

Review

Representing Pain, Trauma and the Damaging bodies of Refugees through the lens of Foucauldian “Heterotopia”

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The pain and trauma of refugees have certainly paved way to an unremitting discourse and every discourse in turn harbors myriad oppugns. The paper purports to accentuate that how the vulnerable and bruised bodies of Refugees have become as “*Spaces*” that are ‘other’ and delineates the site of refugee camps within a ‘spatial’ vantage. It further aims to elaborate the damaging bodies of Refugees as ‘*Heterotopias*’, a concept developed by Michel Foucault in 1967. I will talk of the trauma of detainees in Manus and Nauru islands¹ in the Pacific region of Australia. I will further elucidate the term ‘refugee’; its historicity and the traumatic implications on those who are forcibly displaced.

KEY WORDS: Words: Refugee camps, pain and trauma, Heterotopia, Michel Foucault, bruised bodies.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of trauma on the bodies of refugees is not ephemeral, but pathetically very persistent. Their bodies become symbolic of the sort of ‘control’ domination and ‘disciplining’. Their damaging bodies have turned into what Homi K. Bhaba calls “*Third Space*” in his ‘The commitment to theory; as a collision between an active body (oppressor) and the passive one (oppressed), a space where the two physical forces meet. Bhaba’s concept of ‘third Space’ has a partial resemblance with Edward Soja’s ‘*Space theory*’, and both are vital postcolonial terms.

The study of trauma has been very laboriously addressed for a long time, with the more homogenized medical vantage we doubtlessly discern from contemporary psychiatry stemming from the mid-19th century onward. The formal scholarship of refugees and

their traumatic experiences did not take off until the end of WWII, where the community “published reports of the acute and long term psychosocial adjustment of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany” (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 224). The horrendous and scourging occurrence of the concentration camps and the dislocation of millions as a result of a war-torn Europe gave room to study this population group in-depth. Some professionals developed a thesis of ‘concentration camp syndrome’ characterized by insomnia, fatigue, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and depression” (Boehnlein & Kinzie, (1995: 228).

However, when these venerable bodies of refugees are entangled in a condition of colossal physical and mental violence, such a gauge of savagery and violence is inefficacious to any sound and robust existence. This vicious atmosphere gives rise to human beings with traumatized psyches and survival-phobias. This research

paper, in the form of an image essay, studies the refugee condition; it attempts to study the trauma of detainees in Manus and Nauru islands in the Pacific region of Australia. The asylum seekers in the Australian islands are mostly Muslims, which includes Kurds, Turks, Syrians, and Rohingyas. The paper begins with defining the term “refugee” etymologically and representing the refugee as a mobile site/body of pain and trauma. Employing Elaine Scarry’s *Body in Pain*; this paper also uncloaks the quiddity of pain as being a feeling that disrupts language. Alongside highlighting that language as a medium fails to express and represent trauma/pain of refugees in its entirety, the main focus of this paper is to bring to limelight the fact that a refugee body is a site/carrier of trauma and pain. And, such pain/trauma is not fully expressed by the language in which they express and talk about this trauma to the outside world and their pain/trauma is not wholly represented by theoretical interventions. Employing Michel Foucault’s concept of *‘Heterotopia’*, the paper spotlights the refugee camps and asylums as ‘spaces’ that are *‘other’*; strange, and disturbing.

Elucidating the term ‘Refugee’ and its traumatic implications

The word “Refugee” is not new that has crept into the frame all of a sudden, but is a term that has a dense etymological and historical origin. The word “Refugee” came directly from the French word *‘réfugié’* with a very specific meaning; it referred to Protestants who fled France following the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, the law that granted religious liberty and civil rights to the Protestant Huguenots for nearly a century” (“The Origin of ‘Refugee’”). But, it is also to be noted that after this incident, “within a decade, refugee was being used more generally in English to refer to anyone who was forced to flee to a place of safety, often because of danger or persecution because of religious or political beliefs” (“The Origin of ‘Refugee’”). This displacement of humans from one place to another is often accompanied by human rights violations and various forms of violence. The UNHCR defines refugees as “persons who are forced to flee their home countries to escape serious human rights abuses and other causes of prolonged and emotional distress” (qtd. in George 380).

These processes of displacement of humans turn them into the categories of refugees leading to “immeasurable and long lasting” effects of trauma; such a level of trauma proves “shattering to both their inner and outer selves” (Steel 60). This traumatic experience of refugees seems to be an endless affair as “every day the basic rights of refugees are violated in countless countries around the world, and an increased number of refugees are exposed to disasters, incidents of extreme trauma and ongoing

physical, sexual and psychological oppression” (qtd. in George 379). Not only are the individual physical sufferings and pains traumatic for their survival and existence as refugees, but their experiences of extreme violence, the grievous loss of close family members, loss of identity, and poor health conditions as a result of violence/war are equally included in their traumatic existence. Being displaced sites/bodies of trauma, “refugees also face a lack of autonomy in their host countries (White 2004), where they are virtually powerless and regarded as a threat by the powerful (Hyndman 2000)” (qtd. in George 379).

Giorgio Agamben, a bio-political theorist, gives an extra spin to the existence and formulation of a refugee body/life. He represents the refugee as “homo sacer”; an individual who is trapped in various political processes. His political theory represents the refugee as a figure that exposes the fictitious accounts of national sovereignty, human rights, citizenship, and as a modern bio-political subject or ‘bare life’, regulated within a ‘state of exception’ outside of the ‘normal legal framework—the camp. In his bio-political thought, “Agamben notes that

“a state of exception is created by the modern state where a special or exceptional beings are interned, ghettoized, demarcated within camps, regulated, and sacrificed to produce (paradoxically) the normal legal structures of a state by an implication of the bio political order” (Lemke 3).

The life of a human being constrained by the politics of a state and by political culture is termed as “bare life”, and the state/camp she/he lives in is called “state of exception”. This state of life turns the refugees into bodies where torture and pain reduce them to “trash” or “scum” (Lee, “We Refugees”). These “capitalistically devalued” are subjected to physical torture, psychological harassment, sexual abuse, which leads to bodily pain and mental trauma. These pains are expressed via ‘irrational’, ‘meaningless’, and ‘vague’ shrieks and cries, which reflect the fracturing of language as an incomplete medium to express that pain and trauma. Regarding this, Elaine Scarry writes;

“Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story it tells is about the inseparability of ‘the difficulty of expressing physical pain’, ‘the political and perpetual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty and the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or more simply, the nature of human creation” (Scarry 3).

She further confides;

“Pain and torture have an immediate effect on the human body, and so physical pain happens, of course, not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we each day make our way, and who may at any moment be separated from us by only a space of several inches” (Scarry 4).

The impact of trauma on the bodies of refugees is not ephemeral, but pathetically very persistent. Their bodies become symbolic of the sort of ‘control’ domination and ‘disciplining’. Their damaging bodies have turned into what Homi K Bhaba calls “Third Space” as a collision between an active body (oppressor) and the passive one (oppressed). The study of trauma has been very laboriously addressed for a long time, with the more homogenized medical vantage we doubtlessly discern from contemporary psychiatry stemming from the mid-19th century onward. The formal scholarship of refugees and their traumatic experiences did not take off until the end of WWII, where the community “published reports of the acute and long term psychosocial adjustment of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany” (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 224). The horrendous and scourging occurrence of the concentration camps and the dislocation of millions as a result of a war-torn Europe gave room to study this population group in-depth. Some professionals developed a thesis of “‘concentration camp syndrome’ characterized by insomnia, fatigue, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and depression” (Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1995: 228).

The Nauru and Manus islands in Australia or Foucauldian ‘Heterotopia’ are witnessing an acute condition wherein thousands of refugees have been detained and put in camp-like detention centers. The main issue is that it is being done in a secret manner and hidden from the external eyes. However, here it becomes necessary to first unravel the term ‘Heterotopia’ a term coined by the French theorist Michel Foucault.

Defining the term ‘Heterotopia’

Heterotopia is a concept elaborated by the French Poststructuralist Michel Foucault to describe certain cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that are somehow other, disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside. The French Philosopher provides us a few examples of bars, ships, brothels, prisons, asylums. The term ‘Heterotopia’ as Foucault explains is a space where things are happening ‘outside’ the normal order. As

Walter Russell mead points it;

“Utopia is a place where everything is good; Dystopia is a place where everything is bad; Heterotopia is where things are different”.

Foucault further enunciates several genres of heterotopia;

Crisis Heterotopia: As Foucault explains; is that ‘cultural space’ where events occur out of the sight of masses. For example; a boarding school or motel room.

Besides these examples, we can also look upon the ‘Dover’ as mentioned in Mathew Arnold’s poem ‘Dover Beach’ as a Crisis Heterotopia.

However, Foucault further avouches that ‘Crisis Heterotopia’ is;

“.....reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis”. He also points that crisis heterotopia is demurely evanescing from society and is being supplanted by what Foucault judiciously calls ‘Heterotopia of deviation’.

Heterotopias of deviation: This is another important classification of the term ‘Heterotopia’ that refer to the bedlam like places where we keep individuals whose demeanor and behavior is outside the norm, having the presence of what Edward Said calls ‘Orient’. Such spaces are preserved for those who are the other, eccentric and frightening.

Refugee camps as ‘Heterotopias of deviation; It is an admitted fact as well as an established reality that the refugee problem is mushrooming terribly with no putative end. War, political turmoil, ethnic conflicts, and deteriorating economies have forced millions across Europe, Africa, South America, The Middle East and Asia to flee their homes and turn subalterns occupying a little haunting ‘space’, we call refugee camps.

Refugee camps are envisioned as transient settlements where people who having the fear of violence and persecution are forced to flee their homes look for repose and assistance. However, these camps are blatantly far from being truly temporary and their inhabitants can end up immobilized in these transitory spaces for months and years. The refugees in Manus and Nauru islandsⁱⁱⁱ in the Pacific region of Australia are no exception. Such unfortunate race in reality has become an object of scorn, an instrument through which a powerful hegemonic class tries to be dominant over a section. It is meticulously exposed that “harsh conditions, and physical, emotional,

and sexual abuse of vulnerable people, reinforced by ongoing refusals to accept complaints of mistreatment, have created a situation which shames Australia and undermines the rights and dignity of individuals and families" ("Condition and Treatment" 3). The detainees in such detention centers are subjected to indiscriminate and torture:

The UN Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture, who visited Nauru in 2015, was unable to discuss the team's findings for confidentiality reasons. The Chair, Malcolm Evans said however that there are 'grave concerns around the entire set-up' for asylum seekers: The idea of holding all of those seeking asylum in closed institutions [. . .] of this nature—with no real understanding of what their long-term future is likely to be—is bound to be a cause of great distress.(4)

The space of refugee camps such as the Manus and Nauru Island seems to perfectly embody what Foucault in his notes to a lecture given in March 1967, prudently calls:

Heterotopia; as real places, effective places, places that are written into the intuition of society itself, and that are a sort of counter-emplacements, a sort of effectively realized utopia in which the real emplacements, all the other emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted, a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable (Foucault, 2008:16)

The refugees surviving in these camps of Manus and Nauru Islands are but the culturally constructed tribe of imbeciles no less than those in Psychiatric hospitals or prisons. They are wedged in a state of what Homi K. Bhabha calls "ambivalence", a sort creative chaos restraining between two poles of curiosity and concern. These Manus and Nauru comprise of refugees who though are considered vulnerable and frail have become 'Heterotopias of deviation', whose behavior is anomalous. Their 'damaging bodies' penetrate into the "Colonial Discourse". It is an admitted fact as well as established reality that these places (Refugee camps) too are designed to contain humanity that deviates from the norm, where by norm we mean the state/ nation/ territory/ on which western society is founded. They are in Bhabha's parlance "a subject of;

"Colonial discourse; a system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups"

These people trapped in such a 'space' though find refuge and shelter marks their exclusion from society and underlines their impossibility to find a non-heterotopic site in which to freely exist. In the words of Michel Agier (2012-279)

"Those confined outside are people who are 'cast out inside' within the state space.

He further continues;

".....a place outside the urban tissue of the European nation where this deviation is contained, camps become off-places"

The refugee camp as a 'space' of the 'Third world' comprises, demonstrates and stigmatizes everything that life outside the heterotopia is not; it circumscribes—physically and symbolically – the skylines of the otherness in opposition to which the definition of the 'self' can be more easily drawn or, in fact, constructed.

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