

## **A Study of Refugee Crisis: Tribulation and Torture in Alan Gratz's novel '*Refugees*'**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

War, violence and persecution worldwide leads to displacement of people by force due to multitude of reasons. Holocaust, Genocide, Antisemitism and Ethnic Cleansing by Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin can still be seen in Syria. The ongoing Civil War in Syria caused 12 million people to flee to other parts of the world. The novel '*Refugees*' by Alan Gratz depicts both the tragic loss and ample resilience humanizing the plight of refugees worldwide. Short sighted and unrealistic actions by the power structure community cause refugees in the novel to transgress the borders, separation from family, witness suffering, torture and death.

This paper attempts to throw a limelight on the trauma and their journey that traumatizes the refugees with the support of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory.

**Keywords: Torture, Trauma, Power, Conflict, War, Genocide.**

War, genocide, holocaust began with the motto ethnic cleansing by Adolf Hitler, followed by Josef Stalin and the threat is enduring setting ground rules for the politics of memory. Countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Central African Republic, Somalia, Nigeria and Sudan undergo massive bombings and shootings resulting in death of innocent lives. After the conflict between Hitler and Stalin, Baltic States disappeared in the recent world map. They followed ethnic cleansing and it still prevails in the modern world. They killed approximately over 6 million European Jews around two-thirds of Jewish population of Europe between 1941 and 1945. The NKVD soldiers directed by Josef Stalin equally contributed to the killing of innocent lives as they killed more than 5 million people.

The ISIS militants are at urge of creating a country for themselves by killing people who belong to the other clan. This could be seen in Syria as Bashaar Al Asad is in a conflict with the natives of the land. The riot broke out giving a chance for the ISIS militants to play their role of ethnic cleansing in Syria. The Syrians demanded a strong political freedom as there was a lack of

it. The conflict began when fifteen children wrote anti-government graffiti on the walls and as a corollary they were arrested, abused and tortured. When the natives demanded to free the children, they were being harassed by the government of Bashaar Al Asad. There came the threat as whoever stood against Bashaar Al Asad had to leave the country. As a result, there are 6.2 million Syrians who fled from Syria seeking help and safety in the other parts of the world.

Two world wars, colonialism, nuclear bombs, the Holocaust: uncounted millions suffered trauma during the 20th century. There are eminent writers who had written about such themes and the effects of war. Alan Michael Gratz is one such author who was born on January 12, 1972 and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, home of the 1982 World's Fair. His works are *Samurai Shortstop*, *Something Rotten*, *Something Wack*, *Fantasy Baseball*, *The Brooklyn Nine: A Novel in Nine Innings*, *Starfleet Academy: The Assassination Game*, *Prisoner B-3087*, *The League of Seven*, *The Dragon Lantern: A League of Seven Novel*, *Code of Honor*, *The Monster War; A League of Seven Novel*, *Projekt 1065*, *Ban This Book*, *Grenade* and *Refugee*. He was the finalist of 2002 Marguarite de Angeli Contest and Co-winner of 2003 Kimberly Colen Memorial Grant from Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

In his book "*Refugees*", a historical fiction, Alan Gratz revolves the story around three children who are separated by continents and time but are connected at the end. They belong to entirely different eras: Nazi Germany, 1990's Cuba and modern Syria but they do have one common mission - Escape. Josef is a Jewish boy in 1930's Nazi Germany. Threats of concentration camps loom him and his family and they board a ship bound for the other side of the world. Isabel and her family from Cuba in 1994, set out on a raft escaping riots and unrest plaguing in her country, hoping to find safety and freedom in America. Mahmoud is a Syrian boy belonging to the modern Syria.

The ideologies were Sunni against Shia, government against rebels, Soviets against the United States of America and adding up to the chaos ISIS militants fighting an apocalyptic holy war on its own under the motive of having a country for Islamic people. Mahmoud and his family flee from their homeland which is torn apart by violence and destruction. They begin a horrendous journey, a long trek towards Europe hoping to find safety and security. When asked

whose side they support, Mahmoud's innocent brother answers honestly: "We are against whoever is dropping the bombs on us." (Refugees, 45) All the three main characters last harrowing and tedious journey in search of refuge. They face unimaginable dangers and life conditions making survival a question mark. Right from drownings, massive bombings to betrayals they never give up as they always hoped for a better tomorrow. Even after dire circumstances they developed an optimistic approach towards their lives.

Violence is the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy. Less conventional definitions are also used such as World Health Organization's state violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm or deprivation". For the death caused due to violence, there are enormous hospitalizations, emergency department visits and numerous doctor visits but these are not entirely affordable and available to the refugees.

The obstacles they must overcome right from their decision making, the journey and the process of resettling in a foreign land is a monstrous expedition. These include difficulty in speaking the native language, raising children and helping them succeed in school, finding and nourishing a secured work against all odds, seeking a secured housing in the related terms of safety and security for their family, accessing services available to them, safe transportation escaping human trafficking and the demands of the smugglers and the cultural barriers resulting in the cultural shock not knowing which culture should be applied in their lives, either the treasured homeland culture or adapt to the foreign culture. These elements tend to take a toll of their lives where their basic amenities are at stake, but they will have to overcome all these in order to lead a better life.

Hitler and Stalin made lives miserable for women and children as they are victims of various social injustices prevailing in the current scenario. They were sent to labour camps and detention sites to extract maximum labour providing them with nothing but a loaf of bread and brittle soup as their wage. At times they had to undergo physical torture which includes rape and harassment resulting in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In her book *Salt to the Sea*, Ruta

Sepetys writes, “She kept having flashbacks of the masked soldier pushing her back and the image of her dead father kept interruption her present moment. Even her sleep was full of traumatized dreams”. (Salt to the Sea, 118)

It was and is still hard for women and children to carry over their trauma in their day-to-day life. Trauma that they possess does not only include the tragic event that took place in their lives, but also the time space between the event and the present life which paves way to nostalgia at a higher rate. Children tend to face the most crucial events in their lives at a young age. These events result in trauma letting them suffer disorders not knowing how to cope with life when they are left stranded and are drifted apart from their family. The level of innocence in children is projected in the novel *Between Shades of Gray* as Ruta Sepetys writes, “When the NKVD barged in and demanded the Vilkas family to leave immediately, Jonas came dressed in his uniform with his little tie, holding his book bag”. (*Between Shades of Gray*, 26)

Cathy Caruth writes, “It is indeed the truth of the traumatic experience that forms the centre of its psychopathology; it is not a pathology of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself” ( *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 5). The historical killings caused by violence were arbitrary setting loss and suffering as a mere asset. It integrates the emotions with the experience creating a vulnerable condition to move forward in their lives. Such an incident can be pointed in Alan Gatz’s novel “*Prisoner B – 3087*, as he writes “There were dozens of them, rag and bone skeletons who had perished of hunger, or thirst, or the cold, or suffocation, or overwork” (*Prisoner B-3087*, 37). The state of being alive was so threatening than the death itself.

Cathy Caruth writes, “As modern neurobiologists point out, the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashbacks can be itself re-traumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration. And this would also seem to explain the high suicide rate of survivor, for example, survivors of Vietnam.”

(Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, 92). Such deterioration is spotted in the lives of refugees as people who were once dignified, who had a decent job, clear

family records and innocent attitude were targeted by the Nazi's and the Soviets. Natives were treated like slaves, deported to concentration camps on trains used for transporting animals. Dignified and old people were stripped of their dignity, children and women were raped, and men were tortured and killed in the gas chambers. The atrocities done by the authorities were never questioned but the survival of the refugees is being questioned, which provides no solution to enormous problems.

David Joseph says, "one of the main functions of law is to regulate violence" (19). This could not be sensed in the times of Hitler or Stalin where they enforced law on people with the intention to regulate violence rather than peace. Laws made lives miserable for the Jews as they were beaten, tortured, abused, harassed and killed in the extermination camps. German political theorist Hannah Arendt noted: "Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate ... Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defence, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate". The refugees faced and are still facing tremendous torture and abuse making their lives impossible due to these uncertain circumstances.

In the 20th century in acts of threatening, governments have killed more than 260 million of their own people through police brutality, execution, massacre, slave labour camps, and sometimes through intentional famine. Similar instances can be seen in Alan Gratz's novel "*Refugees*" where the main characters are subjugated to violence, threat of riots, massive killing and bombings. With no place to stay, Mahmoud's family embarks on a journey out of the Middle East and across Europe. It is the rise of Nazism and the horrors of Dachau that shatter Josef's preconceptions and force his family out of their home country. Change comes when Isabel's family decides to flee the destitution of Castro's Cuba for the promise of American shores, braving ninety miles of treacherous sea between Havana and Miami in a makeshift boat.

The three stories in the novel "*Refugees*" reveal the curt intention of the authorities making the natives feel sub-human. Humanity is at stake when humans get slaughtered like animals for not having committed any crime. In all three cases the authorities barged into their

house with no proper intimidation. They held no papers to arrest the family members or to raise hands against them. Violence plays a major role in this novel as it triggers even the submissive characters to act against their will. Josef's father is arrested and sent to a concentration camp under the Nazi's intention of keeping Germany Jewish free. After six deadly months of his survival in the detention site he is released on a warning that he along with his family will have to leave Germany immediately.

In case of Isabel, she watches her family get beaten, her family torn and drifted apart. They are forced to flee Cuba and they try their luck to migrate to The United States of America. Mahmoud and his family run for their lives and turn out to be the victims of war as well. Their apartment is bombed, and they manage to survive by finding escapism as a factor of survival. They flee from Aleppo, Syria by car and are forced to abandon it when the bullets tore the car. They later make their way towards Turkey. Josef's family is reunited not under joyful circumstances but under a threat of violation to board a ship to Cuba and life becomes bitter when they realize Josef's father is paranoid and later, he commits suicide. This incident makes Josef even more responsible to save himself and his family from the Nazi conquerors. Isabel and her family join their neighbours on a homemade boat and push off from Cuba into the ocean towards Miami, with the police shooting after them.

Their basic needs, societal needs, safety needs and love or belonging needs are annihilated making survival harder. Josef reflects on the crew's ignorance of the refugee's predicament: "The stewards smiled with the passengers as though they understood, but none of them could really understand. Not until their shop windows had been smashed and their businesses had been shut down. Not until the newspapers and radio talked about them as sub human monsters. Not until shadowy men had burst into their homes and smashed up their things and dragged away someone they loved. Not until they had been told to leave their homeland and never, ever come back". (Refugees, 225)

Isabel and her family suffer due to the lack of their needs as well. Her friend Ivan is attacked by a shark and dies during their journey. She mourns and struggles with grief: "She wished she was dead too. She wished she was dead so they would put her into the water with

him. So, she could keep him company in the deep” (Refugees, 300). Mahmoud and his mother struggle to survive in the Mediterranean but eventually the family is rescued by the Greek Coast Guard. They get to Lesbos and search for Hana, but do not find her. They go to Athens and decide to escape by crossing into Macedonia.

Mahmoud understands the fact that the best way to escape the eyes of the Soviet is not to do something they do not want them to do. He makes his way-out Turkey strong and continues to be the family’s support system. Josef and his family are given refuge in France. Josef’s mother is pushed to a state where she had to choose between her children, who should be sent to the concentration camp and who should be set free. Josef gives himself to the Soviets and spares the life of his sister. Isabel and her family see the lights of Miami, but the boat starts to fall apart. Then the Coast Guard finds them, while her mother goes into labour. Mahmoud crosses Macedonia and takes a taxi to Serbia until they are held at gunpoint. They walk to Hungary and there the family is arrested and imprisoned at the border.

Isabel is chased down by the Coast Guard, but her grandfather jumps in to distract them, knowing he will be sent back to Cuba. Meanwhile, her mother gives birth as they paddle to shore. Her story ends with her in school, playing a trumpet. Mahmoud walks out of the Hungarian prison with his family and other refugees, and marches to Austria. From Austria they finally get to Germany where they are given asylum. They stay in the home of an older Jewish German couple, and the woman turns out to be Ruthie Landau (Hana), Josef’s sister. She tells Mahmoud how Josef had offered himself to be taken, and she had survived the war. The novel ends with Mahmoud feeling at home.

In view of these considerations, violence may be defined as follows: any action, verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in whatever degree of intensity, those abuses, violates, injures, or kills. Some of the most pervasive and most dangerous forms of violence are those that are often hidden from view (against women and children, especially); just beneath the surface in many of our homes, churches, and communities is abuse enough to freeze the blood. Moreover, many forms of systemic violence often slip past our attention because they are so much a part of the infrastructure of life (e.g., racism, sexism, and ageism).

Violence and torture, slaughtering innocent people to death and stripping them off their rights under the tagline ethnic cleansing and honour killing has led humanity to nowhere but to destruction of innocent mankind and questions their survival. These major characters in the novel tend to display an unwavering belief that family, love and decency must triumph over evil. They did approach life with an optimistic note by having hope as the silver line between shades of life. In this globalized era countries and people of the world think to interact with each other gets distressed due to the inhuman act of Violence. This must be stopped predominantly from the world, eradicating the negative aspects of war, genocide and ethnic cleaning in order to make earth a better place to live in.

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