

## Leaving Home: Refugee Trauma In Afghanistan And Syria In Melissa Fleming's *A Hope More Powerful Than The Sea* And Siba Sakib's *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes To Weep*

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### ABSTRACT

Home is an abode embedded with emotion, a vista of moments and memories with feelings of love towards one another. The 'home' is one's origin and a place of one's formation of culture and identity. Very often, the contemplation and the inevitability of distancing the self from one's home traumatizes one with questions of security, individuality and originality. However, the idea of 'home' enormously conveys meanings and implications in depth when a 'refugee' comes into the deliberation. For a refugee, leaving home is immensely traumatic, as once left, retrieving the home becomes infeasible. Melissa Fleming's *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea* (2017) and Siba Sakib's *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* (2002) delineate notions regarding how people from Syria and Afghanistan respectively have turned aliens in their own home. This paper aims to understand and look into the trauma that a refugee undergoes while leaving their homes thereby, embarking into a life of exile and attempting to relocate 'home'.

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**Keywords:** *Crossing, Home, Refugee and Trauma.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The figure of the refugee is perhaps the most evocative and distressing image of displacement experiences, and the refugee experience portrays the challenges of displacement most starkly (Robinson 4).

Migration, displacement, exile, homelessness are conditions that succeed in an environment of conflict or war. Incongruity in the socio-political scenario of a country eventually impacts the natives of any country to face the repercussions of such a conflict. The inhabitants subjected to such situations of turmoil undergo pain, the utmost of which is the loss of 'home'. In this paper, the idea of the trauma of leaving home would be studied in the context of two countries from different regions of the globe, Afghanistan and Syria, the former a South-Asian country and the later a Middle-eastern. These are locations, which are commonly considered as countries where conflict and migration have been rampant since the last few decades. The countrymen from both the countries have experienced or are still experiencing the trauma of leaving their birthplaces. The people here are shifting their identities right from generating the fear of the impacts of the conflict to being homeless, then being displaced internally and finally turning into a refugee. The relocation of these people cannot be limited to a shift only as geographical, in fact, it's a shift in search of hope, with the realization that they would never be back home. The leaving of home and the search for a new home, being pushed by the external forces show that the displaced population endure a lot of traumas from being migrants to living life in exile.

This study seeks to closely read accounts of two fictional texts from writers confronted by various adverse impacts of such a phenomenon resulting in mass migrations, abandonment of homes, conditions of exile, often also homelessness and subsequent relocations. Afghanistan and Syria have been subjected to numerous complications with the foreign powers and terrorist groups exerting their authority and thereby resulting in the creation of challenges for the native inhabitants.

Adapting endlessly to survive and to sustain without abandoning their homes, some of the people eventually relinquish both the will to survive or the autonomy of the self. The paper seeks to study the life of the people who turn into refugees and the trauma that they go through after leaving their homes and how they cope with that as they are aware of the fact that they can never retreat their homes and are also uncertain regarding their positions in the host country.

In Syria, a sheer distinction is visible between pre- and post- war lives. Distress and adversities have ensued as factors regulating every aspect of life after the Revolution started in 2011. Assad and his supporters sowed the seeds of oppression and as an outcome, Syria emerged as a battlefield (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 6). The Syrians, therefore are withdrawing their homes and seek a better place for accommodating themselves. These are scenes common to the sufferers of any nation where war takes a strong hold.

Similar is the case in Afghanistan where with the arrival of the Taliban, the life of the Afghans has been subjected to injustice and miseries from every inclination. Afghanistan has been a land of experimentation in the hands of various powers. The Soviet invasion, the emergence of America and thereafter the rise and fall of Taliban, followed by the withdrawal of the American troops, handing over the duties to the Afghan government by the US and then the re-Talibanisation in the current context. All these marked a deep impact and contributed to the massive displacement of the native inhabitants. The shifting roles of power in Afghanistan has created confusions in the people's mind regarding their identity in their own country (Karlekar 6). Consequently, a huge number of native people turning to refugees and living a life of exile elsewhere is a commonplace occurrence in Afghanistan.

Therefore, people from Afghanistan and Syria have been experiencing homelessness on a daily basis. Amidst situations of terrorism and violence they have been turning homeless and taking refuge somewhere else. The study in this paper takes into account Melissa Fleming's *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea* and Siba Sakib's *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep*.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study would be conducted on lines of trauma theory as life does not remain the same after the move; change occurs in almost every turn and hence the migrants experience trauma. The study would be analytical in nature, following the qualitative method of research. Two key literary texts on Afghanistan and Syria have been selected to illustrate the idea of 'home' and to support the study, few historical materials have also been included to provide insights into the socio-political events that have resulted in the creation of refugees.

### Life in Afghanistan and Syria: Loss of Home

The two fictional works undertaken in the study here display the characters in a traumatic situation in their confrontation with the post-war realities and being in the process of leaving their homes. The protagonists (Doaa and Shirin- Gol) reflect the lives of the native inhabitants and what they undergo after leaving their homes, being displaced and initiating a life of exile. The characters here being from contemporary sites of turmoil, face multiple odds and their sufferings bring to the fore the trauma of the native people from Afghanistan and Syria. After undergoing displacement, they decide to leave their homes and migrate to other countries. Apart from the trauma arising from the fact that they have been a victim of forced migration, the other fact that highlights a dark reality which exacerbates the mental trauma of the displaced people is about the complications involved in the process of leaving home. Even before leaving their homes, they lose their identities and come under the coverage of being a displaced or a refugee.

As critics of trauma and migrant behaviour opine that "Trauma should be seen as raising the question of identity, rather than simply finding an identity" (La Capra 86). Therefore, it is seen that the refugees suffer from the trauma of losing their identities in their own homeland and as the conflict rises to an unbearable extent, they leave home and become helpless. This helplessness or the plight of the refugees comes into the notice of some smugglers who then complicate the situation further, thereby generating business in the name of providing help. It is arduous to cross the borders, but being upset by the impacts of the disruptions at home, the people do not hesitate even to pay the smugglers who are active on the borders. This they do to rescue themselves from the trauma that they face living in their homes.

In *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea*, Doaa and her husband along with a group of other migrants happen to cross Syria through a boat but to her surprise that was a fish catching boat, already in a dilapidated condition and that the crossing was through the mighty Mediterranean Sea. The smugglers aimed at including passengers that exceed the capacity of the boats. This is because "The more people the smugglers could pack in, the more profit they would make" (Fleming 179). When the situation in the home does not remain worth living at all, the people are compelled to even pay the smugglers. They only aim at leaving their homes which in itself is a painful act. Moreover, the life jackets that they were provided were all fake which opens up the reality of the existence of the companies that produce fake life jackets and enriching their business out of this painful time of the people in Syria.

A new industry produced life jackets to exploit the refugee trade. Some of the vests' fillings were cheap absorbent material. Or, in Doaa's case it seemed, thin sheets of foam that provided only the slightest buoyancy (Fleming 178).

Doaa represents the situation of all the refugees who aim to migrate from Syria but are to undergo such realities in the midst of the sea. All the passengers meet their death in this course of migration. The tragedy of a refugee is reflected in seeing how leaving home and embarking on a journey of uncertainty starts with loss of fellow counterparts in the midst of the process of migrating and even before stepping into another country, being unaware of the future responses from the host countries. Doaa's husband breathes his last in the sea and the hope that they would create a new home is shattered. Out of insecurity, she requests Baseem, her husband...

I'm scared, Baseem," ... "Please don't leave me alone here in the middle of the sea! Hang on just a little longer and we will be in Europe together (Fleming 205).

The refugees in Syria remain unaware about this dark reality. While focussing on the pain of leaving home, they become unmindful of the fact that they are paying money to the smugglers and do not introspect earlier regarding their activities. The smugglers make a profit out of the pain of the refugees as "The more people the smugglers could pack in, the more profit they would make" (Fleming 179). Hence, they load the ships against the capacity and the consequence is the death of the passengers who yearn to relocate themselves elsewhere by crossing the frontier. The passengers lay down their faith upon them and hence face the trauma which appears very sudden to them. Such a catastrophe shatters their hope of living life once again. This is what has been described by Cathy Caruth, one of the pioneers of the trauma theory who lays down her idea regarding how catastrophic events lead to a state of trauma in the life of a person.

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 11).

Caruth's concept of trauma fits into the suffering of the refugees as portrayed in Fleming's work represented by the character of Doaa. Doaa loses her husband, swims the sea for four consecutive days and nights with the additional responsibilities of the two children from her co-passengers who are dead. Not to speak about the afterlife but the process of leaving itself is so agonizing as the people fall prey to the corruption involved in the process. The helplessness of the refugees erupts as business at this point. Even children meet their death while leaving home and get separated from their parents. Doaa depicts the trauma of the entire mass who are forced to leave home and even in exile, they are to face consequences in many respects. The hope with which people leave their home, ends in the process itself as they confront many realities once they step out from their home. The trauma is deepened when even after the shift, people can't voice for their countrymen.

On the other hand, the Afghans too, were facing consequences in crossing the borders. They console themselves from the trauma of leaving home and in such a situation entering another country and there too, suffering from abuses breaks the migrant. The journey that starts with the endeavour to search for home is shattered when at the entry gate itself they are beaten terribly that they get the idea that the search for home is actually futile. Shirin- Gol hold a very optimistic notion regarding relocating herself at Pakistan and felt that

A border was a clean house where you walk in, are handed a glass of tea, greeted warmly by the people of the other country and welcomed" (Shakib 56).

But her trauma intensifies when she gets to know the reality and in no time her expectations ended by knowing that

her compatriots going through the gate to work out how quickly you have to walk to avoid being beaten. It doesn't seem to make any difference how quickly or how slow you walk. It turns out that everyone who passes through the gate gets beaten (Shakib 56).

This shows that it was customary to beat the Afghans while allowing them to enter Pakistan and none could escape this trauma. On the other hand, Shirin- Gol too, undergoes a lot of mental challenges. Being left with no other option in her home, her family decides to migrate to Pakistan and then to Iran. But little did she know that in both countries the suffering is common. With her little children and her opium addict husband, Shirin- Gol displays the condition of people who often prospect a new life after migration but finally arrives at the conclusion that exile is all about confronting challenges and undergoing trauma. Been raped by Pakistani police officers, she longs to go back to her home but realises that it doesn't exist. Confronting the realities, she turns dumb. The effect of refugee trauma sometimes visibly leaves psychological impacts which Caruth defines in her work on trauma theory as,

In recent years, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology have increasingly insisted on the direct effects of external violence in psychic disorders. This trend has culminated in the study of *post-traumatic stress disorder*, or PTSD (Caruth 57).

This is what happens to the protagonist Shirin- Gol in *Afghanistan Where God Only Comes to Weep* who endures the refugee trauma to the last extent and hence leaving home turns seminal for Shirin- Gol's family for sustaining life but at the cost of going through mental trauma. Afghanistan had been a place of conflict with the Taliban coming into power and hence perceiving a new life gives her hope as her children are young and she projects that they could get scope once they are out from their country but the reality acquaints her to the fact that she cannot place her home anywhere.

Disappointed by the treatment of Pakistan, the family at the initiation of Shirin- Gol decides to leave for Iran but there too, the refugees are not welcomed. But when they feel like coming back home, they realize that their home is nowhere to be found. It has been a place of violence and rules and not their native place.

### **Exile and relocation: Search for Home**

The environment of war always carries trauma with the loss of home. Being displaced and losing the home as refugees, it is hope for the life in exile that keeps life in progress. But leaving home forcefully always brings the victim close to the realization that their home is distorted forever. With the sole intention of surviving, they step to cross the border carrying their home in memory.

The experience of identity confusion, even before the uprooting itself is part of the trauma of war and is crucial for understanding the socio- political identity processes through which people rebuild life after displacement (Povey 246)

The refugees create optics which start providing them a different perception of looking at 'home'. While leaving her home, Doaa undergoes the trauma and decides to speak for her home; the insecurities that her countrymen are suffering from. But immediately after she lands in exile, she has to shut her mouth as she realizes that speaking the reality of being in exile, she is inviting threats for the family members who are yet to leave their home. Her situation of trauma strengthens her capacity of handling even the worst terror and hence she endures everything and shuts her mouth with the hope that her family at her home will be safe.

Shirin- Gol too faces the trauma of life deeply and with each shift in her locations, with the experiences of leaving home and living in the refugee camps she realizes that search for 'home' is actually futile. As historical records say,

The majority of Afghans took refuge in Iran and Pakistan in different periods. Only a minority had citizenship rights, and even they were forced to live on the margins and the economic hierarchy placed them at a disadvantage (Povey 244)

Being a victim of war, facing multiple hardships she was unable to understand the fact that her home in Afghanistan had been destroyed. With the search for home, she keeps on migrating by convincing the other members of her family. Whether it is in Pakistan or Iran, her trauma as a refugee remains the same. But enduring multiple sufferings, she comprehends the fact that she has actually undertaken an impossible task of searching for home.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The study in this paper states how lives of the people of any country are disrupted where war and conflict appear as commonplace occurrence. Encircled by insecurities at their birth places, the natives yearn to relocate themselves while going through trauma. The conflict at home creates the pathetic scene of the natives altering their identities unknowingly as displaced or refugees. Since conflict in Afghanistan and Syria has subdued every aspect of the lives of people there, the Afghans and Syrians have made up their mind to leave home. During the process they withstand mental trauma, but they cannot help that, yet are left with the sole alternative of crossing the frontier, thereby attempting to relocate their homes by migrating. This painful exercise is carried out with a hope in the heart seeking a new life in the place of exile, but the trauma that they need to face because of the catastrophe at home, then to coming out of the comfort zones and confronting the outer world, leave an impact upon them mentally and hence they seem to be more conscious of their homes which they start carrying with them in every breath of their lives. But their victimization leads to the realization that home is lost forever, the search for situating 'home' at the end proves futile and therefore, it is from their places of exile that they preserve their respective places of 'home', hope to retrieve that someday again and keep that 'home' alive forever in memory.

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