

Positing Women Volunteers as Planetary Humanists Amid Refugee Crisis: A Literary Perspective

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Abstract

The role of women is critical to both addressing the refugee crisis and promoting a planetary humanist perspective. By recognizing and valuing the contributions of women, we can work towards more equitable and sustainable solutions to global challenges. The paper attempts to explore the role of women as 'volunteers' who play a crucial role in supporting and assisting the refugees in Nadia Hashmi's novel "when the moon is low" (2015). A lot of research has been carried out on women refugees in terms of trials and tribulations that they face in their migration journey including how their experiences as refugees are different from those of males taking into account factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexuality, but no significant work has been done on the non-refugee women who volunteer themselves, both formally and informally, to support and assist the refugees on ground level. Such a concept presents a positive step towards a planetary humanist approach. Thus, the study proposes that it is paramount to consider the role of non-refugee women as volunteers in moving towards an all-inclusive planetary approach. To accomplish this, this paper aims to build a synapse between the notions of planetary humanism, refugee crisis, and volunteerism as presented by numerous theorists on the relevant areas such as Gilroy (2002), Phipps (2019), Lahusen, and Grasso (2018). Moreover, most of the work on volunteerism comprises field work based on quantitative analysis. This study however, applies this idea to the refugee narrative.

Keywords: Refugee, Planetary Humanism, Volunteerism, Non-Refugee Women, Human Interconnectedness, Global-Humanist Approach.

Introduction

The increasing importance of planetary humanism in today's world reflects the urgent need for a more holistic, collaborative, and compassionate approach to addressing global challenges and creating a more sustainable and equitable future for all living beings. This is particularly significant for the refugee crisis which is a global phenomenon and thus requires a planetary perspective. It is not just a problem for individual countries to address but requires a collective effort to ensure the safety and well-being of refugees. This can help us understand and respond to the needs and experiences of refugees more humanely and respectfully. Planetary humanism is a philosophical and ethical framework that seeks to promote a sense of global citizenship and responsibility towards the planet and its inhabitants. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges facing humanity. An important principle of planetary humanism is the idea of global citizenship. This means

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recognizing that we are all part of a single global community and that we share a common responsibility for the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. This requires us to think beyond national boundaries and to work together to address the challenges facing humanity at large.

Gilroy (2002) in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, talks about human interconnectedness and the need for a planetary perspective. Although Gilroy initially builds his idea on the critique of black essentialism his argument goes much further. It contradicts nationalism's fundamental legitimacy as a deeply ingrained political and historical phenomenon. We get the chance to briefly address some more general theoretical concerns by examining Gilroy's use of black essentialism as a stick to beat Black Nationalism: what is the foundation of national (or racial) identities and what is the actuality of those identities? Why is it not possible to collapse these identities simply willfully into a single, undifferentiated humanity? Gilroy does not claim that there are no differences between nations. Although he fully acknowledges the existence of these disparities, he contends that they are only superficial (Robotham, 2005). Gilroy's planetary humanism is an antithesis to the concept of national borders which are tighter than ever and passing them has become a matter of life and death, as the current global refugee crisis demonstrates.

Internationally, there is an increasing urge to strengthen border restrictions in reaction to the ostensible threat posed by an unending flow of migrants, refugees, and immigrants (Al-Nakib, 2019). Gurtov, in "open borders: a global-humanist approach to the refugee crisis" delineates who is accorded the status of refugee by the state. He asserts that being labeled as a refugee is important to garner the "support" of the state. Ironically, this support (if given) is based less on humanitarian grounds, and more on the state's interests which are mostly political and economic. Thus, while planetary humanism highlights the importance of recognizing the humanity and dignity of refugees, and of treating them with compassion and respect, the reality is contrary to that.

The EU's history has reached a critical juncture with the refugee issue, which has sparked political discussions on borders, immigration, and national identity (Brug & Harteveld, 2021). Vestergaard, in his article "the battle for the public perception," delineates the role of media in building people's perception. He asserts that increased media attention to the issue of an increased inflow of asylum seekers resulted in multiple and divergent debates about the seriousness of the issue, as well as a concern among the masses to seek humanitarian solutions at the national level viz-a-viz EU level (2020). Thus, there is a need to frame policies that do not view refugees as a threat or a burden, but as dignified humans, who have a right to be treated with compassion and respect. Apart from the state's attitude toward refugees, the role of the public is also important when discussing the refugee crisis. The attitude of people on a community level towards refugees is twofold. While few people feel threatened by the economic competition that these refugees might bring; consequently, resulting in harboring anti-refugee sentiments (Koos & Seibel, 2019), most of the people are willing to lend a helping hand to the distraught refugees. Brug and Harteveld (2021) purport that it is not possible to expect a singular and uniform response from all the citizens of Europe regarding the increased refugee influx in recent years. Public opinion can vary on the issue on two conditions. The first is that the refugee crisis will be more incumbent in the countries that bear the greater influx. Consequently, there will be more political and public debates in such countries. Secondly, the general opinion also varies depending upon the people's prior conceptions (or misconceptions) about the refugee crisis as different people perceive the same event or idea differently based on their past experiences or knowledge.

Since the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, civil society across Europe has participated in an unprecedented wave of support towards migrants. Lahusen and Grasso (2018) in their edited work, 'citizens' responses in times of crisis' explicate the role of ordinary people in assisting the refugees by saying that while the European governments' response has been marred by uncertainty, a lack of unified approach, and delayed money from traditional contributors, thousands of regular people have joined forces to give services and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers arriving on Greek coasts. These volunteers have played a tremendously significant role in the refugee crisis. Acts of solidarity have been carried out by volunteers, including supplying food supplies, gathering, and sorting clothing, offering medical assistance, legal and financial help, pulling people from the water, cooking, putting up laundries, constructing shelters, and more.

Parsanoglou (2020) sees the rise of humanitarianism as a contributing factor in the treatment of refugees. Social anthropologist Papataxiarchis calls it "a new patriotism of solidarity" (2016, p. 208) and Cabot calls it "humanitarian citizenship" (2019, p. 4), where people have led where larger institutions and some governments have been slow, reluctant, and mired in outdated thinking and ineffective solutions (Phipps, 2019). Phipps attributes the publication of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the Kurdish refugee boy who drowned and washed up on a Turkish beach, as one of the significant factors resulting in the powerful awakening of the masses. The image served as such a great impetus that it altered individual responsibility into a collective movement of welcoming refugees. Phipps advocates that it is the responsibility of people with conscience, and those who are privileged, to offer solidarity and engage in practical activism to relieve people of their difficult times.

Moreover, in 'hospitality as advocacy and vulnerability', Phipps delineates on the importance of hospitality in dealing with refugees. She asserts that hospitality may foster empowerment if the concept is examined through the eyes of its advocate who becomes a voice and source of strength for the vulnerable. She reiterates that advocacy does not necessarily demand direct intervention into the personal matters of the vulnerable, or in this case, the refugees, but also comprises providing care, protection, and service to those in need (Cockburn et al., 2014). This act of hospitality is carried out through acts of volunteering to guide and support the refugees in crisis.

While most of the studies carried out so far aim to highlight the impact of the experience of migration on the lives of women in terms of whether this mostly traumatic experience emancipates and liberates women by providing them with a space where they can feel more empowered after all the hardships, or it further oppresses them by making them more vulnerable to gender-based violence (Hyndman, 2010; Buscher, 2010), a significant interstices in this regard can be highlighted by analyzing the women who are non-refugees and yet play a vital role in the lives of refugees in general and women refugees in particular, strengthening the all-inclusive planetary humanist claim. Thus, an interesting debate in this regard may arise by analyzing the role of women as volunteers and whether they are different than their male counterparts in terms of providing care and other support to the refugees. This idea is crucial to the argument that I aim to present in this paper.

While Gaskin and Smith suggest that there is no clear pattern of gender differences in volunteering across European countries, other scholars suggest that gender does make a difference in specific domains of volunteering, since women tend to have higher rates in informal volunteering activities associated with more caring tasks and lower rates in political activities. More women (10.3%) than men (5.7%) volunteer for refugees/asylum seekers. She argues that it is mainly due to the reason that women associate themselves more with caring tasks such as informal volunteering and are

relatively less inclined towards political activities (Kalogeraki, 2018). Wilson (2000) attributes gender ideologies, as well as the gendered division of labor, as the main reasons why women tend to be more inclined towards volunteer activities associated with caring tasks.

Research Methodology

The paper seeks to analyze, through qualitative analysis, the valuable contribution of volunteers to society that results in a positive impact on individuals and communities, thereby leading to a humanitarian approach, by focusing on the female characters in Nadia Hashmi's novel "when the moon is low". Lipsky calls this act "street-level bureaucracy" (1980) in which day-to-day small humanitarian acts of common people in the public sphere determine the policy, rather than the State. Partridge reworks Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy to describe how white, German women used their citizenship as a form of power to help non-citizens gain rights and residence, calling these women 'informal street-level bureaucrats' (2008). Witcher (2021) also builds on Partridge's term of informal street-level bureaucrats to describe the volunteers who worked mainly within informal associations, to help border crossers attain refugee status, housing, and other entitlements. She asserts that this use of discretionary power wielded by the volunteers sometimes subverts the state-sanctioned categorizations of refugees and vulnerable persons. In their pursuit of enacting their moral rationalities that considered all border crossers as deserving of the right to travel and settle, the volunteers become intermediaries between the state and the border crossers, and in many cases, help them in the fulfillment of basic rights, including the right to shelter, food, and a fair asylum determination. To accomplish this, the paper aims to build a synapse between the notions of planetary humanism, refugee crisis, and volunteerism as presented by numerous theorists on the relevant areas such as Gilroy (2002), Phipps (2019), Lahusen and Grasso (2018). Moreover, most of the work on volunteerism comprises fieldwork based on quantitative analysis. In this research, however, this idea is applied to the refugee narrative.

Analysis and Discussions

Hashmi has very realistically portrayed their journey, where on each step there is a tangible threat of being deported back to Afghanistan. The novel vividly describes the urgency and insecurities of a refugee's existence. Border guards, traffickers, and even fellow travelers are a source of fear. However, amid this uncertainty and fear, there are female characters who serve as caregivers and guides in these difficult times, and without whom, it may not even have been possible for the Waziri family to survive for long.

The first woman who came to support Fereiba after her husband's death was Raisa. While Fereiba was expecting her third child, Raisa would stay "at the house until nightfall and made simple meals for the children". Also, she would take care of the sick Fereiba by putting a wet cloth on her forehead and making her drink from the copper bowl engraved with a surah from the Quran. Fereiba was thankful to her and exclaimed "I don't know how to thank you for everything that you have done. You've put me back on my feet and kept my children fed when you have a household of your own". Raisa was there with her when Fereiba got the news of her husband's death and she and her husband Abdul Rahim helped Fereiba and her children in fleeing from Afghanistan and the tyranny of the Taliban rule.

Hayal, "a petite woman with soft eyes" (Hashmi, 130) is another character who voluntarily helps Fereiba and her children during their stay in Intikal, a small Turkish town. She happily welcomed the babbling baby into her home. She was happy to have children in the house. Fereiba's "heart found an ally in Hayal" (130). She asserts that "though we did not share a language", our hearts

got connected. It was the kindness of these strangers that, according to Fereiba, kept them warm. Hayal was a retired teacher and was kind enough to teach Samira, knowing that she had never been to school due to the Taliban's strict policies against sending girls to school. Also, she took the ailing Aziz to the doctor with Fereiba and helped in communicating with the doctor in the local language. Fereiba feels highly indebted to her kindness. She asserts that "I couldn't imagine what our situation would have been like without the inordinate kindness Hakan and Hayal showed us. I wondered how I could ever repay these total strangers for all they had done" (149). "If it weren't for the generosity of Hakan and Hayal, they would have been on the street for sure" (161). They made them all feel settled in Intikal, thousands of miles from "home" (160). When they were leaving Intikal for their next destination, Fereiba tried to pay Hayal for the final month of rent which she gently refused and asked her to keep the money to take care of her children. She was teary-eyed at their departure and handed Fereiba a bag of food that she had prepared for their journey ahead. For Fereiba, Hayal's presence in her life was like a whisper in her ear, telling her that "God sent miracles in unrecognizable forms" (172). Even Samira, Fereiba's young daughter did not want to let go of her teacher who had become her friend and her "source of security" (172). Also, when Saleem was deported back to Turkey, it was Hayal who "mothered him" (241) and to Saleem, Hayal felt more like family than any of his aunts and uncles.

Another significant character that Saleem encounters during his stay in France is that of Mimi. Mimi's character is crucial to the idea of volunteering because she doesn't come from a privileged background, privileged in the sense of having a resourceful family and a safe place to live. Still, she assisted Saleem in whatever capacity she could. She works as a prostitute who came to the city with her boyfriend, with the hope of starting a new life. However, her drunkard boyfriend trades her to another man. Despite the turbulence in her own life, she volunteers to help Saleem reach France. Not only that, but she also let him stay in her apartment for one night when Burim, her pimp, was not around. Saleem was "grateful to have met Mimi" (322), a girl "who needed saving, had saved him" (343).

While Raisa, Hayal, and Mimi are all informal volunteers who helped the Waziri family, personally choosing "hospitality" in their treatment of refugees (Phipps, 2019), the character of Roksana gives a representation of formal volunteering. Hashmi, through the character of Roksana, shows the efforts of such small humanitarian organizations in assisting and supporting the refugees. "Volunteers would talk to the refugees, attempt to assist with document issues and hand out food and water" (193). They would also provide them with basic medical assistance such as band-aid or offer a course of antibiotics. These volunteers were comprised of young individuals, who felt indignant that their government could subject refugees to such degrading conditions. However, their resources were limited. But their approach was humanist. They volunteer. Nobody was giving them money to volunteer for this cause. They were doing this because they wanted "to help" (199), as Roksana tells Saleem. After listening to Saleem's story, she says "Let me help you with the asylum application. Your family deserves to have this story heard. You have a good case" (201). The concept of 'deservingness' is crucial to the volunteers' understanding of the refugees' issues. Maestri and Monforte (2017) have explored how the volunteers relate emotions of compassion and evaluations about the 'deservingness' of refugees (920). They also give the image of a "resilient refugee" (926) so as not to depict refugees as victims but to show their remarkable determination and strength and stress their agency and exceptional courage. Such an image strengthens the feelings of compassion and kindness among the volunteers. When Roksana listens to Saleem's story and his resolution and self-determination, she asks Saleem to

apply for asylum as he has a compelling story, and therefore he might be the lucky one to be granted asylum. She was moved by his story and continuously assisted him in finding a place, from telling him about a small wooden playhouse in a playground where they could stay overnight (203) to a hotel room where they could stay free of cost for a few days (209). Moreover, she also suggested he go by train from Athens onwards because “in Europe, they do not check passports since you will be traveling between EU countries. The borders are open now.” (205) She not only provided him with a place to live, or useful knowledge regarding the next parts of his journey but also emotional support by comforting him that “hang on, things will get better” and hopes that the rest of Europe treats him well (205). For Saleem, Roksana was his “only hope” (204) amidst this time of crisis.

Apart from these characters, other minor characters helped Fereiba during her trying times, for example, a “kind-faced elderly woman” who helped Saleem locate Calais on the map when he felt lost on reaching France, and, the nurse in England, who comforted her when Aziz was being taken away for treatment. She comfortingly puts her hand on Fereiba’s arm and squeezes it gently, saying wordlessly that “she, too, was a mother and they would take good care of my son” (317).

Conclusion

Thus, through a detailed analysis of the female volunteers in Nadia Hashmi’s novel “when the moon is low”, we can recognize the vital role that women can play in the refugee crisis, and the need to support and empower women in their efforts to address the complex and multifaceted challenges of displacement and refugeehood. Women’s role as volunteers in the refugee crisis has largely remained ignored, with most of the research focusing on the violence inflicted on women during the migration process, the causes of women’s migration, and other problems that they face during the journey. Through a critical analysis of the characters of Raisa, Hayal, Mimi, Roksana, and other minor characters, this research attempts to highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing women's contributions in promoting more just and equitable forms of social organization and governance, by volunteering, both formally and informally, to support and assist the refugees on the ground and at a microcosmic level. These acts of kindness position them as agents promulgating the idea of planetary humanism, in a world where states fail to provide them with even the life necessities and feel threatened by them.

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