



Challenges to Human Rights in Detention Camps: An Analysis of Refugee Children's Resilience in *The Bone Sparrow*

**Pooja K N^{*}
Anjum Khan M[†]**

Abstract

*This paper delves into the poignant narrative of *The Bone Sparrow*, a literary work that vividly portrays the struggles of refugee children and the concomitant erosion of their human rights in the context of detention camps. Zana Fraillon's masterpiece serves as a stark reminder of the pressing refugee crisis, highlighting the dehumanizing conditions and the loss of basic human rights endured by these children. Through the lens of Subhi's journey, the author implores us not only to bear witness to these harrowing stories but also to take concrete action in advocating for the restoration of human rights. This paper explores the urgent need for advocacy, underscores the importance of unwavering compassion, and highlights the necessity of actively working toward a brighter future for all displaced children whose fundamental human rights have been compromised. It emphasizes the critical role of empathy and change in our global response to this humanitarian challenge.*

Keywords: *The Bone Sparrow, Refugee Children, Human Rights, Dehumanization, Detention Camps, Advocacy, Compassion, Displaced Children, Empathy, Humanitarian Crisis.*

The global community is currently grappling with a refugee crisis, stemming from a myriad of complex factors, encompassing political, social, and environmental origins. Irrespective of the catalyst for their displacement, individuals residing within detention camps and refugee settlements find their human rights imperilled. These fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right to freedom of expression, the right to personal security, and the right to dignity, face significant jeopardy.

^{*}M.A. English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: 22pen007@avinuty.ac.in

[†]Assistant Professor, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043, Tamil Nadu, India.

The primary aim of this scholarly investigation is to illuminate the harsh and distressing realities experienced by these displaced individuals. Additionally, it seeks to delve into the physical conditions prevailing within detention centers, which include issues like overcrowding, inadequate access to essential provisions, and limited availability of healthcare and sanitation facilities. The research article delves into the profound influence of these circumstances within detention centers, shedding light on their impact on the physical and mental well-being of the inhabitants. Furthermore, the study scrutinizes the emotional and psychological repercussions of the substandard living conditions on these refugees, thus addressing the pivotal question of whether their hope for a better future can ultimately materialize.

Zana Fraillon, born in Melbourne and spending her early childhood in San Francisco, stands as an Australian writer of fiction for children and young adults, weaving her narratives within the backdrop of Melbourne, Australia. She earned the prestigious Amnesty CILIP honor for her book *The Bone Sparrow*, a work that brings to light the dire plight of Rohingya refugees. *The Bone Sparrow* was designated as Australia's representative for the International Board on Books for Young People on a biennial basis.

In addition, Fraillon's literary contributions have consistently garnered acclaim and accolades, as evidenced by her books being shortlisted for renowned awards like the Carnegie Award, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Prime Minister's Literary Award, and more. It is of utmost importance to underscore that Fraillon's motivation for composing *The Bone Sparrow* was firmly rooted in her passionate protest against the mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seekers, including children, within the Australian context. Australia has witnessed a succession of governments that have implemented immigration policies marked by inhumanity, culminating in the detention of children in austere facilities.

As articulated by Richard Flanagan in *The Guardian*, there exists a prevailing concern that "Malcolm Turnbull wants to destroy Australian literature," with a notable quote suggesting that perhaps these policies aim to foster a growing silence that may allow them to flourish.

Zana Fraillon is also committed to championing the cause of marginalized and voiceless communities. As evidenced by the statement, "Zana lives and works on the unceded, stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people and pays her respects to elders, past, present, and emerging. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land," her dedication to this endeavor is demonstrated. As articulated by Zana Fraillon in Book Trust, *The Bone Sparrow* is one of those rare, special books that will break your heart with its honesty and beauty, but is ultimately hopeful and uplifting".

"As articulated by Karen Hardy in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, it is about the touching story of the refugee crisis that, 'It's political in the sense that this is a global issue and no one has got it right'."

In the interview 'Beyond the Curtain' on *The Bone Sparrow*, S. Shakthi Dharan states, "... I've grown up finding ways to relate to white stories, to connect to the western cultural machine, and it's lovely to be able to turn that around and show that universal stories exist through Rohingya boys." *The Bone Sparrow* is immensely relevant in today's space and time. From the perspective of the innocent, it never comes across as preachy or self-serving but instead leaves one with an awareness that almost borders on the uncomfortable as wonder. As the world pushes refugees from one hell to the next, why are we not stepping up as humans to help those in need? As the pastor Martin Nimbler wisely wrote, "Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

Within the confines of detention centers, individuals are ensnared in an alarming milieu pervaded by mental health challenges and a harrowing prevalence of suicides, further compounded by recurrent allegations of physical and sexual abuse. These distressing conditions find echoes within the refugee camps and detention facilities. A stark illustration of this plight is exemplified by a group of Rohingya asylum seekers hailing from Burma, who found themselves stranded at sea, devoid of essential provisions such as sustenance, potable water, and fuel. In this dire predicament, their lives hung in the balance, and they were compelled to embark on a perilous voyage under the menacing Specter of death.

Subsequently, upon reaching their destination, they encountered a grim reality marked by their confinement within camps, deprived of access to education and gainful employment. Concurrently, their homes and ancestral lands were subject to dispossession or wanton destruction, with many individuals vanishing under mysterious circumstances, often subjected to brutal torture and fatal violence. This deeply distressing situation profoundly affected Zana Fraillon, who was moved by the dire circumstances of the Rohingya people, compelling her to shed light on their plight, experiences, and untold suffering.

The Bone Sparrow stands as a significant exemplar within the genre of refugee literature, centering its narrative on the multifaceted experiences of refugees. When juxtaposed with other works in this genre, noteworthy commonalities and distinctions emerge. This narrative poignantly underscores the traumatic ordeals and adversities endured by refugees, encompassing the wrenching separation from family, the erosion of community ties, and the distressing exposure to various forms of violence and discrimination.

In its thematic exploration, the text prominently spotlights the grim and dehumanizing conditions, along with the pervasive denial of basic human rights that afflict a substantial segment of the refugee population. In doing so, *The Bone Sparrow* amplifies a grievance often marginalized or disregarded within the broader discourse, bringing vital attention to an issue frequently overshadowed or dismissed.

The Bone Sparrow takes its inspiration from the real-life experiences of refugees confined within Australian detention centers. The story revolves around Subhi, a nine-year-old Rohingya boy born in a refugee camp in Australia. For Subhi, this confined environment is the only reality he has ever known, characterized by an existence bounded by guards and

fences. Unlike many of his fellow detainees who fled cruelty and violence in their homelands, Subhi's life is marked by a distinct absence of these external hardships. Nevertheless, he is grievously deprived of the fundamental rights that should be the entitlement of all individuals.

Within the walls of the detention center, these refugees are tragically devoid of rights that are universally acknowledged, including the right to sustenance, access to education, healthcare, personal safety, and the right to a home. This harrowing portrayal serves to underscore the deplorable conditions and dire circumstances faced by these individuals.

The physical condition of the detention camp vividly reflects the severe and wretched living conditions experienced by its residents, particularly the Rohingya refugees. The camp is characterized by overcrowding, with makeshift structures crafted from scavenged materials like tents and shacks, resulting in confined and cramped living quarters for the refugees. The absence of adequate infrastructure exacerbates the problem, leading to a scarcity of sanitary facilities, restricted access to clean water, and an inadequacy of healthcare resources. These conditions not only create an unsanitary environment but also facilitate the transmission of diseases.

The atmosphere within the camp is pervaded by a palpable sense of desolation and despair. The presence of barbed wire fences and stringent surveillance measures serves a dual purpose, aiming to both control and isolate the inhabitants or ostensibly protect them. The oppressive ambiance is further intensified by the indifferent or even abusive conduct of the guards, who offer little respite from the suffering endured by those confined within the camp. As aptly depicted in the quote, "The air feels thick and heavy to breathe. It's going to be one of those days when the sun burns down at you from the sky and up at you from the ground, and there's not much anyone can do to get even a bit cool"(13) the environmental conditions exacerbate the sense of discomfort and hopelessness permeating the camp.

Within the narrative of *The Bone Sparrow*, the physical and psychological well-being of the children residing in the detention camp is portrayed with a poignant emphasis on the deeply distressing and catastrophic nature of their circumstances. Zana Fraillon conducts a thorough exploration of the impact of this harsh environment on the young characters, thereby shedding light on the formidable challenges they confront.

From a physical perspective, the children in the camp grapple with a multitude of adversities, including malnutrition, inadequate access to healthcare, and exposure to unsanitary conditions. The scarcity of nourishing sustenance and clean water gravely compromises their overall health, thereby enfeebling their immune systems and rendering them susceptible to illnesses. The author adeptly illustrates instances of hunger, exhaustion, and physical afflictions that result directly from the dire conditions within the camp, as elucidated in the quote: "I can see Pietre walking up to meet, his eyes all red and puffy from the dust sickness, and I just about think I've worked out that there's a box of cigarettes or a pack of playing

cards inside this shirt when I see Pietre stop" (37). This vivid portrayal underscores the considerable toll exacted on the children's physical well-being in this arduous setting.

The environment within the detention facility exerts a discernible influence on the developmental trajectory and psychological well-being of children. From a perspective focused on mental health, these young individuals confront an extensive array of emotional challenges. Prolonged detention, forced separation from their families, and the absence of personal freedom collectively exact a profound toll on their psychological equilibrium. Consequently, they grapple with emotions marked by profound solitude, anxiety, depression, and a prevailing sense of hopelessness. The dearth of educational and recreational opportunities further intensifies their emotional distress and mounting frustration.

Notwithstanding these formidable challenges, the children discover sources of comfort and resilience in the realm of their imagination and the mutual support they offer one another.

Through the bond between Subhi and Jimmie, "The Bone Sparrow" emphasizes the power of friendship in providing solace, hope and healing amidst adversity. It reminds the profound impact that genuine connections can have on their lives, transcending barriers and offering a sense of belonging, even in the most challenging circumstances as exemplified by the quote, "the two of us look at each other and I get to feeling that maybe I'm not understanding this girl so well, because I have n idea what she's talking about" (91).

The friendship between Eli and Subhi is a heartwarming and significant aspect of the story. Their friendship begins in an unconventional way when Subhi discovers a journal that Eli had left behind. Through the journal, Subhi learns about Eli's experiences and his struggles outside of the camp. Although they initially communicate through written message exchanges in the journal, a strong bond forms between them. Their friendship deepens as Eli helps Subhi understand the complexities of the world beyond the camp. Eli becomes a mentor and guide to Subhi, teaching him about the power of education, the importance of hope, and the value of standing up for oneself. Eli provides Subhi with a glimpse of a future beyond the confines of the camp, inspiring him to seek a better life.

Eli's presence in Subhi's life offers a sense of companionship and support, helping him navigate the challenges and injustices they face. They share dreams of freedom, playgrounds, and new beginnings, finding solace, strength, and resilience, giving them the courage to face their difficult circumstances. Their friendship also highlights the importance of empathy and understanding. Through their interactions, both Eli and Subhi learn to see the world from each other's perspectives, bridging the gap between their different backgrounds. It demonstrates that genuine connections and friendships can transcend age, cultural barriers, and difficulties.

Their friendship in *The Bone Sparrow* exemplifies the transformational power of genuine connections. It showcases the ways in which they remind us of the resilience of the human spirit. They cultivate enduring bonds of camaraderie and foster a palpable sense of

community amidst the unforgiving circumstances within the camp. Zana Fraillon skillfully underscores the remarkable courage and unwavering determination exhibited by the children, even when confronted with such formidable adversity.

The carceral atmosphere, the absence of autonomy, and the pervasive monitoring and regulation create a disorienting and daunting experience. Children embark on their journeys of migration to escape the continuation of their enduring sense of unfair and unjust treatment, coupled with a prevailing belief that life is marked by insecurity, unpredictability, and instability.

They are not provided with adequate sustenance on a daily basis; instead, they are subjected to substandard and often spoiled rations, which have sometimes already been consumed by the camp's guards, as exemplified by the quote, "But we're lucky, Subhi, because today's food is only twelve days past its use-by-date" (7). This poor-quality food and capricious control measures can contribute to the reinforcement of a prevailing sentiment among detainees, suggesting that they are not afforded the basic respect they deserve, as evinced by the statement, "once I even found a human tooth in my rice" (6).

Immigration detention exerts a profound influence on the mental and physical well-being of both children and adults. In the context of children's unique vulnerabilities, detention can lead to detrimental consequences for their developmental and physical health. The ramifications of immigration detention are particularly pronounced in the context of Australia, given its historical practice of detaining children who arrive without prior authorization.

The consequences of detention extend to families, and prolonged periods in detention often yield dire outcomes. As families endure lengthier durations in detention, the strain on familial bonds becomes increasingly evident. Moreover, the extended detention periods significantly compromise the capacity of parents to provide adequate care for their children.

Children manifest a spectrum of psychological indicators, such as depression and anxiety symptoms, sleep disruptions characterized by nightmares, eating challenges, and somatic complaints. Detention perpetuates the cycle of adversity experienced by the child. In *The Bone Sparrow*, Subhi clings to the hope that his father will eventually reunite their family and lead them back home. Children in detention centers frequently exhibit a diverse array of psychological disturbances, encompassing separation anxiety, disruptive behavior, sleep-related issues encompassing nightmares, night terrors, sleepwalking, and discernible hindrances in cognitive development.

One fateful night, Subhi's existence underwent a profound transformation when he encountered an unexpected visitor on the opposite side of the fence, who goes by the name of Jimmie. Through her, Subhi gained insights into the world beyond the confines of the detention center. As articulated by Jimmie, children outside the center often held a skewed perception, erroneously believing that those within were fortunate and possessed a wealth of

amenities, such as fine clothing, an abundance of toys, books, computers, and the presence of teachers and doctors readily available within the center.

Yet, only Subhi comprehends the unvarnished reality of life within the camp, and this knowledge sustains his hope, mirroring Eli's aspiration for a 'someday' when they might break free from the confines imposed by guards, fences, and the pervasive adversity. Within their world, characterized by hardship, there persists an enduring ember of hope, even in the face of the bleakest circumstances. Subhi's discussion of his own 'someday' serves as a poignant reminder, offering a lifeline that can be clung to at various junctures in their lives.

In *The Bone Sparrow*, certain instances surface where the children's aspirations appear to materialize, yet the narrative delves into the exploration of how hope is sustained despite prevailing and formidable adversity. The protagonist, Subhi, and his fellow children within the center, employ various means to anchor their hope, ranging from the sharing of stories, acts of benevolence, and the fertile realm of their imagination.

While moments of exultation and achievement punctuate the novel, it simultaneously recognizes the profound injustices endured by refugees and the often-Herculean barriers they must surmount to translate their dreams into reality. As Nicholas Tucker aptly underscores in the article "The Bone Sparrow: A Contemporary Tragedy," child refugees have become increasingly susceptible to trafficking, occasionally ending up as modern-day slaves, even within affluent nations—a stark revelation that may not have been previously acknowledged. In conclusion, *The Bone Sparrow* delivers a compelling narrative that vividly illustrates the hardships endured by refugees, shedding light on their dehumanizing experiences, the erosion of their identities, and the unwavering yet desperate hope that characterizes their lives. Zana Fraillon's work serves as a powerful reminder of the pressing refugee crisis, urging readers to recognize the shared humanity that binds us all. Through Subhi's journey, the author implores us to not only bear witness to these stories but also to take concrete action by engaging in advocacy, demonstrating unwavering compassion, and actively striving for a brighter future for all displaced individuals, emphasizing the critical need for empathy and change in our global approach to this humanitarian issue.

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