Perspectives of Quiet Struggle in Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*

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ABSTRACT

People all over the world proudly state that the earth has become a global village with technological advancements. Communication, travel and tourism have enabled people to move around different continents for business, education and fun. But it is not the same for a refugee who is forced to leave one's country to survive when war is at its peak. The Canadian writer Sharon Bala explores the silent struggles of a refugee, Mahindan, who escapes the Sri Lankan Civil War with his six-year-old son Sellian. She also brings out the struggles of people who are involved in the refugee case through the characters of Priya Rajasekaran and Grace Nakamura. Mahindan is the protagonist. He loses his wife at childbirth and struggles after losing his belongings, family, relatives and job. His only motive is to save his son but that is shattered when he is accused of being a terrorist and is separated from his son. He faces endless court trials which are never fruitful. Sellian represents the young victims of war who are deeply traumatized and are struggling to adapt with the new culture and language. The novel not only sheds light on the struggles of asylum seekers but also raises critical questions about belonging and justice. *The Boat People* depicts how an ordinary person when faced with extraordinary challenges in life must overcome the day-to-day turmoil and inner struggles to survive the turbulence and evolve as a stronger and a better person.

Keywords**:** Asylum seekers, Displacement, Refugees, Sri Lankan Civil War, Trauma.

Every time a land is being divided into territories, the border walls witness a lot of painful stories. During crisis, people shift from their own land to another just to survive. But when they arrive at a new land, they face even more struggles. *The Boat People* is a novel by Sharon Bala that shows what happens when the stories of loss and endurance of the refugees collide with stories of people living with security and fairness in life. This novel was inspired by the real events of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees reaching the shores of Canada. The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) took place between the Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Bala brings forth the struggles of displacement, trauma and the sense of belonging through her characters.

Mahindan is the central figure in Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*. He is a Tamil mechanic who escapes the Sri Lankan Civil War with his eight-year-old son, Sellian. "Mahindan gripped his son. Sellian shivered in his arms, from fear, from exhilaration, he couldn't tell. Soon Mahindan was shaking too, armpits dampening. His teeth clattered. Their new life. It was just beginning" (4). They travel in a rusty cargo ship and reach a place which he believes would be safe for his son. He silently cries on the way to Canada as he is accused of being a terrorist. Sellian is sent to foster care, and they are separated from each other for more than six months. He is treated violently and faces many law suits which are unsuccessful. "What is the problem? Mahindan had asked after failing yet another detention hearing. I gave all my papers. Why does the judge still keep me in this place?" (Bala 100).

Mahindan evolves as a man of great patience, who is determined to stand as a pillar for Sellian so that he can come out of his traumatic experience and lead a normal life in the near future. Through his character, Bala portrays the struggles of a war survivor and displaced people who carry the scars of violence no matter where they go. Mahindan's main aim is to ensure the safety of Sellian and to give him a better life. He is a single father. "Chithra had died in childbirth. For Sellian's whole life, Mahindan had been both his father and his mother. Not a day had passed when he hadn't seen his son" (Bala 14). He is constantly worried about Sellian's life and his future. To fulfill his responsibility as a father, Mahindan stays strong for his son by hiding his fears within himself.

Mahindan as a person tries hard to escape from his dangerous homeland. He fights his fears and carries his burden silently. But he is filled with regret for leaving his native land and his stable work. He does not have a good companion to listen to his doubts and griefs as everyone around him has their own miseries. Even though he is totally shaken by the current happenings he must pretend to be strong as if nothing is unpleasant. He struggles silently because he cannot let his crying be heard by his son.

> He stood under the piercing spray, water pouring over his face, camouflaging his tears, his frustration at being trapped, the growing dread he'd made an irreparable mistake, his homesickness and grief for every single person he had ever known and loved, the pain of the water raining down like a thousand knives, all of it mixing together. It was the best time of the day, when he let loose his emotions, face contorting under the rain, his sobs drowned out by the rush, the wails of the other men (Bala 322-323).

Grace Nakamura is a third generation Japanese Canadian. She is a newly appointed Immigration and Refugee Board adjucator. She must deal with the asylum seekers very keenly because terrorists can intrude. "The first step was to prove their identity. The government would inspect their documents. There were many forms to fill. There would be a review to decide if they could leave jail, then a hearing to determine if they could ask for refugee status" (Bala 26). Her decisions have the impact on the life and death of the people who seek Canadian shelter as their only hope. Her grandmother, Kumi who was once a refugee from Japan during the Second World War had narrated all her experiences and sufferings that she had endured due to Canadian strict laws and wrong accusations of the Canadian officials.

Grace can empathize with the victims who must face political pressures and is forced to make a trade-off between compassion and immigration polices constrained by law. She suffers silently by not going against the Canadian law as she herself is a benefactor from a refugee family. Even though generations pass, the trauma and inflicted hardships faced at Canada remain within her. Grace silently

struggles by not raising her voice against the Canadian higher officials who mistreat the refugees. She is burdened with inner conflicts while facing the victims, yet her eyes cannot show compassion to them.

> She was supposed to be impartial. But how could she be, knowing that her own grandmother had once been locked up by this very country, branded a traitor and a threat? Every time she looked at the refugees, she saw not just strangers, but echoes of her own family's shame. And yet, she had to put that aside, to sit in judgment, to do her duty (Bala 131).

She was once leading a routine life and had to detour and reconnect with her past and act maturely and proactively in times of adversity. It gives her the maturity to think and act without having any prejudice and be accountable for her every action as she is a part of the judicial system.

Priya Rajasekaran is a second-generation law student. She is assigned to the refugee cases by her senior. She reluctantly gets involved in the refugee case that enables her to understand the collective wounds felt from the ancestral homeland. She is hesitant due to her familial pressure as her family does not want her to lose her professional stability. She experiences an emotional detachment within herself as she was born and bought up in an entirely different country. Her trauma is so severe that even though she shares the same Sri Lankan blood, she is frightened to face the risk of being caught while helping her own kith and kin. This fear which is inherited by Priya torments her as she has never been to Sri Lanka even once.

Priya can hear the reporter's voice through media, mentioning the arrival of the rusty cargo ship carrying Eelam people. In reality, instead of hearing the reporter's voice she can hear the refugee's cries for help awakening her advocacy spirit. She has always been treated as an outsider by the Canadians. But comes out of her fear inherited through her family and is ready to silently support the war victims, showing compassion in her own way.

Priya represents the next generation of refugees who are born in a new land and are struggling silently to be accepted. They are often treated as outsiders although they share the same food, law and community. Priya cannot be treated as a Sri Lankan as well since she never experienced war. She

represents the meek generation of refugees who do not have the courage to voice out for the needy against the nation that once helped them in their lowest of times. The inner struggle between gratitude to the nation and the compassion towards her countrymen remains unspoken as she cannot express her feelings to her family because of their fear and cannot express her sympathy towards asylum seekers because they wouldn't be able to understand her sympathy. To them, she is a Canadian outsider.

From Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*, it is evident that moving out from a war place is not freedom, but the beginning of upcoming trials. The host land may provide a safe shelter or label one as a terrorist or traitor. Through Grace's perspective, Bala tries to project the inborn fears about the nation where they live that had once inflicted pain to their previous generations. They carry unspoken trauma inherited through generations, yet they mask their emotions and pretend to survive naturally. Being in a respectable position, this character cannot show compassion or go against the government when it is visibly seen how they treat the victims unfairly. Sharon Bala depicts the naïve generation through Priya's character that will forever struggle to be accepted as one among the nation and not as an outsider. Sellian and the other children of *The Boat People* are already traumatized that even if accepted by Canada legally, they will forever carry the cross for generations.

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