

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

Reframing the Cosmopolitan Ideal into a World of Refugee Crises: A Close Reading of Fabio Geda's *In the Sea there are Crocodiles*

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Article History: Submitted-05/04/2017, Revised-03/05/2017, Accepted-30/05/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

What does the term “cosmopolitanism” mean in a world where border enforcements, immigration rules and refugee crises are being debated every hour? This paper will attempt to place Kant’s idea of “temporary sojourn” and Derrida’s idea of “conditions to unconditional hospitality” in the context of today’s world culture and the cosmopolitan world we aspire to achieve. The paper will draw on arguments related to the dynamics of boundaries, its intended flexibility and the use of boundaries to frame our opinions about who we want to include and who we seek protection from. The paper will also engage into a close reading of “In the Sea there are Crocodiles” by Fabio Geda based on personal accounts of a refugee, Enaiatollah Akbari and his journey from Afghanistan to Italy in an attempt to understand how the protagonist’s journey reflects upon the way borders are enforced and looks at immigration as a process which provides a scope of dialogue with other cultures.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, refugee crisis, Fabio Geda, borders, immigration.

Post the 9/11 attack at the World Trade Center, there has been a change in the way borders are conceptualized. The efforts at globalization and the indulgence into cosmopolitan outlooks have performed a transition into preparations of how we need to protect our civilians. In the context of this post 9/11 era, where nationhood and group sentiments form an opposition against the imaginary of a borderless world, this paper attempts at an understanding of present scenarios of border enforcement and the way trafficking, bribing at the borders and the fear of detention centers has become inevitable for immigrants due to the variety of societal conditions which are leading to forced migrations. The cosmopolitan idea of thinking beyond the borders, assuming a “world citizenship” and treating everyone as our “fellow city dwellers” seems impossible when simultaneously the world is fighting a global war against terrorism. The paper also performs a close reading of Fabio Geda’s “In the Sea there are Crocodiles” which narrates the real life journey of an Afghan refugee who travels from Afghanistan to Italy through a number of other countries and faces the border and its plights continuously in search of a safe and secure life. The novel provides awareness about the life of an immigrant and the issues that are being focused in this paper and necessitates an urge to rethink the boundaries of the cosmopolitanism as we know of it.

Reece Jones mentions how borders “are important sites for the performance of both security and citizenship”. The statistics show that the number of patrol agents and fencing the border line done since the 1990s are double the numbers carried out during the forty-five years of the Cold War:

In total, at least 22 border barriers were begun around the world in the 10 years since 11 September. (216)

Jones notes the incident of protests regarding the building of an Islamic Community Centre a few blocks from the World Trade Center. The way civilians create an aura of panic and nervousness around people from Islamic countries these days prove the large scale effect of the terrorist attacks. People have started being afraid of anything on the other side of the border and the constant reference to these individuals as “illegals” and “aliens” reflect the fear and repulsiveness that is felt about the culture which they do not understand or most importantly the ones that trespass the lines and tries to exist in their surroundings. Leaders have also constantly engaged in statement, be it U.S.A or India, which indicated towards lack of trust in the faith of others and ended up in a heap of generalizations. In such conditions, how can one imagine a progress towards a “borderless world” when the borders are the only thing that gives away the feeling of safety to the citizens. Common citizens are also affected by immigration laws. Yes, immigration laws are made keeping immigrants mainly in focus but never has it been conceived from the other side. The voice of the common citizen remains absent from this and the government has made this excuse of neglecting the other side because these people already own a secure citizenship.

Brubaker explains nationhood “as a frame of vision, a cultural idiom and a political claim” and Jones builds on this to state that the fear in the minds of the common mass has always been there. It is just that the “representations of fear” has changed over time. A mental space was created where the concept of Islamic countries and terrorism was somewhere merged and the global fight on terrorism, Jones says, was given the framework of the fight against good and evil and hence we ended up with the world at its worst stage of insecurities and most bordered than ever.

Derrida, who made us reconsider the tensions within cosmopolitanism, explains his opinions through the debates over “unconditional hospitality” and “conditional hospitality”. He believes that there exists a constant negotiation in the hard efforts to make a balance between our cultures which insists us to unconditionally welcome the “other” while the laws created to maintain the civility in the society depends on inscribing conditions to the treatment meted out to the strangers who arrive. Also, to be hospitable one needs to be on a higher status than the one on the other side of the treatment or the border for this instance and maintain a kind of control on the “guests”. The control over the guests implies that there will be certain rules which decide on who comes in, how they behave or the kind of activities that go on in the “property” which

belongs to the host. Gerasimos Kakoliris, on the other hand, identifies a problem in Derrida's position:

For Derrida, this asymmetry between conditional and unconditional hospitality maintains an endless demand, since each event of welcoming the other can only fall short of the requirements of the unconditional law of unlimited hospitality. Whatever decision we make in relation to the arrival of a stranger, the infinite obligation to welcome the other, whoever he or she is, will always exist, and will exceed the apparently justified restrictions and conditions that we place on the other in his or her arrival and stay. (149)

Derrida brings out the problems of power hierarchy here when we think of the existence of this "borderless world". Yet as critics have debated over his position, even the act of making a decision while balancing between the conditional and the unconditional sects would be a part of establishing conditions on the entry of the "other". This particular violence of exercising the power of sovereignty over the foreigner becomes inevitable but there can of course be "a continuous, incessant effort of limiting violence towards the arriving foreigner."

Fabio Geda's "In the Sea there are Crocodiles" narrates a personal account by an Afghan boy who almost travelled across the world in search of proper living conditions. The condition of the Hazaras in Afghanistan is deplorable forcing Enaiatollah Akbari's mother to cross the border with her child and leave him in Pakistan where he had better chances of survival. An article in The Express Tribune states that over 900,000 Hazaras live in Afghanistan and yet they become a target of the Anti- Shia discriminations. These people look Asian because of their supposed Buddhist or Mongoloid origins. The article states:

Among the Hazara in Quetta are tens of thousands of new migrants escaping the wrath of the Taliban. Persecution of Hazaras persists in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have shown no let-up in their attack on Shias, burning villages and kidnapping community members, forcing further emigration into Pakistan.

The saying goes that the Hazaras were meant to end up in "Goristan" which implies "graves" and they are supposed to end up dead. Protests have been erupting at the global level against the uncalled wave of attacks against the Hazaras and yet a number of people from that ethnic origin keep being killed every year. As Akbari narrates, the Taliban had killed his father and now were searching for him. Even in the streets of Pakistan, Akbari is questioned whether he is a Shia or a Muslim to which he answers with determination:

First I'm a Shia, I said, then I'm a Muslim. Or rather, I added, first I'm a Hazara, then a Shia, then a Muslim. (Ch. Pakistan)

The man starts beating him up. Akbari knows he could have escaped by lying or not going into the details of his identity but he chooses not to.

Kant's concept of "temporary sojourn" contemplates on how the "other" should not be denied access if that would mean some kind of danger for them and this is extremely relevant for the situation of refugees in the contemporary world. It is mostly a threat to their lives if they get deported back to their countries of origin. As long as the "other" remains peacefully in his place, they do not deserve any hostility and Kant says that "temporary sojourn" and the right to associate belongs to all of humankind. Also, no part of the earth belongs to any individual more than another and only that is how Kant draws his conclusion towards the idea of establishing a "world citizenship". Seyla Benhabib, on the other hand, raises the problem of conflict between the values of "moral duty" and "self-interest":

And what amount of decline in welfare is morally permissible before it can be invoked as grounds for denying entry to the persecuted, the needy, and the oppressed? In formulating their refugee and asylum policies, governments often implicitly utilize this distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, while human rights groups, as well as advocates of asylees and refugees, are concerned to show that the obligation to show hospitality to those in dire need should not be compromised by self-regarding interests alone.(37)

Benhabib further explains why there exists an "unbridgeable" gap between the concept of a "temporary sojourn" which Kant advocates as a right for everyone and the idea of a "permanent residency" where the first is a moral obligation which may not be extended to the second one depending on the decisions of a sovereign country. Bringing in Arendt's "rights to have rights", Benhabib notes that all the philosophers speaking about rights converge on the same point where they do not state but clearly imply that constitutional laws cannot be exercised without demarcating the "insiders" from the "outsiders" and while laws are made to "protect" civilians, they cannot guarantee shelter to each and every one. Panu Minkkinen provides a different interpretation of Kant's ideas where the "other" has already established itself as a plausible "enemy" or contender and Kant's "natural" laws intend on pacifying the relationship at the border:

However, even for Kant, the other is from the outset defined by a certain enmity. The obligation to tolerate and the right to hospitality both imply that the other is originally regarded with feelings of animosity that a set of laws is now meant to pacify. If we review Kant's position from a Schmittian perspective, the enmity arises as the original partnership of likenesses dissolves, and the dissolution has taken place when the other has made its own claim to the land, i.e. in its original appropriation of land. Simply by doing so and by claiming its unique existence, the other has defined itself as my enemy, as both the occupier of a space to be conquered and the possible aggressor threatening mine.(94)

Maintaining the factor of peace also depends on the hostility or hospitality of the "other" that it exhibits from the other side of the border. This context is more relevant to countries which share a border.

Enaiyatollah Akbari in the very beginning of his narrative gives the reader a picture of the Taliban destroying his school and shooting the headmaster after surrounding that man with a group of his own students. He insists that everyone from Afghanistan is not a Taliban and the Taliban consists of different ethnicities.

Well, there may not have been twenty different nationalities, but almost. Some couldn't even communicate among themselves. Pakistan, Senegal, Morocco, Egypt. A lot of people think the Taliban are all Afghans, Fabio, but they aren't. Some of them are, of course, but not all of them. (Ch. Afghanistan)

Akbari encountered multiple reactions to his culture and his status of being an 'illegal'. From his narrative, we come to know of some acts of kindness from random strangers while there are some who can only think of the "Taliban" when they learn that he is from Afghanistan. People from the Islamic countries are seen as extremists and violent.

Though everyone knows about the Taliban and their violent attacks on other countries, not many are aware of the condition of the civilians in Afghanistan itself who have to leave their home and family and would rather live on the streets in some other country to escape the torture of the Taliban. Akbari had an earnest wish to study and to earn his bread by working hard. His grazing around the school where the children played and connecting them with his own memories of school are times we realize how much this boy craves for a normal childhood where he goes to school like the other children. He talks to Geda about why he thinks the Taliban wants to prohibit the children's right to education:

They're ignorant, ignorant of everything, and they stop children from studying because they're afraid those children might come to understand that they don't do what they do for God, but for themselves. (Ch. Afghanistan)

In the asylum, he says that that lifestyle was the opposite of what he wanted and had struggled for such a long time. Migrants applying for asylums have increased every year as statistics show the increase in pressures of migration at the global level. Towards the last section of his narrative, Akbari explains his experience at the asylum which gave him some of the comforts and was way better than living on the streets but it meant that he had to sacrifice his freedom. He explains:

And besides, it was more like a prison than a home. As soon as I arrived, they confiscated my belt and wallet with the little money I had. The doors were closed from the outside and sealed. You couldn't go out (and you can imagine how accustomed I was to freedom, after all those years spent going all over the place by myself).(Ch. Italy)

A decrease in the economic productivity of some countries implies a rush of immigrants looking for sustenance in the better off places and even the fear of detention centers cannot deter them from appearing at the gates of these countries. When caught without legal documents, some are

instantly deported while other are kept waiting in these detention centers till a proper hearing is granted to them and some are deported sooner or later after the hearing. The detention centers are probably not the life they came looking for. Lynne L. Snowden explains how:

Even though the buildings are called reception, or processing centers, they sometimes more closely resemble minimum to medium security prisons.(163)

Snowden goes around in a few detention centers at different borders around the globe and observes the various lifestyles that these immigrants are leading which extensively lacks proper health care or even availability of translators. These also results in group protests at the detention centers and immigrants have gone to the extent of burning down or destroying detention centers when they get infuriated. Some immigrants are deported or transferred even when they are not supposed to be objected to long journeys and exhaustions. Such strict enclosures mentally affect the immigrants and these situations end up creating provocations for other crimes beyond the crime of entering a country illegally that they have already committed and thus the reports of violence from these centers are quite common. Akbari himself faced repatriation twice and had to use traffickers to get back to Afghanistan. Telisia and Sang Safid were the names that could scare anyone off and all the Afghan boys knew what these words mean:

When I was still in Afghanistan, I'd met two boys who'd gone mad. They talked to themselves, screamed, peed in their clothes. And I remember someone telling me they'd been in Telisia, or else in Sang Safid. (Ch. Iran)

These centres were used to torture the Afghans before they were deported. According to a newspaper article, there was a mass deportation of Afghans around 2007 where Iran started randomly deporting Afghans who had migrated to Iran because they lacked valid documents. In the process, even the ones who were registered with the government were thrown out. Families were separated and a lot of them were unnecessarily beaten up and tortured. The Afghans had to spend a few days in these centres before being deported:

According to accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch, the Iranian authorities are transferring thousands of Afghans to three holding facilities near the Iranian-Afghan border before deporting them to Afghanistan. The three facilities known as Askarabad, Sang-e Safid, and Tal-e Seeya, which is also known as the "Black Dungeon," are all veritable prisons. Recent deportees have told Human Rights Watch that the Iranian authorities routinely beat Afghans in these locations and force them to pay for their own food and water. According the AIHRC, Afghans spend between one and 19 days in these facilities before the authorities deport them back to Afghanistan. (Human Rights Watch)

The bribing and illegal activities at the border cannot take place without the help of the government officials. The laws need to look at the statistics and reconsider the loopholes in the management and find out why these activities can still be continued even after such strict

enforcement of borders. James Puleo talks about the schemes that are made available to the immigrants:

Sophisticated smuggling rings can offer full- service to their clients: providing airline tickets, obtaining valid or fraudulent passports, visas and entry permits, staffing safe-houses, circumventing airport exit controls, and recruiting local guides to move their clients to their final destinations.(158)

Smuggling rings make the largest profit by their business of transferring these people who lack proper documentation. The migrants are lured by the hope of a better life and more chances of work and thus get convinced to travel under impossible and inhuman conditions and many of them do not survive the entire process or end up in wrong hands forced to take part in other illegal activities. If by chance they are not in a position to work after being trafficked, they are left to die because the traffickers cannot take these people to hospitals without valid documentation. Akbari explains in one section of the novel:

Obviously the traffickers couldn't take me to a hospital or a doctor. That's the biggest problem about being an illegal: you're an illegal even when it comes to your health. (Ch. Iran)

Akbari's journey from Iran to Turkey was the worst one he ever faced. The traffickers led the group through almost a thirty day mountain trek without giving them any hint about how far the destination is. The traffickers had collected seventy seven people and all of them started crossing the mountain. The border clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan are evident when the different ethnicities in the large group that Akbari is travelling in are divided to avoid any fights. With the hazards of the journey that they were to make, anything and everything could have provoked a fight. The whole group consisted of Kurds, Pakistanis, Iraqis and a few Bengalis. On the fifteenth day, a knife fight even occurred between a Kurd and Pakistani and the one who lost was left there to die, as Akbari recollects. The chances of surviving such a hazardous journey becomes clear from the dead bodies that Akbari finds during the trip:

All at once, we turned a sharp bend and there they were, that group of people sitting on the ground. They'd be sitting there forever. They were frozen. They were dead. I have no idea how long they'd been there. All the others sidled silently past them. (Ch. Turkey)

They would walk the entire night and wait again till the sunset to start again and those who couldn't walk were abandoned.

When he gets the foster parents and the right to education, he feels like taking up as many courses as possible. He learns the language because he feels that translations are not as real as speaking in the actual language. Not only Italian, Akbari learns enough English to negotiate his way through the world. In the starting of his journey, Rahim Kaka gave him a job and a place to stay. He explains:

He was someone I *could* communicate with, perhaps because he was used to receiving guests and so knew lots of languages. (Ch. Pakistan)

Language was a barrier for him back then and yet the same person after a few years is confident enough to refuse the help of a translator. He learns Italian because he wants to belong to his new home. Throughout his journey, Akbari had encountered various representations of culture and all of them were strikingly different from the lifestyle that people led in the little village of Nava:

I thought the sound of Pakistan was simply different from the sound of Afghanistan, and that every country had its own sound, which depended on a whole lot of things, like what people ate and how they moved around (Ch. Afghanistan)

This was a little boy's concept of differences in culture. As he keeps moving around, his experiences of the variety gets intermingled with the story of his own survival. In one section of the narrative, Akbari reveals that it was comparatively easier for the Afghans to intermix themselves with the Iranian culture. While in the streets of Italy, they carry coffee in their hands to integrate themselves with the tourists out there.

Martha Nussbaum advocates the reach of education to be wide enough so that the children could cross the borders with their minds. Here, Akbari's experience acts in the form of his education. His views about culture, languages and people are framed through the hazardous journeys he made across the borders by hiding in trucks, trekking snow clad mountain tops and rowing through the sea dividing countries and every time he falls to the ground thinking he cannot continue further, his urge to live and learn keeps him going. All of these in five years: from the age of ten to fifteen while he is lacking formal education. Yet to critics like Ulf Hannerz, people like Akbari do not get recognized as "cosmopolitans" because migrants do not usually immerse in the culture of the foreign "home" which is never similar to home. They find themselves a group of "compatriots" and confine themselves within that circle which is also what Akbari does. He finds other Afghan boys and tries to use their company as a protection. Yet Hannerz mentioning the criteria of being an absolute "cosmopolitan" writes:

The perspective of the cosmopolitan must entail relationships to a plurality of cultures understood as distinctive entities . . . cosmopolitanism in a stricter sense include a stance toward diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience.(2)

These words prove completely relatable to the character of Akbari as we observe him throughout his journey: his description of the marketplaces at the different locations, his reaction to the kindness of the strangers, understanding the way of work in different cultures to observing how much the Italian people eat. There cannot be complains that Akbari had held himself from getting immersed in any culture and the moment he loses his freedom to wander around is when he starts protesting.

Akbari made it to the end, where he receives a kind and loving family who gives him a foster home and everything else he needs. But many children or adults like him does not reach this happy ending:

They say a lot of people die on the border because the Iranian police shoot at you, one person said. (Ch. Pakistan)

Not everyone is a survivor. We need to think about these people. There are daily changes in immigration laws as well as a rise in immigration crimes. At the global stage, countries are converging on the types of “control policies” that are being enforced but statistics have proved:

. . . the laws barring illegal immigration as powerless in the face of the economic and structural forces compelling people to enter the United States (Coutin 1)

This paper has tried to establish the problems of imagining a “borderless world” and the ideas of “world citizenship” in the present scenario of globalization and cosmopolitanism. The ethics of cosmopolitanism needs to be reconsidered though the tension between universal responsibility and self-interests remain. The character of a cosmopolitan is no more bounded in strict generalized Western terms but can step out of the box to help us imagine the state of immigrants. Maybe even the cosmopolitan ethics can step down from the ideal condition of a “borderless world” and find a way of setting up a dialogue where cultures can find easy exchange without resulting in thousands of deaths every year.

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