refugee

by Arianna Vettorazzi

Abstract:

"Huc pauci vestris adnavimus oris.
Quod genus hoc hominum?
Quaeve hunc tam barbara morem
permittit patria?
Hospitio prohibemur harenae; bella cient primaque
vetant consistere terra.
Si genus humanum et mortalia temnitis arma, a*t sperate*
deos memores fandi atque nefandi."
*(*Publi Vergili Maronis*, Aeneidos,*
Liber I, 538-543)

"*A few of us swam here to your shores.*
What kind of people are these?
What country allows such barbaric customs? That denies us even the hospitality of the sand; that declares war on us, and forbids us to come to rest nearby.
If you fear mankind and the weapons of the mortals, believe at least in the gods, mindful of the just and the unjust."
(Virgil, *Aeneid,*
Book I, 538-543)

This entry explores the term '**refugee**', focussing on the **multifaceted construct** of **identity**. Specifically, it will analyse how **identity** is initially formed on the recognition of an intrinsic **common foundation** to all human beings, and then how it is **constructed** 'from the outside', where **cracks** occur within this **common foundation** and other layers of **political identity** emerge to divide and often legitimise forms of discrimination against refugees.

These aspects remain constant in the way **refugees** are interpreted as being **different**, and make up for underlying components in the **mediation of power dynamics** that refugees are subject to.

It is by no means possible to exhaust the identity of refugees in a single category, culture or time period. The attempt of this entry is to offer a **collection of viewpoints**, **narratives**, **inputs** from different **cultural** and **historical contexts**, mainly through **poetry** and **visual arts**, in order to identify the similarities between them, whereby the contrast indicated above is particularly outstanding.

Etymology:

Rifugiato: *individuo che, per ragioni essenzialmente politiche, ma anche economiche e sociali, è costretto ad abbandonare lo Stato di cui è cittadino e dove risiede, per cercare rifugio in uno Stato straniero*. [...]"

(*Source: Enciclopedia Treccani Online: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/rifugiato/*)

Refugee: 1680s, "one who flees to a **refuge** or **shelter** or **place of safety**; one who in times of persecution or political disorder flees to a foreign country for safety," from French *refugié,* a noun use of the past participle of *refugier* "to take shelter, protect," from Old French *refuge* "hiding place," from Latin *refugium* "a taking refuge; place to flee back to," from *re-* "back" (see **re-**) + *fugere* "to flee" [...].

(*Source: Online Etimology Dictionary: https://www.etymonline.com/word/refugee*)

Problematization:

"[A]ny uprooted, homeless, ***involuntary*** *migrant who has crossed a* ***frontier*** *and* ***no longer possesses the***

***protection of his or her former government**. [...]'*

(*Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/refugee)*

In this definition, it emerges clearly how being a refugee **cannot be an act of choice** (as it can be that of an *immigrant*, for instance). It is rather an **involuntary condition** which consists in the **deprivation** of **aspects of human life** that are necessary to make it endurable as well as meaningful in a number of different ways, and the search for a safe place to live as a consequence of that. In light of this, two aspects of this word can be identified.

On the one hand, **being a refugee** is a condition that **transcends** the culture, nationality, place of origin, religion and so on of the individual, and just concerns them as "**bodies**" and as "**human beings**".

On the other hand, it is a **political status**, which is subject to the rule of law:

"*In contrast to earlier international refugee instruments, which applied to specific groups of refugees, the 1951 Convention endorses a single definition of the term "refugee" in Article 1. The emphasis of this definition is on the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution. A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion*"

(*Source: https://www.unhcr.org/media/28185*)

These **two perspectives** are intertwined and influence each other in the **meaning** of this word, as well as in the **consequences** and the **relations of power** that are linked to it.

In other words, the focus lies on the **contrast** between the **need for a safe haven** from danger and distress, as a fundamental precondition for leading a (human) life, and the **political and social repercussions** of holding refugee status from a legal standpoint. These aspects are always present in the way **refugees are construed** as being different, albeit to distinct and varied extents, and often constitute the underlying elements of divergence in the **negotiation of power dynamics** that come into place in the **definition** of their **identity**.

> "*Even though these bodies are deeply political, in that they emerge at the intersection of corporeal and geopolitical relations of power between the West and the global South, they lack civic status; their **dehumanisation** is, in this sense, an effect of these very power relations that claim to sustain them as human bodies, in the first place (Ticktin, 2011).*" [Chouliaraki, Stolic; 2017].

Before moving onto the next section, it is important to make clear the key distinctions between the terms '**refugee**', '**migrant**' and '**asylum seeker**' which are often used interchangeably – sometimes **on purpose**, as will be illustrated in the examples provided further in the text - but which are actually quite distinct.

> ***Migrant*** – An **umbrella** term, not defined under international law, reflecting the **common lay understanding** of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, **temporarily or permanently**, and **for a variety of reasons** [...].
>
> ***Asylum seeker*** – An individual who is seeking **international protection**. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but **every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker** [...].
>
> (*Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM): https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms)*

Communication strategies:

In recent years, **Italy** has been the **main gateway** for migrants reaching Europe from the African continent as well as Middle Eastern Asia, and has seen a progressively **growing number** of **refugees** arriving at the first port of call in the southern coasts.

In attempting to understand how the '**otherness**' of **refugees** is **discursively constructed**, it is interesting to focus on their representation in the context of Italian media discourse.

In particular, research has shown how they are often represented as **dehumanised** by means of **impersonalisation**, **passivisation** and **objectification** (Cerase and Lucchesi, 2022), or they are portrayed in a **caricatured** and **derogatory manner**, with allusions and implications that label them, purposefully without contextualisation, often as a pretext to assert a political stance on other matters, such as the criticism of institutions, of other European countries, etc. (Materassi and Pezzoli, 2021).

Although the definition of a '**voluntary migrant**' and that of a '**forced migrant**' is intrinsically **blurry**, from a legal point of view it is necessary to identify a boundary between the two, in which the subjective right of asylum seekers to find refuge is different from that of other migrants who may have legitimate interest moving to a new country, but are not forced to do so by a constraint of immediate danger.

According to **international law**, the **right to asylum** is **unconditional** because of the protection regulations in place towards people that belong to this specific category [1]. On the contrary, for those who choose to come voluntarily and unforced there should be different bureaucratic procedures to follow.

In Italy this channel of **accessible** and truly **effective procedures** to welcome and **guarantee economic** and **social integration** to those who come voluntarily **is not** yet **implemented**, which leads to a great number of migrants who wish to enter the country regularly, to do so through asylum applications, even though they do not fall into this category. This produces **mechanisms of distortion** in the **reception system**, which in turn create and maintain an indefinite '**state of irregularity**', as well as altering the asylum application process, which ultimately degenerates into **social marginality** and the **exploitation** of these people (Schiavone, 2021).

This can be identified in the **social and political discourse** reported on the **media**, where 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' are often not referred to as such, but fall under the more generic denomination of '**migrant**' or '**clandestine**' (in Italian: "*migranti*"; "*immigrati*", "*clandestini*") as an **undifferentiated population** whose specific identification is not known, reported, or given mediatic relevance, thus contributing to creating an 'identity' that is left fluid and vague.

Moreover, this description is usually combined with **demeaning vocabulary,** generally relating to the **animal world**, such as 'parasites', 'leeches', 'scroungers sponging off the welfare state' (Perocco and Della Puppa, 2023), or in the expressions such as 'migrants are *swarming*', "migrants were *herded*".

These kinds of frames have a twofold effect: on the one hand the **legitimization of the status quo**, without having to act on the implementation of effective legal measures against these kinds of irregularities, thus perpetuating a system of reception and integration that is fundamentally flawed.

On the other hand, they are **instrumental** in fostering in the **public opinion** the **fear** of a great number of people **invading** the country, who take advantage of the **welfare state** whilst causing **social distress** and being a **threat** to the political order.

This is however **contradicted** by the **actual data** reporting that, in the face of a rapidly growing phenomenon (see the UN High Commission's "Global Trends" report on World Refugee Day, 20 June, 2022), the **number of refugees** in Europe is rather low compared to the population (a ratio of 5 asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants), and that **Italy** is the country with the **lowest number** of asylum seekers in Europe.

Another interesting and powerful way the '**otherness**' of **refugees** is portrayed as **fluid** is identifiable in the **water metaphors** and **measure-words** associated with the word 'refugees' (e.g. *flood of, influx of, tide of, wave of* ~) (LTD Collocation Dictionary, 1997).

Dry land, the human place by definition, that of **stability**, cities and homes, **is contrasted** with the **instability** and **unpredictability** of **water** as an element that **cannot be** grasped, **contained** and controlled. In this sense, the **water-related semantic field** is particularly effective in conferring an identity to refugees that seem to lie outside the realm of people and the human consortium, belonging instead to the **wilderness of nature**.



quotidiano comunista

il manifesto

ANNO XLV • N. 210 • GIOVEDÌ 3 SETTEMBRE 2015

EURO 1,50 www.ilmanifesto.info

Niente asilo

Non ha nome, non avrà terra: è l'immagine choc del piccolo profugo siriano trovato cadavere sulla spiaggia di Bodrum in Turchia, dopo l'ennesimo naufragio nel Mediterraneo. E mentre l'Unione europea si dissolve sulla chiusura delle frontiere, il governo della Repubblica Ceca identifica i migranti «marchiandoli» con dei numeri. A Budapest profughi ancora bloccati alla stazione PAG. 2,3,15

This is the front page of the Italian left-wing newspaper *Il Manifesto* published on 3 September 2015, reporting on the Syrian refugee crisis that hit Europe during that period. The caption reads: "***He has no name, he will have no land**: this is the shocking image of a little Syrian refugee found dead on the beach in Bodrum, Turkey, after yet another shipwreck in the Mediterranean* [...]". The dead refugee child laying on the shore is presented under the words "*Niente asilo*", whereby '*niente*' means 'nothing, none' and '*asilo*' means both 'asylum' and 'kindergarten, nursery': an **intentionally shocking pun**, which aims to provoke insufferable feelings of injustice in the viewer.

The horrifying **picture** taken by a **Turkish press photographer** in this case deliberately brings the tragic implications of this **dehumanized** and **impersonal identity** to its climax: the face of the little one is not visible, the photo anonymously captures his body from behind, against the background of the open sea. Here, such a **controversial** and **appalling image** (made worse by the fact that we are looking at a dead *child*) interacts with the two-word provoking headline (which reinforces the reference to *childhood*) in a jarring way, playing on the **emotional appeal**, as it immediately arouses emotions of anger and indignation in the mass reader.

The **use of images** to convey specific **meanings** and trigger **emotions** in the viewers has been widely analyzed as,

for example, in Susan **Sontag**'s ***On Photography*** (1977) where the philosopher discusses both the **ethic** and the **aesthetic elements** of the visual impact of photographs and their role in the **construction** of a specific **representation** and **interpretation** of **social reality**. For more **theoretical sources** on this, see *Media Discourse* by Norman Fairclough (1995) and *Elements of Semiology* by Roland Barthes (1967).

In this case, the **underlying intent** of the newspaper's front page is to **criticise** the European Union and its **inadequate reception policies** for refugees in the face of an emergency (the full article can be found at: https://ilmanifesto.it/edizioni/il-manifesto/il-manifesto-del-03-09-2015).

This is achieved by **appropriating** the political representation of refugees as **dehumanized** and **impersonal**, generally belonging to a **right-wing political discourse**, **in order to highlight the unacceptability of this stance** by contrast, almost suggesting that this child's tragic death is the result of treating refugees not like all other human beings, that is, not granting them the protection and safety they deserve.

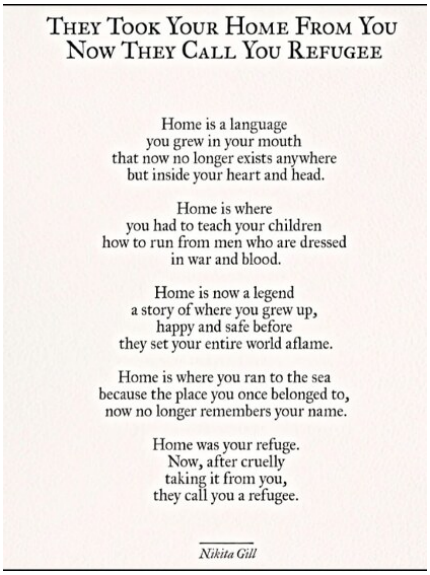
To conclude, a further **consideration** should be made. While the photo purposefully portrays the impersonalization of the little refugee, who then becomes a **symbol** of all the refugees dead in the migration crossings, the child **had a name** and a **story,** which **has to be reported** and **remembered** to avoid the risk that **turning a human being** into a **symbol** makes us forget his/her **individuality** and **humanity.**

The little boy was called **Alan Kurdi** [2], he was a Syrian refugee that, together with his family, was trying to **reach Europe** from Turkey. The **Kurdi family** had been attempting to **enter Canada** to join their relatives in Vancouver, but after they **were denied** the **application** for the asylum and thus an exit visa from Turkey, Alan's father relied on a **people smuggler** to reach the Greek island of Kos. Several people lost their lives in that trip aboard an inflatable boat, and after the incident made the headlines throughout the world, the **identified perpetrators** were **detained** with charges of **human trafficking**.

Subversion:

In this section, a selection of **examples** from **poetry** and **visual discourse** aims to provide **counter-reactions** to the **political representation** of **refugees's identity** more often than not portrayed as **threats** or as **victims**.

Here, the **human aspect** is made more **salient** and is **critically contrasted** with the **political** and **social one**, transcending the boundaries of nation, cultural background, state borders, rule of law, etc., to start from the primary condition of **being human** before **any law** is applied or enforce on it.


THEY TOOK YOUR HOME FROM YOU
NOW THEY CALL YOU REFUGEE

Home is a language
you grew in your mouth
that now no longer exists anywhere
but inside your heart and head.

Home is where
you had to teach your children
how to run from men who are dressed
in war and blood.

Home is now a legend
a story of where you grew up,
happy and safe before
they set your entire world aflame.

Home is where you ran to the sea
because the place you once belonged to,
now no longer remembers your name.

Home was your refuge.
Now, after cruelly
taking it from you,
they call you a refugee.

Nikita Gill

Reflection on the **issue of agency**: in this poem **Nikita Gill** specifically underlines the lack of agency that refugees endure when it comes to basic aspects of human life that they are deprived of.
Their **passivisation** here is not used in a derogatory manner, but rather it is presented as a **form of violence** that is acting out on them, that results from their humanity, their **home**, being taken away from them.

The poem "*Refugee Blues"* by British poet **W.H. Auden**, was first released in **1939** on the verge of World War Two. It reflects on the condition of **Jewish refugees** who were compelled to flee Nazi Germany but were **unable** to find **safety** abroad (see also "*We Refugees*" by **Hanna Arendt** and **Giorgio Agamben**'s **comments** on the same text).
The poem portrays the **agony** and **suffering** of having to flee one's home and being denied basic human rights. Particularly suggestive are those lines in which **natural elements**, untouched and untouchable by human laws, are posed in **stark contrast** with the circumstances of the protagonists, a German Jew and his family. As human beings, they belong to this same **nature** and **life**, broadly understood, where the only constraints are those of the body (e.g. the need for food, warmth and shelter), and yet they are restrained, discriminated against, persecuted for their '**political**' **identity**.
The contrasts are for example: ***old yew*** blossoming anew every spring vs. ***old passports****; the* ***poodle*** kept warm and the ***cat*** let in vs. ***German Jews*** left out in the cold*;* ***fish swimming free*** vs. the metaphorical distance of the same freedom for the protagonist; ***birds in the trees*** singing at their ease vs. ***the human race****;* ***falling snow*** vs. ***soldiers marching*** looking out for them.
The lines that best capture and emphasise this contrast are:
"If you've got ***no passport*** *you're officially* ***dead****"*
But we are still alive*, my dear, but we are still alive.*


Jewish refugees from Czechoslovakia being marched away by British police at Croydon airport in March 1939

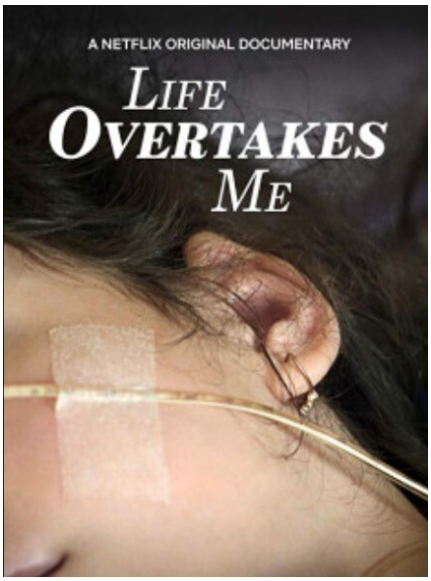
Refugee Blues (1939)
Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.
Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.
In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew;
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.
The consul banged the table and said:
'If you've got no passport, you're officially dead';
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.
Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go today, my dear, but where shall we go today?
Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said:
'If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread';
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.
Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying: 'They must die';
We were in his mind, my dear, we were in his mind.
Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.
Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.
Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.
Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors;
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.
Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.



https://www.20minutes.fr/culture/1681107-20150907-refugies-artistes-celebrites-appellent-solidarite

Visual discourse
This is a **popular image** circulating on the Internet in 2015 the year of Europe's refugees crisis.
Once again, here **refugees** are portrayed as **victims**, lacking individual identity, falling with no possibility of reversing their direction, being dehumanised (Malkki, 1996).
The very strong **visual metaphor** of the **boat upside** down instils an immediate sense of helplessness, all the while subtly inviting the spectator to a **change of perspective**. The 'victimhood' of refugees is not an end in itself, the people are not drowning in the sea: under the caption making a point of their **lack of choice** in being refugees, the viewer is almost encouraged to make an **active choice** towards them, to virtually reach out to catch them.

This **documentary-film** directed by **John Haptas** and **Kristine Samuelson** (2019) shows the case of **refugee children** in **Sweden**, suffering from the so called '**resignation syndrome'**.
This is a form of complex PTSD, originally identified in Sweden in the 1990s, which **affects children** and **teenagers** who have experienced **psychological trauma** after difficult and protracted relocation processes.
As **application** for **asylum** often take a **long time** to be evaluated before it may be possible to grant them and their family the protection they seek, they withdraw in a state of **severe depression** and diminished consciousness, as a **reaction** to the **stress** and the feeling of **hopelessness**.
There is solid research surrounding the effect that migration can have on the psychological and socio-cultural wellbeing [3] of human beings, but **resignation syndrome** seems to be a **specific reaction** to the **trauma** of **refugees**, who in most cases flee from dangerous situations in their country of provenience and are forced to wait, sometimes having to deal with their requests being rejected and issuing appeals over the course of years, before they are granted the legal permission to remain in the new country.





https://gallerieditalia.com/it/torino/mostre-e-iniziative/mostre/2023/02/jr-deplace-e-s/

This picture comes from the exhibition ***Déplacé•e•s*** by French photographer **JR**. The artist uses photography to elicit awareness on human rights and environmental issues: https://www.jr-art.net/projects

Among his projects, he made a series of i**nstallations** that spread awareness about the **millions** of **refugee children** around the world.

This is a **public art performance** held in Piazza San Carlo, Turin, Italy, where hundreds of people took part in bringing five tarpaulins depicting the **images of children** encountered during visits to **refugee camps** from **Rwanda** to **Greece** as well the image as a young girl from **Ukraine**.

Drones captured the event, showing how the **children's figures collided** providing an extraordinary spectacle.

A video from Greece (added on June, 12, 2024)

This video is based on a **true story** that took place on the **Greek island of Lesvos** in October 2016. Lesvos is a north Aegean Greek island in which more than 500,000 refugees sought refuge in the period between 2015-2020 and still counting.

In an attempt of the Greek government to **incorporate refugees** it was decided that **children** should attend **elementary school**, but even though they were put in seperate classes from the Greek children a number of parents opposed the idea.

This **short stop motion** film tells the story of **Maram**, one of those children, a **refugee from Yemen**, on **her first day at school** when a group of **xenophobic parents** blocked her entrance violently, locking the school gate and shouting racist slogans.

Along with **other parents** who expressed their solidarity, the **school teacher** tried to stop them and soon the quarrel escalated in front of the shocked Maram until her classmates stepped in and restored things.

It is a story that shows how **refugee families** seeking the “Land without sorrows and pains" (as they considered Europe to be) instead found themselves staggering in the “Land in between”, living in a **refugee camp**. Yet, it also shows how **solidarity** can make a **change**.

The work for the original video was supported by **Office of Displaced Designers** during their Documentary Film Making workshop in 2017 - https://www.displaceddesigners.org

Maram stop motion animation, 5', Arabic with Greek and English subtitles, 2020
Narration, rap: Maram Omar
Direction, script, artwork, photography: Efi Sialevri- Vicky Yiagopoulou
Post production: Alexandros Spathis
Intro ARTWORK: Eleni Rousopoulou
Music: Leonidas Danezos/ Alcalica
Maram ENG
https://filmfreeway.com/MyMaram
To know more about the context:
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/letter-lesvos
IOW Editorial Board wishes to thank **Efi Sialevri** and **Vicky Yiagopoulou** for allowing the reproduction of their video on IOW website.

Discussion:

The **ambivalent portrayal** and **perception** of **refugees** both as **victims** in need of protection and as **threats** to the nation order is an interesting starting point for developing the discussion further.

- What image and or idea comes up in your mind when you think of a 'refugee'?
- How do you conceptualize the difference between 'migrant' and 'refugee'?
- How are refugees portrayed by the media in your country? How are they portrayed in other written or visual sources (books, pictures, documentaries, etc.) that you have come across?
- How is the image of the Western world as ‘safe’ and ‘protective’ to welcome ‘others’ that aren’t part of it perpetuated?
- In your view, being a refugee is a permanent or a changeable condition? Think of the speech vietnamese actor Ke Huy Quan gave at the 95th Oscars ceremony when receiving the Oscar for best supporting actor (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ1SUKxSAi4).
- How many different types of 'refugees'can you think of?
- Do you know any refugee? What is their story?
- In italian. Online quiz: “*Quanto ne sai dei rifugiati nel mondo?*” (https://www.cartadiroma.org/news/in-evidenza/quiz-quanto-ne-sai-dei-rifugiati-nel-mondo/)

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