on the essay 'That Which You Are Denying Us' by Lyndsey Stonebridge, which explains the refugees' problems of being voiceless ones with no right to any language. The essay is categorized under three sub-headings 'Life of the oppressed', 'Love of nature' and 'Language of the voiceless' to examine the effect of language restriction, equality in nature and the use of English as the language of liberation by the refugees with reference to the select memoir.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Little Daughter by Zoya Phan is a memoir that explains the plight of the Karen community refugees who were chased away from Myanmar because of the hatred that existed on them for centuries. There is a common notion that the Karen- Burmese conflict started in Burma, since the first dictator came to power in 1962 or in 1988, when the students protesting in the streets were massacred by an even more brutal dictatorship (Phan, 2009). These are cruel incidents that came to light during the fight but, the troubles between the two groups were always there for centuries and heated more since the day of their independence from the British government. During the British rule, the Karen were friendly with the colonizers which turned out to be the fact that made the Burmese people hate them much more than they already did. The problems increased when most of the Karen people chose to turn into Christians. This hatred kept on increasing until the oppressors took all measures to ruin the daily life of the Karen and chased them away from the land that they thought belonged only to them. Being one of the minority groups in the country, the Karen were not able to keep on fighting for their rights. Torture, troubles and fear turned out to be the elements of their everyday life and they had no other choice but to run away from them, at one point of their life.

A full understanding of the process of migration requires not only the analysis of the migrant’s role in the country of origin or destination. Rather, it is inextricable from the broader political context, including social, economic and political factors, which establish structures within which migration takes place (Dzankic: 164).

The essay focuses on elaborating all the troubles that the Karen community has gone through in Burma, because of the hatred transmitted through generations of anger and vengeance. The essay aims at examining the pain of the Karen refugees gone through as being the oppressed ones in the society; the problems of dominance and power in the hands of a human in killing humanity and equality; Nature as a much better being than humans in spreading love and peace; the problems of refugees as the voiceless ones in the society and language as a tool of oppression and liberation.

1. Life of the Oppressed

Zoya Phan’s *The Little Daughter*, is a memoir that details the pain of the Karen refugees who were made refugees by the power of the state. Zoya’s story of her life was a narration of a fight between life and death, as the refugees were never privileged enough to live without fear and danger. “Millions of forcibly displaced people living in and outside camps seek to support themselves and their families often with minimal humanitarian assistance, and in the face of active resistance by governments and citizens of host countries” (Jacobsen 99). Along with the pain, sorrow, fear, sufferings and trauma, Zoya also narrates the fight and the rebellious attitude that made them survivors. Individuals are usually oppressed by the dominant ones in the society, based on their race, religion, culture, gender, caste and so many other things that are considered inferior to them. Oppression occurs, when the powerful ones in the society decide to use the attained power in a wrong way and destroy the life of the groups of people that they hate. In case of the Karen refugees, this oppression turns out to be an act that makes their daily

life, a living hell. They live a life of denied necessities for centuries and to make it worst, they are brutally killed if they were not able to run away from their country. Just because they belong to one of the minority community that is not in the good books of the dominant one, they are destined to live a life that treats them like beggars and they are pushed to a situation of depending on others for their basic rights, needs and necessities.

The Burmese leaders in power, implemented rules that made the minority communities depend on them to lead a life. The Karen refugees mentioned in the select memoir are living a life in which, they are grateful to God for just staying alive amidst struggles as the act of killing has been normalised in the country. There are barriers to lead a life and also to run away from the country, which makes 'death' one of the few good options that they have in their life. The biased rules of the government made it very difficult for the Karen and other minority communities. "The Four Cuts policy was brutally simple: it would cut off all supplies, information, recruits and food to the Karen resistance" (Phan, 2009). All the sources to earn a living, was cut off by the government and, people were busy solving their problems of starvation and escaping from death that they had no time or energy to fight back for their rights. All the resistance fighters who rebelled in spite of troubles were also brutally killed then and there. Cruel dictatorship ruled the lives of the innocent citizens of the country.

The brutality of the oppression had no limits, as there was not anyone to question the evilness of the situation. "Attacks escalated, with Karen villages being burned, villagers shot and women raped" (Phan, 2009). The Karen people were not treated like fellow human beings and were tortured worse than animals. The Burmese rulers, army and all the prejudiced citizens in the society, kept on hurting the minority groups both physically and mentally. They were pushed to a situation of leaving the land they love the most, in order to stay alive. The Karen people were denied the citizenship to the only country that they have lived in, for centuries and to add to their struggles they had no right to live and their life was at threat each and every minute they lived there. "My brothers and sisters and I loved our home, and we just tried to convince ourselves that we would never have to run away" (Phan, 2009). Phan and her siblings convinced themselves that they need not leave their home of love but, were also aware of the fact that they were in utmost danger only at their own home. "Studies of the experience of refugees have, to date, focused upon the significant traumatic experiences experienced by people from refugee backgrounds, including physical violence, rape, torture and the death of loved ones" (Rosbrook 156). Their life moved in all the dangerous ways that the humans in power have designed them to be.

'Fear' is something that has always been induced in the life of the refugees all over the world. This constant fear is gradually accompanied by trauma of losing everything that they loved in their life. There was a constant fear of death, as their lives were always at gun point. Zoya and her family had a peaceful life until the first bomb attack occurred in their village. After the attack, every minute of their life was a living hell as they were expecting the next attack very soon. Sometimes there were no attacks but, all the people hid themselves for a long time fearing an attack and came back only after the aircrafts went far away. "Sometimes we were stuck in the shelter all day long, wishing we could be playing out in the sunshine" (Phan, 2009). Many

of the Karen people lived a life that was nothing better than death, as they were treated in brutal ways that were much cruel punishments than death. “Karen women who had been gang-raped and killed in the most disgusting ways imaginable; farmers shot in the stomach for no reason, and left to die in their fields; villagers working as porter-slaves and left to a slow and lingering death” (Phan, 2009). These brutal treatments made the refugees run away from their only home to an unknown land, while the home they loved was burning behind. “The village was gripped by an echoing silence. Everyone stared at the vision of the inferno” (Phan, 2009). The trauma of the refugees follows them till their grave n and, only the ones who have experienced it can feel their real pain of death, oppression, helplessness and survival amidst the chaos.

2. Love of Nature

The Karen refugees have always gone through troubles because of the discrimination created and enforced on them, by the fellow human beings who consider themselves as the superior ones in the society. When Zoya Phan narrates her story of suppression and humiliation, she is not able to leave out the happy narration of her innocent childhood too. Though her parents were aware of the upcoming danger, the family enjoys a peaceful life amidst nature, in their village named Manerplaw. Their life is interlinked with nature and living in a village near the forest, they are dependent on the natural resources for their daily life. There is a lovely relationship between the Karen people and Nature and they exchange enormous love with each other. Zoya grows up looking at her father who loves his flower garden as much as he loves his kids. Her mother is more interested in her vegetable garden that helps them in killing their everyday hunger. Zoya and her family treated nature like family and the nature also provided, nurtured and protected them like a mother does her children. “An important ongoing division in geographical research in the area of forced migration exists between critical and applied policy research” (Collyer 113). It is necessary to have a detailed geographical analysis of the refugee’s homeland and the migrated land to understand their physical and mental problems of displacement.

Zoya and her siblings had no fear for the forest since their childhood. They enjoyed themselves in the forest and that was a phase of life in which they had nothing to worry about. “Once I had learned to swim properly, I used to love playing in the river and resting on the riverside beach. Say Say would climb on top of one of the giant water buffaloes, which wallowed in the shallows, and start dancing on their horns” (Phan, 2009). Nature, unlike humans has the ability to shower love on everyone, with no superiority or discrimination. Nature has no intentions of harming or hurting anyone and also has high level of tolerance. It is the humans, whose greed ends up hurting the other living beings in the environment. The war, by destroying nature affected the humans, and by destroying humans affected the nature that always loved them. “The enemy had destroyed his flower gardens at Manerplaw, and in the village, and that must have pained my father. For if someone destroys your love it really hurts” (Phan, 2009). The fact that Zoya’s parents were animists, help them in connecting deeper with nature than the other humans.

The happiest phase of the lives of Karen refugees were at their home, when they were surrounded by nature. The Karen lived a life that was inseparable from nature. They did not

even have a clock, as the cock and the sun showed them the time. “The cockerel was known to us as the Karen clock” (Phan, 2009). Bamboo was the grass that was of much use to them as it was available in abundance and provided shelter and was also very useful to them in many other ways. “Bamboo is the heart of the Karen people” (Phan, 2009). Even the traditional dance of the Karen People is Bamboo dance in which bamboo sticks are used. The children even had an elephant growing up with them, in the village which they called by its name. The Karen lifestyle and culture was bound with nature and so was its food habit that has rice and fish paste as the staple food, which was cooked in firewood.

The food habits of the Karen bring them even more close to nature and show that they also have the traits of nature like equity, impartiality and tolerance. It is these traits of the people that make them good friends of nature. The Karen people do not avoid any food as inedible ones and they make use of all the sources that the nature gives them. At times of the brutal rules implemented, the starving families were reduced to eating the flesh of banana trees (Phan, 2009). When a Karen family built the roof of their house, many others in the community joined in helping them and they were served with pumpkin and chicken curry as a thank you gift. The journey to the mango grove has always been a happy event in the life of the girls in the village. It is the cruelty of humankind that destroys the love and peace of both fellow human beings and the nature, as the war troubled them both. “Everyone was worried. Even the trees, the river and the very earth seemed worried” (Phan, 2009).

3. Language of the Voiceless

The refugees are ruled by fear and the first thing that fear gives them is ‘silence’. Fear made them dumb and that became the ultimate achievement of the oppressors. The situation of not being able to talk or talk back against their pathetic situation, made them weaker and weaker. Lyndsey Stonebridge, in her essay *That Which You are Denying Us* focuses on the problems of the denied right to speak, in the life of the refugees. She mentions the incident at Woomera detention camp, where the refugees sewed their lips together to protest against their state of voicelessness (Stonebridge, 2014). This shows the extent to which, denied right to speak can take a human being. Their troubles are unheard and it is pathetic that many refugees die with no chance to talk for themselves. The problems gone through by the refugees are unknown to the outside world as their voice never escape the fence of the camps. “The study of language is not simply a linguistic exercise, but is an “ideological enterprise” in which language is used as a signifier for deeper anxieties surrounding race and ethnicity” (Bloch 2). Language is more than just means of communication and when it comes to oppression, it is important to note the politics behind restrictions on a language.

The oppressors all over the world make sure that the right to education is denied to the oppressed, as it is good education that would train the rebels to speak up for themselves. “Education is a way for refugees to become integrated in a new culture and is a process involving social inclusion through which they become accepted in a society” (Thomas 195). Though many of them struggle hard to get educated, there are enormous barriers in their way of knowledge. “There continue to be several obstacles for migrant and stateless children

to access state schools. The most important one is financial” (Nawarat 958). When all the possibilities of learning a language are broken, there are no ways of voicing out one’s opinion, even when there is an opinion. Language is used to show one’s power in many parts of the world but, when used wisely, the very language can be used against the oppressors to break the hierarchy. “The power of language is not only a power over others, made possible through language; it is also the even more pervasive power that language wields over the speakers themselves” (Kadt, 1993). English is a global language that has the generosity to accept words from other languages and keep on changing itself over time, according to the needs of the speaker. English language, because of globalisation has many benefits attached to it even in many countries where it is not the official language. “Kapur and Chakraborty (2008) suggest that English is increasingly valued in the labour market in this era of globalisation. They estimate the returns to English skills in the Indian economy and find that individuals who are more likely to have training in English earn significantly higher relative wages and better occupational outcomes even for the same level of overall education” (Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2013). Zoya realizes the importance of English and wisely uses it as a tool to make her oppressed voice reach as many people as possible. In a world where she was restricted from speaking her own language, she cleverly chooses English as her language of liberation which would eventually liberate her people to talk in whatever language they want to use.

Stonebridge explains the depth of being voiceless and argues that it is the prime cause for the trauma of the refugees. Only if the refugees are able to talk their problems out aloud, they would be able to vent out their suppressed emotions. “Losing one’s language is not only to be denied a linguistic anchorage to nation and tradition, it also means losing the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings” (Stonebridge 115). Zoya understands the power of voice very well from her father, who is a resistance fighter. She admires the way her father fearlessly points out the mistakes of the dictators in power. She loves the way in which her father stands and talks for their rights in a calm but, brave voice. “He’s so strong when he speaks like that! I never realized” (Phan, 2009). This inspiration gives her the strength to speak for their voiceless minority community people, who were tortured and chased away from home. She conquers fear and stands there as a warrior, who is brave enough to speak the unspoken truth. Her act of choosing to write the book in English shows her thoughts to reach wider range of people, including her oppressors. She has chosen English as the language of liberation and has decided to fight with no fear that could stop her until she achieves equality.

4. Present Situation of Refugees

The most important fact that should be noted about the refugee crisis is that the refugees all over world are facing troubles and inhuman treatments that have not at all changed over a long period of time until now. The hatred and prejudices plotted against the refugees have not had many positive changes even after researches, articles and news reports focussing on the dark side that has been hidden for decades. The oppressed ones who are chased away from home, cross the border, stay at refugee camps and a few of them manage to stay in another country

that accepts them and take care of their basic needs. Despite the place they are struck in, all the refugees face troubles of being homeless and losing their self-respect. “The socio-political exclusion at an individual level may result into an interiorisation of feelings of rejection by the society and feelings of guilt for not being good enough for the new society” (Bareka 87). “Prior to coming to the USA, people described common health problems as dizziness, headaches, dysentery, influenza, vomiting and diarrhea, asthma in children, whooping cough, “cold on the lungs” and cancer. Most of the accounts of being diagnosed with hypertension or diabetes related to medical care provided in refugee camps” (Rosebrook and Robert 159). The sufferings, pain, distress, health issues and trauma of being a refugee do not leave them till death. It is due to lack of humanity and equality in humans, unlike in nature that has not changed the situation of refugees till date. Though there are people human enough to offer helping hands, there are not many people who are human enough to stop all the discrimination and brutality.

It is a situation of immense pain that many people belonging to the minority communities are still living in Myanmar under the same situation which killed millions of people and chased groups of people away. Many countries that lent a helping hand have also stopped the acceptance of refugees at a certain period of time. “International migration is now a normal feature of contemporary societies: a global phenomenon of flows and counter-flows; geographical fluidity rather than population shifts; ongoing daily processes, not unique events” (O’Reilly 25). The condition of the life of refugees is getting worse than in the past. There are many researches that investigate the under-represented realities of people immersed in the daily challenges and constraints of growing up without legal documentation in Thailand. “A 2009 survey found that migrant children around Mae Sot suffer from malnutrition rates greatly higher than both Thai children and children in the refugee camps” (Johnson 3). The refugees are facing troubles not only in their homeland but are affected by their suppression at home, wherever they go on to lead a life. It is acceptance at home that can end all their troubles.

Conclusion

The essay studies the different ways in which the Karen were oppressed by the state and how the fact that they were being voiceless affected them the most of all the troubles that they have gone through. With reference to the select memoir, it also explains how nature is a superior being than humans, which uses silence as its language to promote love, peace and equality. Though Zoya’s life had all the troubles created by human beings in it, it was her memories of happiness with nature, safety given by nature and natural resources that was available when needed, that made her survive all the troubles. It is this trait of nature that all humans should learn to make this world a better place. This essay has also explored on how a language can be used as the voice to shout out the rights of the voiceless.

Oppressors all over the world work strive to cling to power while the oppressed struggle to engineer equality. This greed of the oppressors results in creating toxic environments throughout the world. This in turn affects the well-being of all the organisms in the universe.

The main problem in the situation is that the oppressors do not have any guilt attached to their misdeeds. They should learn from nature that the power that they have is to be shared and not to be cherished by one group of people. It is love that can end the wars and create a peaceful environment like the forest in which Zoya spent her childhood. Nobody should be denied the right to speak, and everybody should have the courage to voice out the things that could liberate them, even if that would cause their life, for voiceless life is not a life worth living.

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