Chapter III

Bo(dies) of No Return

To be oppressed means to be deprived of your ability to choose, to act, to move freely. The body knows this.

— Bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Discrimination takes different forms. Refugees, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or age, experience varying levels of marginalisation and dehumanisation. Individuals are often shaped and restricted by their social, political, and economic conditions. For refugees, however, the loss of agency is far more severe. They are displaced from their homes, denied legal rights, and left vulnerable in unfamiliar environments. These experiences cause serious disruptions to their autonomy. For many, this results in a loss of bodily agency, where their bodies become sites of violence, exploitation, and control, with few options for escape or redress. The combination of displacement, powerlessness, and vulnerability leads to a deep crisis, where the bodily autonomy of refugees is constantly under threat. The title Bo(dies) of No Return thus reflects this layered experience: the literal body marked by suffering, and the symbolic ‘dies’ within, signifying lives stalled, stories silenced, and returns denied.

While women often face gendered forms of violence and oppression in refugee settings, it is important to recognise that the loss of bodily agency affects all refugees—men, women, and children alike. Men may face physical violence, exploitation, and forced labour. Children may suffer psychological trauma, forced separation from their families, and the abuse of their innocence. Women are especially vulnerable, often enduring sexual violence and gendered discrimination that make their suffering even greater. Still, the shared experience of losing bodily agency among all refugees shows a wider, systemic

problem that needs careful attention. This chapter studies the idea of bodily agency within the experience of refugeehood. It draws on Hannah Arendt's theoretical ideas to show how refugees, no matter their gender, suffer a deep loss of agency. Through this discussion, the chapter aims to show how violence becomes normal in refugee settings and how this strips people of their humanity and autonomy, making bodily suffering an ordinary and almost unseen part of daily life.

The dynamics of oppression and violence experienced by refugees can be better understood through Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil,' a term she coined by her in the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to describe how ordinary individuals can become complicit in widespread atrocities. Arendt's analysis of the Holocaust underscores the normalisation of violence, where systematic dehumanisation is continued not by isolated acts of malice, but by widespread indifference and collective participation in harmful systems. This idea can be extended to the refugee context, where the loss of bodily agency, particularly in displacement, is often institutionalised and normalised. Refugees, regardless of gender, suffer from the erosion of their autonomy and dignity in environments where violence, exploitation, and disregard for human rights are pervasive. It is important to analyse the impacts of what Arendt terms as authoritarian regimes, in depriving the refugees of their meagre bodily rights by using common citizens as their baits.

It is crucial to acknowledge that refugees, regardless of gender, are disproportionately affected by violence during ethnic clashes, war, and other forms of oppression. In such contexts, violence often becomes a weapon wielded against the most socially vulnerable. As Piterman points out in her essay in *The Conversation*, "Hannah Arendt coined the term 'the banality of evil' to suggest that the Holocaust was not only the work of crazed fanatics, but also the collective work of ordinary individuals who became acculturated by

a state-sanctioned process that stripped Jews and others of their humanity" (Piterman, 2). While Arendt's analysis was not specifically focused on gender, the concept of the 'banality of evil' can be applied to the broader refugee experience, where violence, exploitation, and dehumanisation are not only perpetrated by those in power but also by ordinary individuals complicit in perpetuating these injustices.

The 'banality of evil' is particularly evident in refugee settings, where the bodies of refugees—whether men, women, or children—become sites of abuse and exploitation. Refugees are often caught in a cycle of vulnerability, where their physical and emotional suffering is normalised. Borges' article titled "Journey of Violence: Refugee Women's Experiences Across Three Stages and Places" details on the narratives of women becoming dehumanised bodies in the process of becoming refugees. In refugee camps and other spaces of forced migration, this normalisation of violence extends beyond gender, affecting all refugees as they endure conditions of extreme vulnerability and loss of autonomy. However, the women and children are found to be the most affected in terms of physical abuse.

This chapter aims to explore how the concept of the 'banality of evil' can be applied to the refugee experience, highlighting the loss of bodily agency experienced by refugees, regardless of gender. The dehumanisation and exploitation of refugees in these contexts are not the actions of isolated individuals but are embedded within the larger structures of power and indifference. It is this collective apathy and complicity that create the conditions for violence to become normalised, where the suffering of refugees—whether men, women, or children—is often seen as an unfortunate but inevitable part of their displacement. Nissim Mannathukkaren's article published in *The Hindu on* May 19, 2016 specifies:

> German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt gave the world the phrase, "the banality of evil". In 1963, she published the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, her account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi military officer and one of the key figures of the Holocaust. Eichmann was hanged to death for war crimes. Arendt's fundamental thesis is that ghastly crimes like the Holocaust are not necessarily committed by psychopaths and sadists, but, often, by normal, sane and ordinary human beings who perform their tasks with a bureaucratic diligence. (Mannathukkaren)

Refugees, no matter their gender, are often victims of power misused by those who are supposed to protect them. In refugee camps and temporary shelters, people responsible for their safety—such as soldiers—often take advantage of their vulnerability instead. This exploitation, especially in the setting of displacement, shows how the loss of bodily agency becomes a common part of the refugee experience. It is through the deliberate and repeated reduction of their autonomy that refugees are exposed to what Hannah Arendt called the 'banality of evil,' where violence and abuse become normal parts of life.

The conditions faced by refugees from Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and other conflict zones are inhumane, far surpassing the hardships faced by those in societies striving for equality and stability. As Hannah Arendt notes in her work *The Human Condition*, "The human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature" (Arendt, 9). The violence and abuse endured by refugees, particularly those in vulnerable conditions, contradict the fundamental human condition as described by Arendt. In these circumstances, refugees—men, women, and children alike—are deprived of the basic human right to bodily autonomy and dignity.

They are trapped in environments where they have little to no agency to escape the brutality they face, unable to move toward safety or normal human conditions.

In societies marked by inequality, people are often reduced to their physical bodies, with value placed on surface-level traits. Refugees, regardless of gender, face an even greater form of this vulnerability. They are displaced and forced to rely on outside help to survive. Without basic rights and often unable to meet their own needs, they face systemic marginalisation that deepens their suffering. While gender discrimination often affects women more severely, it is important to recognise that all refugees—men, women, and children—experience a loss of bodily autonomy. Their physical integrity is weakened by their displacement and their dependence on others. For refugee women, this loss of bodily agency is made worse by the need to depend both on humanitarian aid and on social systems that see them mainly as vulnerable. These women are often treated as passive recipients of charity, not as individuals with dignity. The violence they face, whether in their home countries or in refugee camps, is often carried out by those who are meant to protect them. This shows how power is misused in spaces where people are most at risk.

Gender discrimination in these settings harms not only those directly affected but also weakens the broader social environment. It creates unsafe conditions that allow violence and marginalisation to continue, making justice and equality harder to achieve. The exploitation of refugees, especially through sexual violence, is part of a wider pattern of power that keeps hierarchies and inequalities in place. In environments where victims, rather than perpetrators, are blamed, the power imbalance grows even stronger. This leaves individuals with few ways to reclaim their bodily autonomy and dignity. Oppressors maintain control by dominating marginalised groups and often punish women more harshly when they resist or demand their rights. In many cases, women face sexual

violence as a form of punishment for challenging these structures, while men do not face the same risks. In refugee camps, where women are already at risk because of displacement, the threat of sexual violence increases their insecurity and forces them to live with continuing abuse.

The exploitation of women's bodies is a form of body politics used by those in power to maintain control, with refugee women suffering both in their homelands and in places of resettlement. Their lack of legal protection and statelessness prolong their suffering, often rendering them disposable. While marginalised groups face various forms of exploitation, women are subjected to additional sexual violence, intensifying their vulnerabilities. These experiences of abuse and lack of agency reflect the broader social hierarchies that leave refugee women struggling to survive while being denied the space to assert their needs. The researchers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Save the Children UK's report on "Sexual Violence and Exploitation of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone" found that "sexual exploitation in refugee settings was widespread, with perpetrators including aid workers, peacekeepers, and community leaders" (Ferris 586). This highlights a situation where those in positions of power, under the guise of offering help, take advantage of vulnerable women.

The most troubling aspect of the misuse of power is the absence of guilt among these perpetrators, who rationalise their actions by claiming that the women are repaying them for their assistance. This justification serves to normalise sexual violence, leaving the victims unable to speak out or protect themselves due to cultural constraints and the power dynamics within these environments. Alfaro-Velcamp, in the research article titled "Rape without remedy: Congolese refugees in South Africa" analyses, "It is increasingly recognised that immigrants are repeatedly raped in their home countries, in transit, and then again in their host countries" (11). The underlying issue driving these abuses is the

deeply ingrained chauvinistic belief that men possess the right to control and objectify women, a belief central to rape culture. Martha C. Nussbaum, in her essay "Objectification," explains seven key concepts involved in the objectification of women: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum 257). These concepts are evident in the treatment of refugee women, who are often reduced to mere tools for fulfilling the desires of the oppressors. Their bodies are treated as property, stripped of autonomy, and subjected to violence without regard for their emotional pain or dignity.

Bartky states that "sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are isolated from her identity as a person, reducing her to an object for male sexual desire" (Szymanski 14). This phenomenon reflects the reality for many refugee women, who, stripped of their basic rights, live in constant danger in foreign lands, viewed and treated as objects. The repeated victimisation and the societal tendency to blame women for their plight exacerbate the psychological harm, leading to self-objectification. As Szymanski notes, "Females' self-reported experiences of sexual victimisation are related to more self-objectification and body shame and adverse psychological outcomes, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder" (Szymanski 11). These deeply ingrained societal biases make it difficult for victims to speak out, leaving them vulnerable to repeated assaults as they often have no safe refuge.

The power over refugee bodies begins in their homeland when they become victims of ethnic clashes, hatred, and war. The damage to their bodies continues as they are forced to leave by their oppressors. They face cruel treatment that denies them the right to control their own bodies. Even on their journey to seek safety, they suffer violence, torture, and abuse. These attacks often go unpunished. When refugees lose their citizenship, they also lose legal rights over their bodies. On reaching camps, asylums, and

detention centres, they continue to face the same struggles. Those who are supposed to protect them often become new oppressors. At every stage, the refugee body remains exposed to harm and control by others.

Lack of proper sanitation facilities and healthcare facilities in the refugee camps is a major act of degrading refugee bodies. It is essential to resolve this, not just for the betterment of refugees but for the betterment of environment and society as a whole:

> Data gathered from 23,040 patients at Doctors of the World clinics in 25 cities across Europe found that more than half (54.2%) of the pregnant women surveyed had not had access to antenatal care and only one-third (34.5%) of children seen had been vaccinated against mumps, measles and rubella and only slightly more (42.5%) against tetanus. One in five patients had given up seeking medical care or treatment 20 because of difficulties, including financial and language barriers. (438)

The above data mentioned in Leigh Daynes' article titled "The health impacts of the refugee crisis: a medical charity perspective" stresses that all humans have equal rights to medication and healthcare facilities. It is the duty of the government to provide healthcare services to everyone, without discrimination. Refugees, despite losing their citizenship or living in temporary shelters, must not be denied access to medical help. Healthcare is a basic human right and should not depend on nationality, status, or place of residence. The article highlights that ignoring the health needs of refugees leads to further suffering and worsens their vulnerable condition. It also points out that providing proper healthcare is a step towards respecting the dignity and bodily rights of refugees.

Judith Butler, in *Bodies that Matter*, discusses how powerful individuals in society reduce the powerless to mere bodies, stripping them of their humanity. She explains that harm done to these bodies often goes unchallenged because their suffering is seen as

unimportant by those in power. Butler states, “The limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as ‘bodies’” (Butler 7). This means that society decides whose bodies deserve recognition and whose do not. Those in control create unfair divisions, denying dignity and respect to the oppressed. They use fear to maintain their power and take away any sense of autonomy from the powerless. Butler also points out that the rape of oppressed women is not about sexual desire, but about using violence to control and dominate. This idea is linked to Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality of evil,’ which shows how cruelty becomes normal in systems of oppression.

Uwiringiyimana, in How Dare the Sun Rise, recounts the discrimination her family endured in their homeland, where they were treated as outsiders. She also describes how fear and violence followed them into the refugee camps that were supposed to offer protection. In vivid detail, she narrates the Gatumba massacre: “Limbs, bones, and bloody bodies lay everywhere. I smelled burning flesh. I saw men with guns, machetes, torches. They were marching around the camp, looking for survivors to kill” (13). These horrific scenes show how refugees lose all control over their own bodies, becoming targets of violence with no ability to protect themselves. The refugees’ bodily existence itself becomes vulnerable and exposed to harm. Such acts of violence, targeting innocent civilians, align with Hannah Arendt’s critique of the dangerous confusion between violence and power. The hatred directed at minority communities destroys not only the lives of individuals but also the moral foundation of systems that are supposed to uphold human dignity.

On the day they left Congo, Uwiringiyimana and her family also faced extreme hatred and violence in their homeland. They were attacked in their van in a way that was violent and terrifying. This hatred, existing deep in society, leads to the banality of evil,

where cruelty becomes normal, and refugees lose control over their own bodies. The brutal attacks reflect the worst use of power over vulnerable people and leave lasting scars on those who survive:

> We had mattresses and suitcases tied to the top of the vehicle, and the attackers tore them down and stole them. We hurried to lock the doors and tried to close the windows, but the windows were stuck open—the vehicle was rusty and old, ready to fall apart. People reached in, grabbing at us. They ripped our watches off our wrists. I had always known that many Congolese people disliked us, but I had never seen such hate on people's faces. (49)

The violent attacks in the Gatumba camp, with burning bodies and bleeding refugees, show the cruelty and arrogance of the attackers who promoted ethnic hatred. The death of Uwiringiyimana's little sister, Deborah, is a crucial event that reveals the vulnerable state of refugees and the brutalities caused by deep-rooted hatred. Uwiringiyimana describes the scene, "It was the most horrifying scene imaginable. Somehow my mom found the strength to cradle my little sister's burned skull in her arms. We saw the row of people who had been shot dead while running from the tent when the attack began. We found my cousin's body, which had not been burned" (Uwiringiyimana 64). The fact that the attackers aimed to kill a six-year-old child shows the extent of their dehumanisation and the depth of ethnic hatred planted in them over the years. Their attempts to burn the camps and kill the refugees alive are acts that reveal the complete loss of humanity among the attackers. These violent actions show the death of kindness and sympathy, leading to the loss of bodily agency among the vulnerable refugees. Having escaped one harsh attack, Uwiringiyimana and her family faced another brutal experience at the camp, one that continues to haunt them.

After arriving in America as refugees, Uwiringiyimana's family faces not only emotional challenges but also economic hardships. They are forced to work long hours for very little pay just to maintain stability. Uwiringiyimana writes, "The factory hours are long and tiring, and the work is tedious. It is painful to see my parents come home looking so worn out. But they never complain. They do what they have to do" (Uwiringiyimana 105). Despite the language barriers and many difficulties, her parents focus on securing a better future for their children. However, the hard labour they are forced to do reflects a loss of bodily agency. Refugees like Uwiringiyimana's parents are expected to work harder than others, often with no choice, just to survive. Their bodies are used for cheap labour, with little regard for their health or dignity. This continued exploitation shows that even after escaping violence, refugees still struggle to regain full control over their own lives and bodies.

Uwiringiyimana's How Dare the Sun Rise powerfully shows the complete loss of bodily agency faced by refugees, both in their homeland and beyond. The brutal violence she describes — from the Gatumba massacre to the attack on her family's van — highlights how refugees are stripped of all control over their own bodies and are reduced to mere targets of hatred. Scenes of burning bodies, bleeding refugees, and the murder of innocent children like her sister Deborah reveal the deep dehumanisation that ethnic hatred can produce. These acts of violence, carried out with no regard for life, reflect Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil, where cruelty becomes normalised and morally accepted within society. Refugees are not only attacked and displaced but are also forced into systems that continue to exploit them. Even after reaching America, Uwiringiyimana's family faces economic hardships, working long and tiring hours for minimal pay, showing how bodily exploitation continues in more hidden forms. Their labour is demanded without concern for their health or dignity, underlining that the loss of

bodily autonomy does not end with physical survival. Through her personal story, Uwiringiyimana reveals how violence, hatred, and systemic neglect strip refugees of agency over their own bodies at every stage of their displacement.

The Milk of Birds presents two internally displaced women, Nawra and Adeeba, whose distinct upbringings shape their responses to hardship and their experiences of bodily agency. Nawra is raised in a traditional, gender-biased environment that instils in her a sense of inferiority and teaches her to suppress her voice, while Adeeba grows up with progressive ideas that empower her to confront adversity. Although both face the same threat of sexual violence, it is Adeeba's progressive mindset that enables her to resist and safeguard herself and others, showing that rejecting societal stereotypes is a path toward reclaiming bodily agency. In contrast, Nawra, despite internally sharing Adeeba's views, initially lacks the courage to express them, reflecting, "I have the same thought. But I am not like my friend. Every thought that crosses my mind does not cross my lips" (Whitman 7). Nawra's silence, shaped by fear of societal repercussions, leads to her victimisation at sixteen, underlining how those in power exploit the bodies of vulnerable girls to assert control. However, through Adeeba's example, Nawra gradually realises that speaking out is essential to reclaim ownership of her body and to resist the structures that seek to silence and oppress her.

The stereotypes that keep women in traditional roles take away their ability to control their own bodies and lives. These beliefs often operate without people even realizing it, pushing women to act in ways that limit their freedom. Nawra's thoughts about the foreign aid workers show how deep this bias run, "She and her companion are young and beautiful, and I wonder how their husbands let them travel to this dirty place" (Whitman 9). This reflects how society often thinks women should be controlled. In the same way, a mother who refuses her daughter's help, believing that a husband is all she

needs, shows how traditional ideas can block women from asking for help and continue to treat their bodies as objects. Sexual violence makes this loss of bodily agency worse, allowing others to take control of women's bodies without facing consequences. Changing these outdated views is crucial to breaking down the systems that silence women and deny them control over their own bodies.

In the Darfur camp, Nawra and Adeeba, two teenage girls, endure unimaginable trauma that few people in the world could survive. The very soldiers assigned to protect them from harm become the perpetrators of violence. The impunity they enjoy, knowing that they will not face punishment for their actions, enables them to commit atrocities without fear of reprisal. This unchecked power leads to widespread abuse, including the sexual violation of women, which is seen as a tool to assert dominance over the IDPs. Adeeba, while collecting firewood with other women, is attacked by the soldiers on her way back. The fact that the assault was a mere exercise of power, rather than a crime, devastates her. However, the emotional toll is even greater than the physical trauma—the shame of having to conceal the violation adds another layer of suffering to her already broken spirit.

Sexual violence, particularly against internally displaced women, often serves as a demonstration of male power rather than sexual desire. This is evident in *The Milk of Birds*, where Nawra's father protests against the oppression he faces, and in retaliation, the men decide to rape Nawra as a means of inflicting pain on her family. Rather than harming the men directly, the men choose to violate the women in the household, believing that this act of violence will instil greater fear and humiliation than killing the men. Nawra's tragic experience underscores this, "So, my father and my mother and my brother and my sisters and my cousins stood there with eyes wide open while these men used me and Kareema as women" (Whitman 146). The belief in the purity of women and the importance of

preserving their virginity makes such violations an act of deeper subjugation, reinforcing the notion that women's bodies are tools for control. This violent act of objectification, instead of empowering the men, perpetuates a system of dominance where women's safety is undermined by societal values that position their bodies as objects to be conquered.

Adeeba's experience of sexual assault by soldiers while gathering firewood highlights the brutal reality that women who challenge patriarchal norms often face violence as punishment. Her assault is not just an isolated act of cruelty, but a systematic response to any defiance of male authority. The sexual violence serves as a direct consequence of her refusal to remain silent, underscoring the precariousness of a woman's agency in a world that punishes autonomy. What is particularly distressing for Adeeba is not just the assault itself, but the expectation to hide it. The women assaulted with her are pressured to downplay their trauma, denying the reality of rape to avoid the ruinous stigma. This expectation that women must conceal their suffering further perpetuates the notion that their bodies are not their own.

Later, Adeeba's courage also brings to light a larger, more entrenched issue: the deeply ingrained societal belief that men are inherently superior to women. This idea is not only perpetuated by individual actions but is institutionalised through cultural practices. As the novel illustrates, "When a wife gave birth to a girl, her aunts and all the women trilled like frogs. If it was a boy, the men cried, God is the greatest" (Whitman 120). This widespread reverence for male offspring reinforces a culture that values women less, conditioning them to accept their subjugation. It is precisely this mindset that enables the perpetuation of gender-based violence and the silencing of women. The hierarchical structure that elevates men while devaluing women feeds into a cycle of control over women's bodies, exemplified in practices like sexual violence. To challenge this status

quo is not merely an act of personal resistance but a necessary call for societal transformation.

Women being brutally raped at their home, on their way to the camps and at the camps are terrorising incidents that grab them off their rights over their body. These brutalities are done by common men and soldiers who are supposed to protect them, which emphasises on the banality of evil. Nawra, in her letter to K.C. Canelli specifies, "Once I feared death, but now I know there are things worse" (108). The incidents of violence on her mother on their way to camp and the little girl Zaenab in the outskirts of the camp affect her more than her own torture at home, due to which she becomes pregnant. It is observed that the women are also beaten up, shot, attacked and violated when they are already bleeding to death as an act of gaining power over the feeble bodies. The women go through corporal abuse at all three places, as an extent of the banality of evil, that degrades them to be lesser beings than animals and gives them a life that is worser than death.

In *The Milk of Birds*, the concept of the 'banality of evil' can be applied to the systemic oppression of internally displaced women like Nawra and Adeeba, where violence and exploitation are not always the result of individual malice but a normalised and collective disregard for women's autonomy. Nawra's experiences of sexual violence and the societal forces that subjugate her reflect this banal evil, as the perpetrators act within a framework of accepted customs and traditions that objectify women's bodies as tools of control. The systemic indifference, where women's suffering becomes part of the societal fabric, mirrors Arendt's theory—where evil does not need to be monstrous to be destructive; it is enough that it is accepted and unchallenged.

Beyond sexual violence, the IDPs endure a myriad of challenges from the moment they are displaced from their homes. The first trauma is the loss of their sanctuary, their

homes, which should be the safest space. When their homeland transforms into a place of danger, their fight for survival begins. This ongoing struggle is not limited to any one group but extends to all refugees and IDPs, no matter where they are in the world. Various studies and narratives have highlighted the shared pain and suffering across different refugee communities. For example, the Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar's Rakhine State are considered one of the most vulnerable refugee populations globally. They have been fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh since the 1960s, as they continue to face violent oppression from both the government and local populations in Myanmar. As noted, "Oppressed by the government as well as the local population in Myanmar, they have been fleeing to Bangladesh since the 1960s" (Akhter 226).

The urgency of voicing these concerns is intensified by the fact that certain groups, especially Rohingya women, bear the brunt of the violence. Their stories are critical not only for understanding the current situation but for ensuring the future survival of their community. As one scholar observes, "The voices of the bearers of the people, or more specifically the Rohingya women, are therefore critical for the present as well the future survival of the Rohingyas as a community" (Mohsin 4). In this context, memoirs like *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* by Habiburahman become vital sources of information, giving insight into the unique challenges faced by these women, including the intersection of gender-based violence and displacement. These voices are not just important—they are essential to the continuing fight for justice, human rights, and dignity for the refugee population.

Habiburahman's memoir represents the experiences of Rohingya refugees and migrants, bringing attention to the violence and dislocation they face. Although the account is written from a male perspective and does not focus in detail on the specific harms experienced by women, it does not entirely omit them. Certain parts of the narrative

reveal how the Rohingya, particularly women, experience a loss of bodily agency both in Myanmar and in refugee camps. The memoir displays how the authorities in Myanmar use physical violence, harassment, and control over women's bodies as a way to force minority communities from their homes. As Habiburahman records, "The Rakhines' nationalist pride and religious extremism create a climate of fear, and frequent harassment and bullying add to the dangers already posed by the authorities and the army, in particular the NaSaKa" (Habiburahman 87). The targeting of women forms part of a larger pattern of violence that is treated as normal by those who carry it out, reflecting Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. Sexual violence is used not only to harm individuals but to break family structures and drive entire communities into exile.

However, Habiburahman's memoir fails to deeply explore the specific challenges faced by Rohingya women, focusing instead on his own experiences. Yet, through his own suffering, readers are forced to consider the far greater and more devastating impact such violence would have on women in the same circumstances. While all Rohingya people—regardless of gender—endure violent assaults and brutal attacks, the book's focus on a male narrator leaves the unique vulnerabilities of women in these situations largely unspoken. This oversight, however, encourages a critical examination of the gendered dimensions of displacement. Habiburahman's experiences shows how the Rohingya men are subject to physical beatings and torment by the officers, when they are found to be non-citizens of the host country and also when they are found to be who they actually are, in their homeland.

Rohingya men and women alike are subjected to oppressive laws and brutal treatment by a dictatorship, constantly living under the threat of violence and forced expulsion. The community is subjected to humiliation, marginalised, and made to feel unwanted in their own homeland. For women, this environment is even more perilous, as

they face the constant fear of arrest, sexual assault, and the possibility of being chased away at any given moment. In this context, the memoir, though limited in its scope regarding women's experiences, highlights the broader narrative of suffering and injustice faced by the entire Rohingya community. It implicitly calls attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the intersectional violence experienced by women refugees, whose bodies become sites of both political and gendered violence in times of conflict.

Habiburahman's memoir not only highlights the oppressive conditions faced by the Rohingya refugees but also draws attention to the loss of bodily agency, particularly for women. His father advises the family to obey the rules imposed by the dictatorship, urging them to remain silent in the face of insults and physical mistreatment. Yet even when they try to comply, the harsh regulations make it almost impossible to avoid punishment. When they inevitably break the rules, they are forced to bribe the police to escape further violence. One of the most disturbing incidents in the memoir is the arrest of Habiburahman's parents, after which his mother returns home bearing visible signs of physical and emotional suffering. He describes her appearance, "My mother's smile fails to hide her tiredness and distress. She looks distraught, there are bags under her eyes and her hair is a mess. Her blouse is torn, and there's a big red mark on her neck" (Habiburahman 64). This account reveals that violence against women is not limited to physical harm but extends to a deeper violation of their bodily autonomy. Her dishevelled appearance, torn clothing, and physical bruising point to the way the oppressors treat women's bodies as sites of domination. Through this, the memoir illustrates how the everyday practices of the regime reduce individuals to mere bodies to be controlled, reflecting Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil, where acts of cruelty become part of ordinary administrative rule. The loss of bodily agency here is not an isolated incident

but part of a broader system of domination that erases dignity and identity through repeated acts of violence.

This loss of bodily agency is not limited to his mother's experience but is a central theme for women refugees in general. While all refugees endure immense hardship, women, in particular, face heightened forms of violence, including sexual assault and forced displacement. The experience of being a refugee is doubly oppressive for women, who are vulnerable not only to the trauma of displacement but also to gender-based violence. They are not only displaced from their homes but also from their control over their own bodies. Research highlights the severity of this issue, with studies suggesting that "shifting collective norms around gender inequity, particularly at the community and peer levels, may sustainably support the safety and well-being of adolescent girls in refugee settings" (Stark 1). Women in refugee camps are often denied the basic right to bodily autonomy, as sexual violence, exploitation, and lack of access to essential health services persist as daily realities.

The concept of the banality of evil provides a way to examine the violence and oppression described in Habiburahman's memoir. Arendt's idea shows how ordinary individuals, embedded within oppressive systems, can carry out acts of cruelty not through deep personal hatred, but through thoughtless obedience to authority and the roles they are expected to perform. This way of understanding is clearly reflected in the organised violence against the Rohingya, particularly in the way women's bodies are targeted as part of efforts to erase a minority community. The fact that Habiburahman's mother was taken as a prisoner and physically harmed for the simple act of owning a piece of land shows the extent of injustice faced by minorities in Myanmar. The recurring accounts of sexual violence and harassment, as detailed in the memoir, show how acts of harm are normalised by those in positions of power. Such practices are not portrayed as exceptions but as part

of a broader method used to dehumanise and uproot minority groups. The repeated use of women's suffering as a political tool demonstrates how violence becomes a routine part of governance under oppressive regimes, further reflecting Arendt's argument that evil often operates through ordinary, unquestioning actions rather than through extraordinary acts of cruelty.

Habiburahman's mother's distressing experience, marked by physical harm and public humiliation, shows how such acts are not isolated events but part of a larger pattern intended to impose domination and control. These actions, carried out by individuals who follow the regime's orders without question, reveal the unsettling normality with which such cruelties are inflicted. By stripping women of their bodily agency, the authorities reduce them to objects of communal shame, using their suffering to weaken the social fabric of the Rohingya community.

The deliberate use of violence against women becomes a tool to advance the broader aim of ethnic removal, turning private pain into a public method of control. This organised pattern of harm reflects the dangers of banal evil, where ordinary people, by complying with oppressive structures, contribute to the spread of widespread violence and injustice. Moreover, addressing the loss of bodily agency requires addressing the root causes of refugee crises, which are often deeply tied to gender-based violence. As Yacob-Haliso asserts, "Truly durable solutions to humanitarian problems would be for their multidimensional root causes to be addressed" (Yacob-Haliso 64). These root causes, conflict, human rights abuses, political instability, and entrenched gender inequities continue to strip women of their bodily autonomy, forcing them into precarious situations where their safety and dignity are constantly at risk.

The oppressed are forced to endure insults and humiliations that erode their self-respect, simply to survive in their homeland, where they are despised by their oppressors.

The Rohingyas are degraded and subjected to inhumane treatment, their patience tested to its limits. Habiburahman reflects on his father's teachings:

> Dad has taught me to be submissive and play by their rules... I just have to deal with it, it's an uncomfortable moment and it'll pass... They insult me and I sense the impending danger. When I get back... they make me sweep the leaves around their military base... Episodes like this are a regular occurrence... It gives these soldiers who lack any shred of humanity the opportunity to abuse others and have a good laugh. (98)

Over time, the Rohingyas adjust to life under subjugation, learning to endure the daily erosion of their dignity as a condition of survival. They suppress their anger and frustration, forced to internalise their suffering under the constant threat of violence and humiliation. In doing so, they gradually come to accept the loss of control over their own bodies and lives as a grim necessity. Amid the inhumane treatment they face, their identities are reshaped by prolonged exposure to fear and coercion, leaving little space for personal agency. Even as they hold onto the distant hope that change might one day come, they live each day marked by the steady stripping away of their bodily autonomy. Their existence under such conditions reflects a life where survival demands the acceptance of powerlessness, and where the hope for future freedom carries with it the scars of a deeply rooted loss of agency.

The brutalities Habib faces persist even after his escape from Myanmar into Yangon, complicating his life further. The issue of being unwanted in his homeland continues to follow him wherever he seeks refuge and represents the lack of agency over his own body. Habiburahman recalls, "I remember the stories of innocent men and women who are imprisoned there and emerge battered and broken, to be taken in again by their

families in Sittwe. None of them are political prisoners or criminals, just men and women who are the wrong colour, the wrong religion" (133). This highlights the ongoing persecution of the Rohingyas, who remain marginalised and viewed as outsiders even after fleeing their homeland. Once escaped, Habib lives under the constant fear of capture and must remain in disguise. The threat of wrongful arrest intensifies in places like Yangon, where he must remain vigilant and cautious.

The acts of rebellion by a group of young, oppressed men bring significant consequences. The primary aim of the oppressors is to eliminate those who spread rebellious sentiments. Habib's physical suffering becomes unbearable as he faces extreme violence in prison. He is beaten to the brink of death, his body battered and bleeding. As he reflects, "Intense pain cripples my back. I am exhausted and don't even want to think. I mumble a few words before falling into a lethargic sleep. Once again, aggressive voices echo in my head, accompanied by the sound of a nightstick hitting the bars one by one" (159). In such a state, he realises that if he dies, no one would search for him—refugees are treated with indifference. Yet, despite the intense pain, Habib manages to resist and ultimately escape.

The intensified struggles of refugees, both men and women, highlight the pressing need to restore bodily agency and autonomy, which have been systematically stripped away through violence and oppression. Habiburahman's account of his own brutal physical assaults underscores how the banality of evil plays out, with those in power using violence to assert control over the vulnerable. Refugees already live in constant fear of the oppressors, and this fear is reinforced by continued brutality, not just to intimidate but to maintain a societal structure rooted in power and domination. While women endure the additional suffering of sexual violence, men too face physical abuse meant to break their spirit and destroy their sense of identity. The experience of Habiburahman's family

exemplifies this suffering, where both physical and emotional abuse are used to control and humiliate. The loss of bodily agency for refugees, regardless of gender, is not an incidental outcome; it is a deliberate tool of oppression, leaving individuals powerless and further entrenched in their vulnerability.

Ben Rawlence's City of Thorns, a biography of migrants in the Dadaab refugee camp, recounts the disturbing violence endured by refugee women. The narrative sheds light on the many reasons behind the forced migration of these individuals, including the unbearable brutality inflicted by invaders. Rawlence describes the invasion of Mogadishu in 2006 as marked by "astonishing speed, force, and cruelty," leaving "a trail of looted homes, massacred civilians and raped women" across Somalia (26). The new invaders wield power ruthlessly, using women's bodies as instruments of domination and control. For many women, this marks the loss of bodily autonomy, compelling them to abandon homes that have become sites of unimaginable violence.

Even during their arduous journeys to safety, refugee women face further violations at the hands of those entrusted with maintaining order. Rawlence notes how the Kenyan police refer to undocumented Somali refugees as "ATM machines," extorting money from men and subjecting women to routine sexual violence (35). This grim comparison highlights the extent to which women's bodies are reduced to exploitable resources, devoid of agency or humanity. The act of rape, described as routine, becomes as transactional as bribery, blurring the line between physical violence and economic exploitation. The dehumanisation of refugee women, illustrated through these accounts, points to a larger framework of exploitation that thrives on the powerlessness of displaced individuals.

The refugee camps are dangerously overcrowded, posing grave risks particularly to women, who are subject to persistent threats of sexual violence from men holding even

minimal authority. Rawlence notes, “Crime was sky high and rape was routine. And the population was about to explode again” (40). In these conditions, women confront the continual risk of assault without access to justice or effective protection. Efforts to resist or report such violence often expose them to further retribution. Consequently, their bodies are reduced to instruments of violation, stripped of autonomy and dignity. The normalisation of such atrocities illustrates a disturbing embodiment of the banality of evil, wherein systemic violence becomes an accepted, even anticipated, aspect of daily life. Forced to endure constant fear, the suffering of women is rendered invisible, treated merely as an inevitable by-product of displacement.

Refugees are conditioned to believe that mere survival is a privilege, even amidst relentless suffering. Many witness the deaths of loved ones and others from their homeland, leaving them trapped in a state of forced gratitude for being alive. Rawlence remarks, “Their clothes were ripped and their faces were sad, and then they carried on their journey. Rape of asylum seekers was epidemic. And they might have considered themselves the fortunate ones: they were alive” (67). This imposed mindset, instilled by men in positions of authority, reflects the banality of evil, where such atrocities are normalised and stripped of moral outrage. Sexual violence becomes a punishment for their survival, a cruel reminder of their perceived powerlessness.

The dehumanisation of refugees is methodical, designed to prolong their suffering. A powerless refugee lives under constant subjugation, where even death offers no real escape. Those in authority present sexual violence and suffering as inevitable or deserved, continuing cycles of exploitation. Survival itself becomes a form of punishment. This shows how normalised violence strips human life of its value, turning refugees into tools of suffering. Their journeys reveal a steady loss of bodily agency, as violence and oppression remove their autonomy and safety. Migrants on their way to refugee camps

often fall victim to brutal violence. This violence appears not only through physical attacks but also through the constant fear of sexual assault that controls the lives of women and girls. Even those who escape direct harm suffer from the lasting fear of violation. As Rawlence notes, "Isha's little troop from Rebay are lucky. None of them is raped, and none of them is left behind. Eighteen days, Isha counts until, finally, their huge crowd... arrives at the town of Dhobley" (67). Nonetheless, luck is a harsh judge; escaping rape does not remove the continuing threat that keeps refugees in a state of fear and submission.

This fear of violence operates as a tool of oppression, extending power over women's bodies without physical contact. The pervasiveness of this fear reflects a systematic loss of agency. Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' underscores how ordinary individuals enact or enable unspeakable horrors through compliance or indifference. The perpetrators of these crimes wield power with chilling normalcy, exploiting the vulnerability of the displaced. As Rawlence describes, "They shoot her uncle and rape her elder sister, but the presence of the baby in Muna's mother's arms save[s] both of their lives" (73). Such acts demonstrate how the dehumanisation of refugees enables violence to persist with impunity. The gendered dynamics of this violence are particularly striking. Men are often met with physical harm—beatings or executions—while women are subjected to sexual violence. This distinction underscores how sexual assault is not merely an act of gratification but a deliberate assertion of dominance and control. Even infants are not spared, as the killing of children becomes another means of demonstrating power. This entrenched violence reflects a disturbing normalisation of evil, where oppressors exploit the refugees' defencelessness to assert their power.

The banality of evil operates through mechanisms of fear, control, and dehumanisation, turning acts of extreme cruelty into ordinary, everyday practices. Refugee women, bearing the dual burden of forced displacement and constant fear, exemplify the profound loss of personal agency. Even when they escape direct acts of violence, they remain trapped within a system that governs them through intimidation and psychological pressure. This persistent erosion of bodily autonomy is a deliberate strategy used to uphold systemic oppression. Examining these conditions reveals how fear, violence, and the consolidation of power work together to sustain the structures that refugees are forced to endure, reducing individuals to instruments of survival rather than recognising them as full human beings. Women, particularly those in precarious settings like refugee camps, are often compelled to make choices that conform to external demands rather than express their own will. Sexual violence remains the most visible and brutal assertion of dominance over women, but other forms of coercion, such as forced dependency, manipulation, and the suppression of voice, also contribute to the systematic stripping away of their agency. These subtle forces, though less visible, reinforce the same structures of oppression and deepen the refugees' experience of powerlessness.

In the camps, women's rights are routinely violated—not only through abuse but also by shaming them for circumstances beyond their control. Muna, a refugee in the camp, faces such control when she becomes pregnant by a man she loves, Monday. Instead of supporting her, people around her pressure her to abort the baby. As Rawlence writes, "The Somalis working for GiZ called Muna into the office and advised her to have an abortion" (75). This coercion extends to cases of pregnancies resulting from rape, where the same society that forces women to carry their trauma-born children also denies them the right to choose whether to keep or abort the baby. These actions blatantly disregard the woman's autonomy, turning her into a vessel for societal control rather than

a person with agency. The oppressive dynamics in these camps further demonstrate how men assert dominance over women's lives, making decisions about their bodies without consent. Women lose the freedom to choose whom to love, to carry a child, or to decide against it. Even in dire circumstances, such as pregnancies resulting from violence, their voices are silenced by societal shame and fear.

Despite the overwhelming oppression, there are women who resist these injustices. Tawane, the youth leader for Hagadera, the largest camp, takes a stand against sexual violence at great personal risk. She fights fiercely to protect the women in the camp and challenges the oppressive power structures around her. Rawlence recounts her bravery, "She shows how she pleaded with the British not to rape the women in the northern Kenyan town of Wajir where they were staying at the time and how – an extended finger to motion shooting – she grabbed the barrel of a gun of a Kenyan soldier who tried to shoot her clansmen" (95). Tawane's courage exemplifies how resistance is possible, even in the face of overwhelming danger. However, her efforts are often met with limited success, as many women remain silenced by fear. The fear of retaliation, combined with the shame attached to sexual violence, prevents many women from speaking out about their experiences. Even when they attempt to seek justice, their 'rightless' state as refugees offers little hope for accountability. This systemic failure encourages oppressors while further isolating victims. Nevertheless, leaders like Tawane persist, driven by the hope that one day justice will prevail and refugee women will regain the freedom to live without fear.

This passivity, where violence becomes normalised and perpetrators escape accountability, reflects the idea of the 'banality of evil,' a concept that runs throughout this chapter. Hannah Arendt explains that banal evil occurs when ordinary individuals, shaped by social norms or commands, commit terrible acts without reflecting on their moral

consequences. In the refugee camps, this idea becomes visible through the routine acceptance of violence and exploitation, where abuse is either ignored or treated as part of the normal order. Women's loss of agency in these spaces is a direct outcome of such systemic indifference, where oppressors carry out their actions without recognising their moral weight. Rawlence captures this through the account of Fartuun, a refugee woman who recalls, "She struggled, in vain. 'After a while, I felt sperm rolling over my thighs,' she said. In total, at least seven women were raped and over $300,000 dollars was missing across the camps. No one, of course, was ever held to account" (113). Such impunity, where violence faces no consequences, clearly illustrates how banal evil operates, allowing oppression to continue without any sense of personal or collective responsibility.

The recurring violence in the camps, coupled with the absence of justice or consequences for perpetrators, further illustrates how banal evil operates within these environments. The lack of accountability for such acts of violence, coupled with the failure to confront the systems that enable such abuses, allows the cycle to persist. The refugee women, already vulnerable, are left powerless not just by the violence they endure but by the systemic indifference that enables their continued suffering. As Rawlence observes, while a few leaders, like Tawane, attempt to challenge this passivity, the deeply ingrained fear and shame surrounding these abuses prevent many women from speaking out. The pervasive silence surrounding these atrocities underscores the ongoing influence of banal evil: the normalisation of violence and exploitation against women, not as isolated acts of cruelty, but as a routine part of a broken system.

The exploitation of refugee labour and the way ordinary citizens take advantage of their vulnerable position is a clear example of the banality of evil, where acts of injustice become everyday practices. Refugees are made to work but are rarely paid fairly, if at all, for their efforts. Nisho, a young man seeking survival, engages in intense physical labour

yet earns so little that he cannot afford the basic goods sold in the very market where he works. Initially, refugees like Nisho are paid much less than citizens who perform the same tasks. Over time, however, their desperate circumstances are further exploited, and even their already meagre wages are reduced. Rawlence records this deterioration, "He complained about the weight, and about the wages: 150 shillings ($1.9) the owner of the goods would pay him for moving them. It used to be 250 shillings ($2.5)" (Rawlence 49). This systematic labour theft reflects the everyday functioning of the banality of evil, where situational opportunists gain small profits at the great cost of others' health, dignity, and survival. Refugees lose more than just wages; they are robbed of their energy, time, bodily strength, and basic rights. Their exploitation is normalised and overlooked, reducing them to expendable tools in a system that thrives on their dispossession.

Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns* gives a direct account of how refugees are trapped in a system where suffering becomes a way of life. The book shows how the banality of evil works quietly through everyday acts of exploitation, making violence and injustice seem normal. Refugees lose their bodily agency as they are forced to endure sexual violence, forced labour, and fear without the ability to resist or seek justice. Their bodies become objects within a system that values survival over dignity. Rawlence's work makes it clear that these conditions are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern where ordinary people, by following orders or acting out of self-interest, contribute to the ongoing oppression. The refugees' daily lives show how fear, powerlessness, and exploitation combine to erase autonomy and normalise cruelty.

In *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, the journey to Raqqa takes place under the heavy presence of the Shabiha, a civilian militia that supports the Assad regime. These men, dressed in black, create an atmosphere of constant fear. They operate without limits, using violence to control and dominate the population. Their unchecked authority leads to

the loss of bodily agency, especially for women, who become easy targets of their cruelty. One incident described in the novel shows a Shabiha member abducting and assaulting a girl. When questioned, he coldly justifies his act by saying, “Because I could. I was given the power and I took it” (Abawi 35). His words reveal the deep moral decay that arises when power is separated from responsibility. They show how ordinary individuals, when placed in violent systems, can commit acts of cruelty without remorse or critical thought. This reflects Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, where evil deeds are carried out not by fanatics but by individuals who fail to think about the consequences of their actions. In the world controlled by the Shabiha, violence replaces legitimate power, and domination takes the place of governance. As a result, individuals are stripped not only of their freedom but also of their dignity and humanity. The novel portrays this reality with stark clarity, showing how the collapse of lawful structures gives rise to a culture where cruelty becomes routine and bodily agency is systematically destroyed.

The brutal attacks on civilians by those in control reveal that the land has become a place where the banality of evil thrives. In Raqqa, bloodshed in public spaces is not accidental but is deliberately used as a method of punishment. This practice goes far beyond any act of humanity. Ordinary actions, such as walking through the streets, expose individuals to the constant risk of death. As a result, people are forced to live in fear, with no real choice other than to flee the country or face death. The hanging of bodies in public squares, often as punishment for minor infractions against strict rules, clearly shows the loss of bodily agency. Death is turned into a public spectacle, sending a clear message of terror to those who survive. In one scene, a character observes, “We passed this area yesterday, and there were heads . . .” but stops, unable to continue. Musa, another character, responds with chilling detachment, “You passed Naim Square. That’s where Daesh carries out a lot of its punishments. It’s not the only place. It’s horrible, but it is

now our new normal. You can't avoid it" (Abawi 58). The normalization of violence, where individuals are forced to witness or encounter death regularly, reflects the deep erosion of human values. It also illustrates Hannah Arendt's idea that evil becomes banal when violence is accepted as a normal part of life. Using terror to control people strips them of agency and dignity. The novel shows how, in such a setting, violence no longer appears extraordinary but becomes part of the everyday existence of those trapped under the regime's rule.

The brutalities and violence affect children and teenagers most severely, leaving them terrified and emotionally scarred. The constant exposure to horrific incidents plants deep fear in their minds, but it also implants violence as a possible response to their environment. The terrifying conversations between teenage boys reveal not only their fear but also their loss of agency over their own bodies and their fading hope for survival. These young individuals are trapped in a world where power is exercised through cruelty, and they must endure its consequences without any means of resistance. Their fear is not temporary but becomes a permanent part of their existence. Through the portrayal of these children, Abawi highlights how violence against the body erases innocence and shapes a future where survival feels almost impossible. The children's conversations, filled with anxiety and despair, clearly show the loss of bodily autonomy and the normalization of death and suffering around them. This atmosphere reflects the banality of evil, where unimaginable cruelty becomes a part of everyday life. Abawi uses these conversations to expose the lasting effects of violence on the most vulnerable, making it clear that the destruction of agency in young minds is one of the most devastating outcomes of living under oppressive control:

> Tareq shuddered. "How many executions have you seen?" He looked at his cousin, who took another calculated breath. "I don't know." His eyes weakened. "I really

> don't know. They replay in my dreams at night. Like a Daesh screen in my mind." He tapped his head. "I went to school with a boy, he was a few years older than me. He came from a good family. He joined a group of citizen journalists, exposing the horrors of our lives for the world to see. He was caught." Musa's voice broke. "They stabbed him in the heart, shot him and cut his head off. Over and over, it played. What kinds of monsters do this?" Tareq watched as another tear formed in his cousin's right eye. (61)

Facing war is a terrible thing that the people endured in their county. War does not mean just death, it also means to be standing there, injured, watching the friends and family die in front of them. "He handed Farrah's wilted body over to her big brother, who rocked the young girl in his arms as he kissed her round cheek. The tears falling from his face cleaned the dust from hers" (25). Tareq watched his little sister and mother die, and the blood and bodies were too much for his age of innocence and peace. It is a situation dominated by evilness that the young children had to endure the extreme brutalities of war. The war is the best example which stands for the epitome of banality of evil:

> A doctor ran over to Tareq, eyeing the blood that trailed down the side of his face. "Come with me!" She demanded, grabbing an arm and pulling him to a room full of other patients, none of whom were critical. Pushing him down onto a plastic chair, she pulled over a tray on wheels. As she dabbed liquids from her bottles and searched his head, her panic steadied. "You're going to be fine." She took a breath. "I just need to bandage up your head and you can rejoin your family." She instantly regretted her words as the young man's eyes began to well. (27)

In the novel, the boat journey to the refugee camp stands out as another incident where the bodies of refugees are degraded and dehumanized. During the journey, their

safety is ignored, and many are left to die in the ocean without any assistance or concern. The refugees themselves, faced with no real alternative, choose to risk the dangerous journey. For them, escaping the brutalities on land, even if it means dying at sea, seems like a better option than staying behind. The hopelessness of their situation is captured in a conversation where a character says, "People dying in this sea for decades. Many Afghans buried here. For more than ten years they coming. The Syrians are newer. But it is multiplying. We are running out of room." He gestures toward the cramped land as he speaks (Abawi 111). This grim reality shows how the refugees' bodily agency is completely stripped away. They are forced into choices where survival itself becomes a distant hope. The overcrowded land and the growing number of deaths highlight the severity of their displacement and the indifference of the world around them. Abawi's portrayal makes it clear that the loss of bodily safety and dignity during these journeys is another example of how violence and neglect together contribute to the banality of evil.

In the novel, the illegal boat ride to the island becomes a symbolic representation of the illegal existence of refugees across the world, no matter where they go. Just as they are cramped into a fragile boat, struggling for space and survival, their lives are similarly cramped with endless struggles between survival and death, leaving them unable to breathe freely. The boat journey, surrounded on all sides by the vast, engulfing ocean, mirrors the life of the refugees, who are surrounded by endless misery and hardship after being reduced to mere bodies without rights or recognition. There is no assurance that they will survive the dangerous journey at sea. Yet, staying on land offers no better prospects, as their lives there also move constantly toward danger and death. The entire boat ride, where money is taken without any guarantee of survival, reflects the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt speaks of. Every minute of the

refugees' stateless existence mirrors this condition, where exploitation, suffering, and uncertainty have become a normalized part of their daily reality.

Another important incident that shows the dehumanisation of refugee bodies is the constant threat of human trafficking faced by refugee children. Being the most vulnerable group with no control over their bodies, children are haunted by the fear of being kidnapped and sold. In *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, the incident where Susan is kidnapped by strangers in the refugee camp highlights how unsafe and dangerous the living environment is for refugees. The danger is not just imagined but very real. Adepoju's article titled "Review of Research and Data on Human Trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa" points out that "children and women are the most affected victims of human trafficking, and they are also frequently subjected to sexual violence" (80). Although Susan is rescued by her brother and their well-wishers in the novel, the episode leaves behind a lingering fear of what could happen if a child goes missing. The reality is grim: a missing refugee child is often lost forever, especially if the kidnappers manage to leave the area or cross international borders. The human trafficking of refugee children has become normalised, as they are already erased from official records. With no legal identity and no one in authority committed to finding them, these children are left defenceless against such crimes.

In *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, Atia Abawi presents the deep loss of bodily agency experienced by refugees through acts of violence, exploitation, and displacement. The novel illustrates how the normalization of brutality, including human trafficking, public punishments, and the perilous journeys undertaken by refugees, reflects Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. The dehumanisation of individuals, particularly the most vulnerable, becomes an accepted part of daily existence, erasing personal autonomy and reducing life to survival under constant threat. Zoya Phan's memoir *Little*

Daughter offers a stark portrayal of how women who resist oppressive power structures often face heightened violence and abuse. Phan's decision to speak out about the brutalities faced by Myanmar's minority communities directly challenges the authority of those in power, and as a result, she becomes the target of severe retaliation. This response is not accidental, nor is it merely a reflection of personal animosity; it is a systematic attempt to silence her by inflicting the ultimate form of punishment: sexual violence. This act reflects the banality of evil, a concept wherein violence becomes so normalised and institutionalised that it loses its individual moral weight.

In Phan's case, her father receives written threats of her potential rape as a consequence of her activism, signalling a deep-seated societal belief that women's bodies are appropriate tools for punishing dissent. If Phan had been a man, the retaliation might have been in the form of a death threat, which would have directly targeted her life. However, the response to her defiance as a woman takes the form of gender-specific violence, reinforcing the entrenched gendered power dynamics. This distinction demonstrates how the banality of evil operates through everyday systems of oppression, where acts of violence and control over women are not only tolerated but institutionalised as mechanisms to maintain power.

The attacks on the KNU resistance fighters were very brutal in Myanmar. The fighters were killed mercilessly, as the oppressors did not want anyone to revolt against them. Phan's father was one of the fighters who escaped persecution and returned home enduring physical violence. "My father was kept in the pitch black of the dungeon as his captors took away his fellow KNU leaders and executed them. At one point they had put a gun to his head and acted as if they were going to kill him" (141). The resistance fighters were in the army very well aware of the fact that they could die any minute. The Karen

people were also aware that they were ready for war and the time to leave their home would arrive very soon.

Phan's narrative also emphasises the anonymity and cowardice of her attackers, which further underscores the argument for the banality of evil in action. The enforcers are not individuals who wish to make their violent actions known or who seek personal recognition for their cruelty. Instead, they remain faceless, and their violence becomes an impersonal act, designed to serve the larger system of oppression rather than any personal vendetta. Phan's recollection of a particular attack highlights this disturbing reality, "I felt a stab of intense pain as one dragged me by the hair, pulling me back towards the street. I started screaming as loudly as I could. I had my handbag on my shoulder, but neither made any attempt to grab it. Instead, they tried to drag me out towards the road" (Phan 329). This dispassionate and faceless violence mirrors the broader patterns of banality of evil, where cruelty is carried out without any personal moral reflection. It is less about individual malice and more about maintaining a system where fear and violence are tools used to enforce societal norms and power relations.

Even after Phan flees Myanmar, her persecution continues, illustrating that those in power do not merely seek to destroy the bodies of women who resist them—they also aim to control the narrative of their lives. Phan's ongoing struggles in Thailand and London, where she is denied proper refugee status and criminalised for her activism, reflect how entrenched oppression operates even in spaces supposedly offering refuge. Here again, the banality of evil manifests, as Phan is continually rendered powerless by a global system that treats her as a threat merely for speaking out against injustice.

Phan also recollects incidents where she and her people escape war which describes the close to death brutal attacks endured by the refugee bodies:

> Nant Than Htay didn't know what had caused the burning, but they had to run for their very lives. She put her smallest child on her back and holding the other two tightly by the hand she started to run, away from the place where the blaze was at its fiercest. Within minutes the fire seemed all around them. Vegetation turned into a roaring mass of flames, as thick, acrid smoke filled their nostrils and choked them. Nant Than Htay was totally disorientated, and terrified. All around her fallen leaves and grass roared and crackled; her terrified children screamed and cried out with fear. She was certain she was going to faint with suffocation and be consumed by the flames. (238)

Zoya Phan's experiences give a powerful picture of how the banality of evil works, not only through direct violence but also through quiet and constant systems of control that aim to silence voices of protest. Her story shows that oppression does not always appear in shocking or extreme ways. It can be quiet and hidden, working through nameless violence, cold treatment, and the refusal of basic human rights. The harm she suffers is not just caused by single attackers. It is part of a larger system that uses her gender and her role as an activist to justify its cruelty. In this way, her story shows how the banality of evil shapes how society treats women who stand up against injustice. Her experiences reveal how such systems use fear and control to punish resistance and keep power in place.

A similar reality applies to the resistance fighters from Sri Lanka. Although *The Boat People* does not provide specific details about the abuse of Tamil women, existing articles and academic studies document the violence endured by women, particularly those involved in resistance movements fighting for the survival of the civilian population. The novel nevertheless suggests the difficulty women face in escaping the country alive. The experiences of Sri Lankan refugee women fighters and Myanmar resistance fighters reflect a shared pattern when examined through the lens of the banality of evil. Evidence shows

that women were subjected to extreme forms of torture, and the brutality they experienced often surpassed that inflicted on their male counterparts. Despite this, the circumstances compelled them to continue resisting, even with full awareness of the likely consequences.

The title of the novel The Boat People itself symbolically underscores the loss of bodily agency experienced by the refugees. It reduces them to nameless, displaced bodies, stripped of individual identity and denied recognition as human beings. The title signifies that they are no longer accepted as Sri Lankans, nor are they yet considered Canadians; they exist in a liminal state, marked only by their mode of arrival. Being treated as terrorists and prisoners further dehumanises them, reinforcing the notion that they are merely 'boat people' bodies in transit, detached from personhood. Their real identities remain obscured and unacknowledged until the end of the narrative, and even then, the possibility of reclaiming a new, recognised identity remains uncertain. They are burdened with suspicion and fear, seen as potential threats rather than as people seeking safety. This reduction of individuals to mere physical presence, shaped by prejudice and systemic neglect, exemplifies the banality of evil and highlights the need to acknowledge refugees as more than displaced bodies, recognising their agency, humanity, and right to belonging.

The death of loved ones in *The Boat People* reveals how the fear of death remains deeply etched in the minds of the surviving characters. Upon arriving in Canada, the refugees are placed in detention centres and segregated by gender, men, women, and children housed separately. They are subjected to confined cells and communal showers, conditions that strip them of privacy and bodily autonomy. The forced separation of Mahindan and his son Sellian intensifies their sense of vulnerability and fear, raising the possibility that they may be permanently parted. The refugees are haunted by memories of war, including bombings, displacement, and personal loss. These past experiences have left lasting physical and emotional scars. Moreover, the continuous challenges of

displacement leave them with little space or time to grieve. The psychological trauma they endure, compounded by the stress of navigating the Canadian immigration system, further destabilises their sense of control. The persistent recollection of violence and loss leads the refugees to question their own agency, especially over their bodies, which are now controlled, observed, and restricted by external systems.

Mahindan's war-stricken body reflects the physical violence he endured in his homeland, and the loss of bodily agency continues as he and Sellian reach the shores of Canada. While they are still struggling to cope with the loss of their family, especially Sellian's mother, they are subjected to treatment that denies them basic respect in the detention centre. The manner in which refugees are pushed, ordered into lines, and beaten to maintain order illustrates that they remain refugees, no matter where they seek asylum. The forced separation of Sellian from Mahindan, and the physical assault on Mahindan during his arrest, underline the harsh and dehumanising practices within the detention system. These acts highlight the politics of the body, where control and surveillance replace care and compassion. The refugees, already emotionally broken, are further subjected to physical hardships that strip them of dignity and reduce their sense of belonging in the new land.

Physical violence is a significant factor that strips refugees of agency over their own bodies. However, several indirect yet critical forms of degradation also contribute to this loss of agency. Inadequate healthcare and poor sanitation facilities in refugee camps severely undermine the bodily rights of refugees, reducing their control over their health and well-being. While not directly addressed in the selected texts, research highlights how refugees are often denied reproductive rights, which further illustrates the systemic denial of bodily autonomy. Labour exploitation is another major concern; refugee bodies are frequently overworked and underpaid, with wages grossly disproportionate to the labour

performed. These forms of exploitation contribute to the erosion of dignity and physical integrity. Addressing the degradation of refugee bodies requires confronting the structural inequalities and unjust power dynamics that persist within both national and international systems. Nicola Pocock in the article titled, "Refugees, Racism and Xenophobia: What Works to Reduce Discrimination?" observes:

> When discrimination is institutional or structural, refugees and migrants may face reduced access to public services and healthcare entitlements based on race or ethnicity; for example, due to social segregation in housing policies, whereby migrants are concentrated in outer city estates far from good schools, hospitals, and public transport routes. Here, discrimination is not perpetrated by an individual, but by an unjust system of laws and policies which perpetuate inequities over time. (Pocock and Chan, *Our World*)

The treatment of Tamil asylum seekers upon their arrival in Canada illustrates the extension of structural violence across borders. As observed, "Tamil asylum seekers are forced to wear handcuffs as soon as they are intercepted off the coast of British Columbia. They are also forced into orderly queues in order to be checked and stripped of their few possessions" (Solis 4). This securitisation of migration echoes Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, wherein dehumanising practices are enacted through routine bureaucratic procedures. The impersonal and procedural nature of these actions conceals the moral implications of treating asylum seekers as security threats rather than as victims of persecution. The normalisation of such exclusionary practices constitutes a modern form of the banality of evil, one that perpetuates violence not through overt hostility, but through a system that renders the suffering of refugees both invisible and ordinary.

Primary sources and UNHCR reports illustrate that refugee camps are often reduced to mere warehouses of bodies, spaces where refugees are not given the opportunity to live or plan for a future. Rather than providing safety or hope, these camps function as temporary holding areas where individuals are physically present but denied their agency. The chapter argues that, in essence, these camps serve as storage spaces for living bodies, awaiting death or indefinite displacement. In memoirs, fiction, and nonfiction, refugees experience a repetitive cycle of survival marked by a sense of existential nothingness. This repetition underscores the loss of bodily agency, where the bodies of refugees become sites of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Through an analysis framed by Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, the chapter examines how the systematic and bureaucratic violence in these camps strips refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) of their autonomy. The banality of evil is evident in the routine, impersonal treatment of refugees, where cruelty becomes normalized and the bodies of refugees are reduced to mere vessels, devoid of dignity or individual recognition.

This chapter has demonstrated that the loss of bodily agency among refugees is both a consequence and a manifestation of systemic violence and dehumanization. The camp, as a site of physical and psychological disintegration, effectively denies individuals their autonomy, underscoring how power is exerted through the everyday violence of institutional processes. Nevertheless, is there a way for refugees to reclaim agency in the face of such conditions? How might resilience, plurality, and collective identity provide a means of resistance for those whose existence has been reduced to mere survival? These questions pave the way for the next chapter, which will examine how refugees navigate these profound losses and attempt to reclaim their agency through solidarity, resistance, and cultural plurality.