

## **Chapter II**

### **Human Debris of Statelessness**

They have no idea what it is like to lose home at the risk of never finding home again.

— Rupi Kaur, *Milk and Honey*

Refugees experience a profound loss of identity and autonomy upon displacement, not only being deprived of their political and legal recognition but also becoming objects within broader structures of power. Forced to flee their homelands due to persecution rooted in culture, race, language, or ethnicity, refugees are thrust into a condition of statelessness, as critically discussed by Hannah Arendt. Statelessness signifies far more than the mere loss of national belonging, it denotes the erosion of a political community that recognises and enforces one's rights, thereby reducing refugees to a state where they cease to function as political subjects and become instead subordinated to the authority of others. In this condition, they are restrained from seeking even the most fundamental of rights, including access to basic needs and necessities that sustain human life. Over time, the refugee ceases to be seen as a person with rights or history and is instead perceived as a burden, an expendable fragment of humanity cast aside by the global order. The chapter elaborates on how the stateless condition renders refugees acutely vulnerable, pushing them to the peripheries where they are marginalised, dehumanised, and exploited. In being denied all the guarantees and securities that citizenship provides, they come to represent the human debris of statelessness, those left in the wake of exclusionary politics and displaced sovereignty.

Hannah Arendt, as a philosopher, political activist, and a person who experienced life as a refugee, explicitly details the demerits of totalitarian regimes that operate solely on the dominance of power and the submission of individuals. In the chapter “The Decline

of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, Arendt argues that totalitarianism has destroyed all other forms of government that treat people with respect and humanity. She elaborates on how people were ruled by fear and terror as methods of governance and were utterly oppressed due to the lack of citizenship. Although the work was published seventy-five years ago, it remains relevant to many political structures that govern through fear, questioning methods that, Arendt argues, ultimately lead to the destruction of society. The work provides valuable insights into the impacts of statelessness and offers a strong theoretical framework for analysing the plight of refugees who lose their citizenship.

The philosophies, theories, and literary works that explore the statelessness and rightlessness of refugees not only reveal the true conditions of the oppressed but also suggest various ways to break the silence surrounding these issues and move toward the restoration of rights. Bernstein, in his article titled “The Origins of Totalitarianism: Not History, but Politics” (2002), specifies that Arendt believed the only way to communicate thinking is “to infect others with the perplexities that stimulate one’s own thinking” (383). Arendt’s work clearly delineates how nations maintained good law and order for their citizens but often failed to uphold justice for the oppressed and the stateless. She analyses how the denial of rights was enforced upon refugees, who were reduced to mere “problems” by the political structures and were no longer respected as fellow human beings. Elaborating on the condition of statelessness, she also emphasises the concept of the ‘right to have rights,’ which encapsulates the impulse to seek justice and rightful entitlements amidst the grim inequities faced by refugee communities.

Denied the right to have rights, refugees are pushed into spaces of exclusion such as camps and asylums, where they are left passive and vulnerable. This chapter, however, looks beyond the immediate loss of agency to consider how refugees are drawn into the

workings of political power. Often used as symbols in political rhetoric or as bargaining tools in international negotiations, they are stripped of the ability to act for themselves and instead made into instruments within broader political agendas. Such instrumentalisation deepens their dehumanisation and reinforces their exclusion from the social, political, and economic life of host societies. Drawing on Arendt's analysis of power and politics, this chapter explores how the condition of statelessness places refugees at the mercy of more powerful structures, turning them into extensions of external interests. It examines the ways in which autonomy is withheld and dependency is imposed, continuing a cycle of marginalisation and disempowerment.

Across many regions, refugees face organised disenfranchisement, frequently finding themselves without meaningful legal protections or political voice. Displaced by forces such as ethnic conflict, war, or political upheaval, they are often treated not as individuals deserving support but as burdens to be managed. This imbalance of power, where the privileged dominate the vulnerable, translates into profound hardship. For many refugees, the daily struggle to survive leads to impossible choices, as their lack of rights and resources denies them meaningful agency. In such conditions, even basic necessities—food, shelter, security—become uncertain, reflecting not just individual suffering but deeper patterns of inequality and exclusion.

A joint UNHCR and WFP review titled “Malnutrition in Protracted Refugee Situations” (January 2006) highlights the severity of this plight, stating, “Higher than acceptable rates of acute malnutrition are present in many protracted refugee camps, most notably Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, and some camps in Sierra Leone and Chad. The anaemia levels for children and women in protracted refugee situations worldwide are higher than WHO standards for severe public health issues” (UNHCR and WFP, 2). This horrid reality underscores how the power holders, rather than extending assistance, often exploit

refugees to maintain their own power and secure profits, prolonging the cycle of suffering. The refugee crisis often arises from political decisions that favour certain groups while discriminating against others, creating conditions of deprivation and exclusion. Zarin Ahmad, in her doctoral thesis “Ethnic Conflict and Refugees: A Case Study of Sri Lanka” (2001), argues that “group identity or consciousness is a key element of an ethnic group. Identity and ethnic group are, therefore, closely related. The point to be noted here is that an ethnic group emerges as part of antagonism or deprivation felt as part of the larger society” (17). In such context, marginalised groups are forced to leave their homes, losing not only their land but also everything they have worked for.

Upon relocating to a new country, these refugees often carry the weight of the prejudices they have faced, leading them to believe they are unworthy of help or support in their new surroundings. They may view their new lives as an extension of an existence that should have ended in their home country. During these vulnerable moments, refugees frequently become victims of political power dynamics that exploit their situation. They endure various forms of abuse, including labour exploitation, sexual assault, false accusations, and human trafficking. It is the manipulation of power over these vulnerable populations that worsens their plight, reducing them to mere bodies struggling to survive in an indifferent world.

Power is often imposed on marginalised groups, including internally displaced persons, individuals facing threats to their lives, and refugees seeking asylum in foreign countries. “The host government can determine whether or not to allow humanitarian agencies to help the refugees, such as the Indian government that banned NGOs from working in refugee camps hosting Tamils from Sri Lanka in 1993” (Rüegger 47). In many contexts, power is seen as a key means to acquire material wealth and establish dominance. Once individuals experience the control that power brings, their focus may

shift toward safeguarding it, sometimes at the expense of others. This drive to maintain power can lead to the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable populations.

In the case of refugees, such abuses of power can manifest in extreme violence, as they are frequently marginalised in the global context, making their lives vulnerable to unchecked harm. As reported in *The Hindu* (November 9, 2024), “In August 2017, attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group on Myanmar security personnel triggered a brutal campaign by the military, which drove at least 740,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. The military is accused of mass rape, killings and burning thousands of homes.” This instance highlights the severe consequences of power used to oppress and control vulnerable groups. The refugee crisis, therefore, is not only a matter of displacement but also a reflection of structured power imbalances, where the powerless are subjected to violence and exploitation by those in positions of authority.

Hannah Arendt offers a critical perspective on the struggles of refugees, addressing their plight with depth and complexity. In the *Faculty of Law blogs at the University of Oxford*, Asher Hirsch and Nathan Bell explore how Arendt’s insights can inform our understanding of the contemporary refugee crisis. The concepts she developed in the twentieth century remain pertinent in today’s context. Arendt’s principle of the ‘Right to Have Rights’ underscores the necessity of belonging to a political community that can ensure the protection of rights: “The principle that Arendt espoused was the ‘Right to Have Rights’. Everyone, she argued, should be allowed to belong somewhere. Human rights can only be effectively upheld if there is a political community – a state or a ‘newly defined territorial entity’ – that can guarantee that rights will be respected” (Hirsch and Bell). Arendt not only advocated for equality but also aimed to create a society in which all individuals are given equal dignity.

Exploring the plight of refugees through the lens of power politics requires an examination of their vulnerabilities, both within their countries of origin and in their places of refuge. Singh, in her article “Arendt in the Refugee Camp: The Political Agency of World-Building” (published in *Political Geography*), notes that “Arendt observes that nation-states and NGOs have the power to shut away stateless persons in camps indeterminably precisely because stateless persons lack membership in a political community” (2). Singh’s observation highlights how the absence of political belonging leaves refugees exposed to marginalisation and indefinite exclusion. Without official documentation to establish their citizenship, refugees are routinely denied legal protections and societal recognition. These conditions are not accidental; rather, they sustain the dominance of powerful groups who benefit from maintaining the refugees’ precarious status. This dynamic underscores the intersection between statelessness and entrenched inequality.

Power is expressed across different levels of society, with each form calling for particular modes of control and exclusion. In the context of global refugee oppression, Hannah Arendt’s insights provide a critical framework for understanding these dynamics. Stateless refugees, stripped of the documents that would affirm their existence within a political order, are reduced to their bare physical presence. In this state, they become vulnerable to the operation of biopolitical controls that further marginalise them. Their exclusion from political and legal systems leaves them stranded at the edges of sovereignty and human rights. Arendt’s analysis makes clear how statelessness reconfigures individuals into objects of political management, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability and exclusion.

Hannah Arendt experienced statelessness from 1933 to 1951, a period during which she authored her essay amidst the unfolding horrors of the Second World War and

the Shoah. In this essay, she offers a poignant analysis of the profound personal costs and existential challenges faced by Jewish refugees, who were left without legal or political protection. While her examination begins with the specific plight of these refugees, Arendt extends her critique to the broader political systems that facilitated their displacement. Rather than interpreting their experiences as isolated individual tragedies, she underscores their systemic nature, framing exclusion as a deliberate political process. “This systemic exclusion, as she contends, later extended to significant portions of Europe’s population during the war” (Flohr 6). Arendt elaborates on how the refugees are the results of a political decision to exclude individuals from a country.

Sandra Uwiringiyimana’s memoir, *How Dare the Sun Rise*, recounts her family’s survival during the ethnic violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the hardships they continued to face after resettling in the United States. Her story makes it clear that gaining citizenship does not put an end to the struggles of refugees. Even after becoming U.S. citizens—a milestone that many displaced people never reach, Uwiringiyimana and her family still face dehumanising treatment. They are not seen as equals but are pitied, and the inequalities they encounter continue to limit their independence. They are often discouraged from speaking about their past and expected to fit the roles laid out for them by those in authority. Their heavy reliance on outside aid deepens their sense of disempowerment, leaving them with little control over their own lives.

Uwiringiyimana uses her memoir to document how the Banyamulenge Tribe has been exploited for political agendas, forced to comply with oppressive systems to survive. Despite their efforts to navigate political wars, they were denied recognition as Congolese citizens and ultimately driven out with no dignity. She writes, “So many of my people today are languishing in refugee camps, belonging to no country, always in limbo” (18). A news article in *Genocide Watch* (September 3, 2021) highlights that the Banyamulenge

have faced persecution and been labelled “unwanted people” since the colonial era, with false historical narratives used to justify their genocide. As Herve Gouyet writes in his article “Refugees Are Powerless in More Ways than One” (*Zayed Sustainability Prize*, June 2022): “Displaced people are among the world’s most vulnerable populations. Thus, they are the most critical group to support to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal” (Gouyet). Refugees are often reminded that they do not fully belong, emphasising their marginalisation and keeping them in a subordinate position in their host countries. These conditions shred away dignity and sustain a cycle of powerlessness that persists long after their immediate crises are over.

In her memoir, Sandra Uwiringiyimana reflects on the peaceful life her family enjoys before ethnic violence erupts in their homeland. Although they lack material wealth, their lives are filled with security and contentment. “Things seemed simple then. I knew my parents loved me, and I felt safe with them” (Uwiringiyimana 19). This sense of safety, even without material abundance, is central to their happiness. However, those in power deliberately target this security, knowing that destroying it is key to forcing displacement. The persistent threat of violence becomes a weapon used against the vulnerable, creating a cycle of fear and instability that follows refugees wherever they go. This constant fear drains refugees of hope and resilience, making survival in a hostile world even more difficult.

Uwiringiyimana is one of the few who manage to resettle in the United States and continue her education, but resettlement brings its own set of challenges. Having already faced ethnic discrimination in her homeland; she now encounters racial prejudice in her new country. This only deepens her sense of isolation and brings back memories of the violence she escapes, leading to unending nightmares and emotional distress. Writing on the conflict in the Congo, Herbert Weiss notes in “War and Peace in the Democratic

Republic of the Congo” that “war is still very much present, and peace is still only a hope, and in the meantime, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced civilian Congolese suffer endless afflictions from hunger to rape to massacres” (31). His observation points to the lasting damage caused by systemic violence and the ways in which those with power continue to shape the suffering of the vulnerable. For refugees like Uwiringiyimana, discrimination does not end with displacement but continues to shape their lives, revealing how inequality and injustice follow them even into supposed safe havens.

Even after resettling, many refugees continue to live in difficult and unsafe conditions. Gaining citizenship or access to education and work does not erase the trauma they have experienced. Uwiringiyimana still struggles with memories of the genocide and the death of her younger sister. These painful memories make it hard for her to move forward. She reflects, “I should be embracing my chance to get a college degree, not melting down about my past” (Uwiringiyimana 168). Her words show how deeply the past can affect the lives of refugees, even after they have found new opportunities. The fear caused by the misuse of power affects not only individuals like Uwiringiyimana but also leaves an impact on later generations. Adonis, in the article “Exploring the Saliency of Intergenerational Trauma among Children and Grandchildren of Victims of Apartheid-Era Gross Human Rights Violations”, notes through personal interviews “the serious psychological impact that a subject’s father’s experience had had on him” (169). The psychological scars of violence and oppression often persist across generations, making full recovery and reintegration difficult. The lasting effects of fear and exploitation show the depth of harm caused by systemic injustice on displaced and marginalised communities.

Sandra Uwiringiyimana’s memoir, *How Dare the Sun Rise*, provides a detailed account of how refugees experience a loss of agency during both displacement and

resettlement. Hannah Arendt's concept of statelessness and the right to have rights offers a useful framework for understanding this condition. Uwiringiyimana and her family are deprived of their political identity both in their homeland and in refugee camps. Although they eventually gain U.S. citizenship, their experiences of exclusion continue, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing their dependence on external systems. Arendt's distinction between power and violence clarifies how refugees are not simply denied rights but are subjected to structures that treat them as objects of political and social control. This disempowerment affects not only their survival but also their social standing and psychological resilience, preventing a full recovery of autonomy and dignity.

Zoya Phan's *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West* offers a powerful account of the continuing hardships faced by the Karen refugees, a marginalized community in Myanmar. In the article "Sacred Spaces of Karen Refugees and Humanitarian Aid Across the Thailand-Burma Border," Alexander Horstmann underscores this reality, noting that "thousands of people are forced to leave the villages as a result of these severe human rights violations, find themselves in the jungle, on the mountains, roaming around without food and medical attention, and struggle to make their way to the Thai-Burmese border" (258). Through her personal story, Phan exposes the discrimination and violence inflicted upon her people by the ruling authorities. The regime's systematic denial of basic rights and essential resources leaves minority groups with no alternative but to flee for survival. This methodical deprivation, masked as governance, represents not just neglect but a targeted assault on the very existence of these communities.

Phan argues that power, when used without accountability, becomes a tool of oppression rather than protection. The ruling elite exploit their authority to suppress and displace vulnerable communities, treating them as enemies rather than citizens. She writes,

“I knew my people were starving to death; I also knew there was an enemy doing this to us, and that they were human, just like us” (Phan 22). This observation starkly critiques the contradiction of humans dehumanising others for political gain. The actions of the regime, far from serving the people, expose the destructive potential of unchecked authority driven by prejudice and fear.

Phan challenges the regime’s portrayal of minority groups as threats to national unity, exposing this narrative as a pretext for their systematic erasure. The exclusion, displacement, and violence inflicted upon these communities are not inevitable consequences of conflict but deliberate choices made by those in power. Even as a child, Phan recognises the injustice around her, sensing that the rulers valued their own agenda above the lives of the oppressed. Her account reveals that the regime’s aim extends beyond governance to the destruction of communities they deem undesirable. Phan urges readers to reckon with the devastating human cost of unchecked power and the pressing need to resist such abuses.

The Karen and other oppressed groups in Myanmar have no choice but to fight for their rights. Many lose their lives or suffer severe injuries in their struggle for justice. The oppressive rules and the violent actions of the rulers leave these communities with no means to protect themselves. Fear dominates their existence, as war and political instability force them to live every moment under the threat of death. Phan reflects on this disturbing reality, stating, “I wanted the war to be far, far away. I imagined it to be so in my mind. The very idea that it might come to us, here, had never once occurred to me” (Phan 119). The war profoundly affects children, exposing them to scenes of bloodshed and injured soldiers daily. While they do not directly witness the battles, they acutely feel the absence of their fathers, uncles, and brothers—men who either join the resistance or

hide in fear of persecution. Families are torn apart, meeting only in secret, as survival becomes a daily struggle.

Political power in Myanmar, instead of safeguarding citizens and ensuring their welfare, spreads fear and destruction. The Karen people resist oppression with immense dignity, but their efforts are methodically crushed. Their lives and identities are reduced to debris, as they become tools in a broader political strategy of ethnic hatred. Phan vividly illustrates how the Karen are stripped of their humanity, their existence manipulated by those in power to further a brutal agenda. In Myanmar, as Phan's memoir demonstrates, the military rulers control every aspect of their citizens' lives. The people are mere pawns in the hands of the regime, subject to its every whim. Initially, the military focuses on marginalising and oppressing minority groups, making their survival difficult but stopping short of outright eradication. As the Karen National Union (KNU) grows stronger in its resistance, however, the military escalates its efforts to annihilate these communities. Phan recalls her childhood, observing, "In my childish mind the war was all a long way away, and we lived in a beautiful, peaceful place" (Phan 68). This peace, however, is a fragile illusion shattered by the regime's growing aggression. The military deliberately cuts off basic resources, uses violence to intimidate, and forces families into displacement camps—spaces that offer little safety and remain under constant threat.

The Karen people's endurance is remarkable, nevertheless it is shaped by the harsh conditions forced upon them by their oppressors. The regime's deliberate attempts to weaken and scatter these communities show the dangers of unchecked power. Camps along the border, intended as places of safety, often turn into spaces of continued hardship and fear. Through her memoir, Phan brings to light the harsh reality of a people torn from their homes and left to endure violence and loss, reminding readers of the heavy human cost of political power without accountability. Even in their flight through the forests

toward potential refuge, the threat of violence persists. Phan recounts, “It was not a good night. Every few minutes I’d waken with a start, as the boom of an explosion went echoing through the forest. Then it would be quiet for a while before the next crash” (Phan 151). The regime’s actions extend beyond physical displacement; they aim to dismantle the Karen’s connection to their homeland, leaving little hope of return. By framing the Karen as historical outsiders or invaders, the regime enforces a narrative designed to alienate them from their identity and history. This psychological manipulation serves as a long-term strategy to erase the presence and memory of these communities from Myanmar.

Zoya Phan’s experience in a refugee camp on the Thai border highlights the enduring challenges faced by the Karen community. Observing the well-equipped and organised Thai soldiers, Phan reflects on the stark disparity with the Karen resistance fighters, “It made me so sad to think of our own resistance fighters, many of whom wore flip-flops and carried weapons that were decades old and held together in places with wire” (Phan 173). This contrast underscores the systemic deprivation deliberately imposed by the ruling regime, which suppresses the Karen community’s access to resources and self-sufficiency. A stable economic foundation could enable the Karen to negotiate peace or rebuild their homeland. However, the regime’s policies ensure that the Karen remain economically marginalised, leaving them in a state of everlasting vulnerability.

Life in the refugee camp offers little real relief from hardship. Refugees live with the constant threat of attack, trapped in a cycle of fear and uncertainty. Phan recalls, “Ever since that day I had lived with fear as a constant companion” (Phan 176). Their heavy reliance on outside aid only deepens this fear, stripping them of control over their lives and leaving them vulnerable to forces beyond their reach. This dependence is not just a sign of limited resources but becomes a means of control, reinforcing a sense of

powerlessness. The Karen people's suffering stems not only from physical violence but also from the emotional toll of living without stability or dignity. This continuing displacement and deprivation break apart their sense of community and belonging. By keeping them in a state of need and fear, the regime not only weakens their ability to resist but also tries to erode their spirit.

The loss of the right to education is one of the most damaging consequences of displacement for refugees. Zoya Phan captures the pain of this deprivation when she writes, "I hated being a refugee and the stigma that came with it" (Phan 185), a stigma that extends to being denied basic opportunities like schooling. In refugee camps, education is not treated as a right but as a rare privilege, available only to a few through charity. Phan's determination to study, along with her sister's, highlights how exceptional access to education is among displaced populations. It is through her hard-won education that Phan later brings the suffering of her people to light, showing that education is not merely a personal achievement but a means of survival, resistance, and change. Her story makes clear that denying education to refugees is not just a loss of learning—it is a loss of future hope.

Zoya Phan, like Sandra Uwiringiyimana, chooses to speak about the conditions faced by her people despite the risks involved. On returning to her hometown, Phan observes that violence against women, malnutrition among children, and ongoing conflict remain widespread. Refugees who flee are recognised internationally, but those who remain within Burma as internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often overlooked. Their suffering and deaths receive limited international attention. This distinction highlights the uneven response of the global community and deepens existing power imbalances. Phan's decision to speak is not based solely on personal experience but reflects a deliberate

response to systemic injustice. By publicly identifying those responsible, she challenges the structures that sustain violence and denial.

In Zoya Phan's memoir, Arendt's concept of the 'right to have rights' aligns with the narrative of the Karen people's struggle against the loss of political, social, economic, and legal agency. Arendt argues that individuals, when stripped of their citizenship, lose their basic rights to participate in political life and access fundamental protections, rendering them stateless. This concept is evident in Phan's account of the Karen, whose rights are systematically denied by the military regime. They face displacement, deprivation, and violence, all while being denied any legal recognition or protection. The Karen's plight reflects Arendt's view of statelessness, where the absence of a legal status makes them vulnerable to exploitation and marginalisation, as they are denied the very right to claim their rights, thus illustrating how the loss of political agency can result in the erasure of an entire community's existence.

In *The Milk of Birds* by Sylvia Whitman, the narrative presents the experiences of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Darfur region. Through an exchange of letters between K.C. Cannelli, an American teenager, and Nawra, a Sudanese girl living in a displacement camp, Whitman contrasts two lives shaped by very different circumstances. By focusing on Nawra's experiences, the novel draws attention to the specific challenges faced by displaced girls, particularly the loss of bodily autonomy and access to basic rights. Survival becomes a constant struggle rather than a given outcome, shaped by structural inequalities and displacement. The novel also contrasts the degrees of pain experienced by K.C. and Nawra. While pain is universal, Whitman shows that social position defines its nature and possible relief. K.C.'s academic struggles and personal challenges are portrayed as problems that can be addressed through familial and professional support. Nawra's suffering, in contrast, is deeply connected to political

violence and displacement, making recovery difficult. Whitman thus highlights how systemic oppression limits not only opportunities but also the basic capacity to heal from trauma.

Further, the novel depicts the harsh conditions within displacement camps. Once forced from their homes, IDPs often encounter greater dangers in the camps, including disease, hunger, and continued violence. Nawra observes, “In my section an old woman died because she could not breathe, and everywhere people were coughing and spitting. The children complained about the crunch between their teeth” (Whitman 34). The camps are not portrayed as spaces of refuge but as environments where survival is precarious. Whitman underscores that displacement produces constant vulnerability and that systemic neglect sustains the suffering of displaced communities.

In the displacement camps, life becomes a continuous confrontation with death, where death no longer carries its traditional emotional weight. Internally displaced persons endure extreme brutality, and death becomes a regular part of daily existence. The threat of violence is constant, and individuals are often forced to witness the killing of family members, regardless of age. The normalisation of such atrocities strip life of its meaning and reduces survival to a matter of chance. As Whitman records, “Umar passed into the hands of God last night. Umm Hakim wrapped him in the tobe he had chased in the wind just a month ago because we have no burial cloth” (Whitman 46) and details on the brutal death of Nawra’s family member in Sudan. The absence of basic necessities, such as proper burial materials, highlights the severe degradation of living conditions, where survival becomes an undeserved exception rather than an assured right.

In such conditions, displaced individuals are pushed into a cycle where survival takes precedence over all other human rights. The pursuit of education, justice, or dignity

becomes impossible when the struggle for daily existence overshadows all else. The displaced remain dependent on those who control access to basic needs, not out of gratitude, but because survival demands it. In this environment, broader concerns, including rights and justice, are displaced by the urgent and often unanswerable need to simply stay alive. The systemic destruction of humanity within the camps leaves little room for anything beyond the immediate effort to endure.

At just fourteen, Nawra's life is marked by the loss of fundamental rights. Stripped of the innocence and protection typically afforded to children, she is forced to mature quickly in the face of political oppression. Nawra's experiences reflect the loss of basic human rights, particularly the right to safety and security. As a result, she is denied the right to live free from violence, forced into a position where survival becomes her only concern. In her interactions with K.C., Nawra's advice is grounded in the harsh reality of a life where truth offers little protection, "If telling the truth does not save you, lying will not either" (Whitman 57). This statement highlights the loss of the right to justice and the systematic denial of dignity, where even speaking the truth cannot shield the oppressed from further harm.

Similarly, Nawra and her best friend at the Darfur refugee camp and a fellow refugee Adeeba's effort to reclaim their basic rights are consistently obstructed by a system that fails to acknowledge their humanity. In seeking medical assistance, they expose themselves to the risk of severe punishment, as there is no legal framework available to protect them. Their right to bodily autonomy is systematically denied, and even the simple act of seeking contraceptives is treated as a form of resistance against a political structure that refuses to safeguard their well-being. When they attempt to file a complaint against the soldiers responsible for their suffering, they are confronted with the harsh reality that the legal system offers no protection for refugee girls. As a result, Nawra

and Adeeba are rendered voiceless, trapped within a system of institutionalized abuse. Their experiences highlight the complete erosion of legal, medical, and personal rights, leaving them vulnerable and powerless in an environment that systematically denies their dignity.

In *The Milk of Birds*, the struggles of internally displaced persons (IDPs), particularly young girls like Nawra, reflect Hannah Arendt's idea of the 'right to have rights.' Arendt argues that individuals must belong to a political community that guarantees their rights, and without this basic recognition, they are stripped of their humanity. Nawra's experience as an internally displaced person in the Darfur camps demonstrates this deep loss of agency. She lives outside the protection of a functioning state, where her basic rights are denied and her survival is uncertain. In Arendt's terms, Nawra is not only facing personal suffering but is exposed to continuous political violence that silences her and denies her humanity. The exploitation she experiences, whether through economic dependence or sexual abuse, arises directly from her political displacement. As Nawra and other IDPs confront these hardships, they are deprived of the right to belong, to speak, and to claim their humanity. This reality supports Arendt's view that without the right to have rights, existence itself becomes a daily struggle against both physical danger and the loss of identity.

In the memoir *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* by Habiburrahman, the author highlights the extent to which power politics erodes the rights of refugees. He traces the origins of the conflict to Burma under the dictatorship of U Ne Win in 1982, when the leader, in an act of extreme power abuse, instituted a policy that excluded ethnic groups not on his list of 135 recognised nationalities from obtaining Burmese citizenship. The Rohingya, a once-thriving ethnic group with millions of members, suddenly found themselves stripped of their citizenship due to the arbitrary

decisions of those in power. The ethnic hatred toward the Rohingya is so deeply ingrained that the larger Burmese population sees them as unwanted foreigners. They are accused of being Bengali invaders, unworthy of belonging to the Burmese land. As Habiburrahman describes, “They say that because of our physical appearance we are evil ogres from a faraway land, more animal than human” (Habiburrahman 9). This hostility is fuelled by prejudice, with the community being referred to as ‘Kalars,’ a derogatory term meant to insult their dark skin. Such stereotyping, combined with verbal abuse and constant reminders to “leave” instead of invading the land, makes life unbearable for the Rohingya. It is the people in power who spread this mental torment, seeking to rid the country of an entire community in favour of those they deem more ‘worthy’ of citizenship.

The authorities’ actions are clear—they drive the Rohingyas away, stripping them of their homes, their animals, their fields, and their livelihoods. The Rohingyas are left with no choice but to escape, enduring torture and threats far worse than death itself. Even when they return to their land once the violence subsides, they find that everything has been taken from them. Despite being able to prove the land was theirs, they have no recourse, as the law is manipulated in favour of those in power. “When others who coveted the land heard what had happened, the local authorities issued orders for my father to be killed” (Habiburrahman 15). The message is unmistakable, the Rohingyas are not welcome, and their rights are irrelevant. The theft of their property is not an accident; it is a deliberate, calculated strategy by those in power to weaken and displace a large, thriving community.

Habiburrahman’s father, in an attempt to reclaim what was rightfully his, faces further persecution. He is forced to flee the country once again, targeted by the authorities for simply seeking justice. “They are orchestrating our disappearance and we can do nothing to stop them” (Habiburrahman 16). The Rohingyas know the truth—they have no

other choice but to leave, but they are also painfully aware that there is no place for them to go. This leaves them trapped in a cycle of dispossession, living in the same land that has rejected them, stripped of their dignity and self-respect. The brutal reality is clear: the Rohingya community is being systematically erased, not just by physical violence, but through the denial of their very existence.

The Rohingyas conceal their identity diligently, complying with the oppressive rules imposed upon them. However, their distinctiveness renders them easily identifiable, exposing them to systemic abuse. Habiburahman endures verbal and physical assaults from a young age solely due to his ethnic identity. He recounts the abuse vividly: “Three of them hurl abuse at me: ‘Look who it is! Look at the dirty kalar who believes in his kalar God! Is he on his way to wash off his filth?’ ‘With his big nose, big eyebrows, and big ears, he’s more hideous than an ogre.’ ‘Forget the thanaka, nigger. You can’t hide your pongy kalar skin’” (22). These derogatory remarks highlight the deep-seated racial and cultural prejudice he faces.

The Rohingyas are relentlessly chased away by those in power, with no option but to flee. “Those who refused to leave their homes were slaughtered or arrested and tortured” (Habiburahman 17). Though they long to remain in their homes, staying is not an option—it guarantees far more than death. Those who resist are taken into custody and subjected to unimaginable torture, enduring pain that words cannot capture. Fleeing does not bring them respite; it leads only to more flight. They wander across Bangladesh, seeking shelter, yet wherever they go, they are treated as intruders, unwanted and unwelcome. The cycle of fleeing has worn them down. They are exhausted, with no place to call their own, no home to return to. The authorities have successfully forced them into this endless state of displacement, ensuring that they have no space for revolt, no ground to protest the injustice being inflicted upon them. By keeping them constantly in flight,

without a place to settle, the power structure has deprived them of any sense of stability or agency.

The Rohingyas live in an everlasting state of fear, where every action, every step, is governed by the threat of punishment. Their paths are restricted; they cannot move freely like others, for their very identity is dangerous. “At home, we speak Arakanese, the language of the region where our family comes from, and at school our lessons are in Burmese” (Habiburahman 21). Even their language betrays them. They speak the Rohingya dialect only in secret, for if they are heard, they risk retribution from those outside their community. Fear permeates every aspect of their lives, forcing them to hide their identity at all costs. This fear is so consuming that it blinds them to the fact that, in the process of surviving, they are gradually losing their sense of self. They are trapped in a cycle of survival, their identities slowly eroded by the very fear designed to control them.

Since childhood, Habiburahman is taught to conform to the oppressive rules imposed by those in power. The notion of freedom or reclaiming what has been lost is never discussed because it is seen as unattainable, with no space for reclaiming what the Rohingyas once had. “You are a Rohingya, Habib. You must not play with just anybody, anywhere and anyhow. You must know your place” (Habiburahman 24). This constant reminder reinforces the idea that the Rohingyas have no rightful place in Burma, and their presence is tolerated only as an act of pity. The history of their long-standing existence in the country is erased from memory, replaced by fear—a weapon wielded to keep them in subjugation. The Rohingyas are conditioned to live in fear, hiding their identity and enduring the dominance of those favoured by the ruling powers.

The Rohingyas are not only dominated but subjected to brutal physical and verbal abuse. They are denied their names and referred to derogatorily as ‘Kalars.’ Their physical

appearance is mocked, and they are dehumanised, likened to evil creatures. It is a shocking and deeply inhumane reality that such violence is spread even by children from recognised ethnic groups. The hatred directed at the Rohingyas is instilled in the young, poisoning them with prejudices they do not understand. These children, devoid of any personal grievances, are encouraged to hate simply because the adults in their society have taught them to. It is a tragic indictment of a society where such cruelty is normalised, and where the Rohingyas—whether children or adults—have no rights to protest or defend themselves. They are rendered voiceless, unable to challenge the verbal assaults, as they exist outside the realm of human dignity within their own country.

Habiburahman's father's medical shop reflects the harsh realities the Rohingyas face in Burma. Despite his efforts to run the business, he is constantly threatened by authorities. He is restricted from entering certain areas to gather the herbs necessary for his products, and when he does, he risks being tortured or punished if caught. "The authorities want one of two things: to eliminate us or to strip us bare. Our blood or our money. Policing in Burma is corrupt to the core, but it's also thanks to this corruption that we can buy our freedom" (Habiburahman 37). The fact that bribery becomes a tool of survival demonstrates the degree to which the regime controls every aspect of their lives. However, this 'freedom' comes at a cost—one that depletes the family's resources. The social exclusion they face further intensifies their struggle, as local people refuse to buy from a shop owned by a Rohingya. This, in turn, deepens their vulnerability and makes it increasingly difficult for them to stay in the country.

The constant fear the Rohingyas live under is not coincidental but a direct result of the oppressive policies in place. The authorities use fear as a way to maintain control, ensuring the Rohingyas remain subjugated and powerless. "The army is patrolling near the market, on the lookout for any slight transgression that might give them an excuse to

punish someone” (Habiburahman 43). This heightened surveillance and the threat of punishment reflect a strategy to keep the population in a state of constant apprehension. Moreover, the army’s operations are specifically designed to erase any trace of the Rohingyas. “The junta’s soldiers are unleashed and set loose across the country, like rabid dogs.

Tasked with erasing all traces of our presence, they pour into the plains and mountains of Arakan State where they patrol the towns and villages, shrieking ‘Pyi Thaya’ with pride—just two words that justify the bloodshed, the flames that set our houses ablaze” (Habiburahman 67). These actions are not isolated incidents but part of a broader campaign to eliminate the Rohingya population from Burma, forcing them into a position where they have little choice but to flee or face violent retribution. This example shows how the Rohingyas’ economic, social, and physical marginalisation is strategically orchestrated, not simply a byproduct of war or civil unrest. Rather than being random acts of violence, these actions are part of a systematic effort to weaken and remove the Rohingyas from society. It is crucial to recognise that the policies and actions of the Burmese military are not accidental but deliberate, designed to strip the Rohingyas of their rights and force them into displacement.

The Rohingyas face severe restrictions in Myanmar, confined within strict boundaries they are forbidden to cross under any circumstances. Despite adhering to these oppressive rules, they are still subjected to harsh punishments for even perceived transgressions. Habiburahman recounts:

From now on, all the land around the village is declared a black zone, forbidden to Muslims. My family is not allowed to enter the jungle under any circumstances, whether to collect wood or visit a neighbouring village. Dad tells us that we can

only play behind our home. However, he still needs to restock his shop regularly and has no choice but to enter the jungle in secret to gather plants or reach supply points in surrounding villages. (45)

This paradox highlights the impossibility of their situation. The Rohingyas are forced to endure entrenched discrimination to remain in their homeland, yet even compliance does not guarantee security. In their struggle to hold onto the only place they call 'home,' they risk their lives daily and this represents the lack of legal agency of the vulnerable beings. The Rohingyas endure a situation where their voices are silenced. Rey Ty, in his article "The Rohingya Refugee Crisis" states, "The attacks on the Rohingya civilian population violate international human rights law and international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war. The crimes committed include crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and war crimes" (57). Subjected to brutal torture, the Rohingyas lack legal protection, rendering them vulnerable to relentless abuse.

Fleeing one's homeland may provide temporary relief from immediate threats, but it does not ensure safety. Upon entering a new country without identity documentation, a migrant face heightened vulnerability and suspicion due to their lack of political agency. In April 2001, a thousand soldiers surround the building site where Habib works. The site managers attempt to use their influence to prevent their entry, as they had previously warned the workers that sleeping on site could lead to accusations of harbouring illegal workers. With nowhere else to go, the workers find themselves trapped. As Habib recounts, "The soldiers cart off the refugees and immigrants whose papers are not in order. I am forced to hide in an enormous water tank for several days" (196). In an unfamiliar land, refugees remain at constant risk of arrest. They endure harsh conditions, demonstrating resilience in their efforts to avoid imprisonment and survive on limited resources.

The Rohingyas face a reality where they can be accused or punished for anything, regardless of their actions, at the discretion of their oppressors. They must not only endure the consequences of their own actions but also withstand the unjust repercussions for crimes they did not commit, but were falsely attributed to them. Habiburrahman recalls his father's words:

My children, they try to justify the arrests by accusing us of all kinds of crimes that we haven't committed. Given our situation, they'll always find a pretext. I had to sign a paper to say that I exchanged kyats for foreign currency, which is strictly forbidden. I was also found guilty of possessing aspirin without authorization. I admitted to all of this to appease them so that I would then be able to negotiate and pay for our freedom. (65)

Habib's father emphasises the need to endure present injustices while keeping a firm focus on the future. Together, they confront false accusations and the hardships imposed on them, building a strength that sustains them in the moment and prepares future generations to face ongoing struggles. The refugees find ways to sustain themselves in a land where they are denied all forms of legal agency.

The Rohingyas' status as illegal citizens within their own country, and later as trespassers when attempting to flee, illustrates the extent to which they have been marginalised. Inside Burma, they were viewed as non-citizens, subjected to violence and even mass murder. When they sought refuge in neighbouring countries, they were similarly branded as illegal immigrants, stripped of their rights and denied a place to call home. This pattern of rejection, both within Burma and beyond, underscores the deliberate efforts by those in power to erase the Rohingya from both their homeland and the broader global community. The structured oppression they face is not just a matter of persecution

in their own country; it extends internationally, making their plight a continuous struggle for survival and dignity.

Habiburahman's move to Malaysia symbolises a brief hope of finding safety, but even there, he is never free from fear or insecurity. The lack of legal protection in Malaysia continues to deny him basic rights, leaving him vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. By sharing his story, he highlights not only his personal suffering but also the wider loss of rights experienced by countless others in similar conditions. His narrative becomes a record of survival and a quiet form of resistance against structures that seek to erase his identity and dignity. Despite leaving his homeland, Habiburahman remains caught in a cycle where political forces control his existence and restrict his freedoms. His experiences reveal how the denial of rights persists across borders, turning him into both a victim of power and an unwilling symbol of ongoing political struggle.

In analysing *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* by Habiburahman through the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory of power and statelessness, the plight of the Rohingya people exemplifies the destructive potential of political power when it strips individuals of their rights and identities. Arendt argues that the loss of a home or the denial of citizenship makes one vulnerable to extreme exploitation, a condition in which individuals become stateless and thus invisible to the political world. The Rohingyas' suffering, driven by arbitrary decisions of the state, reflects this theory as they are systematically denied their basic human rights. Arendt suggests that power is not just an instrument of political control but a process that shapes people's lives and their relation to the world. The Burmese authorities' deliberate efforts to erase the Rohingya identity align with Arendt's assertion that power structures can redefine who belongs to a nation, excluding groups based on arbitrary distinctions. The loss of citizenship, language, and cultural identity experienced by the Rohingya reflects the collapse of their political

agency, leaving them disenfranchised and erased from the social fabric. This loss is not merely a physical or legal status but a profound denial of their shared humanity, a central concern in Arendt's analysis of statelessness and the importance of belonging to a community to maintain one's dignity and freedom.

Ben Rawlence's biography *City of Thorns* provides an in-depth exploration of the lives of refugees through his personal visit to a camp and interviews with nine individuals who share their experiences. While categorised as a biography, Rawlence captures the essence of the refugees' struggles and voices with a remarkable degree of honesty and clarity. The book highlights the profound impact that decisions made by those in power can have on the lives of the most vulnerable. It serves as a powerful testament to the ease with which the lives of the socially marginalised can be destroyed by those who hold power. One signature or a simple gesture from the powerful can doom individuals to a lifetime of hardship, underlining the immense disparity between those who govern and those who are governed.

The refugees in *City of Thorns* each carry their own unique story of displacement, yet all share the painful reality of leaving behind their homes to survive. The conditions they face in the refugee camp never align with their expectations, as it is always the ruling authorities who determine the terms of their existence. Rawlence begins his narrative with the story of Guled, a teenage boy orphaned amidst the political turmoil of Somalia. Guled, along with his elder sister, struggles to survive on the meagre earnings she makes selling small items such as biscuits, cakes, and occasionally petrol. He grows up in a war-torn country where survival becomes the ultimate goal, and any dreams or aspirations he may have had are crushed under the weight of violence and oppression. "Guled's priorities were playing football and staying alive" (Rawlence 26). His dream of playing football is stifled in his homeland, where militia forces rule through a strict interpretation of religious

law. Boys like Guled are punished for engaging in something as simple as playing a game, and the militia enforces these brutal rules under the guise of divine authority. This situation exemplifies how political power, cloaked in religious justification, is used as a tool of control and oppression. The refugees' lives, shaped by the whims of those in power, reveal the devastating consequences of such unchecked authority.

The militia controls the Horn of Africa due to the political games played by powerful people from various countries. The powerful are not concerned with the innocent lives at risk, but rather with preserving their own positions and influence in the world. The orders given by the militia, in the name of God, are not legitimate laws, but oppressive rules that disrupt the daily lives of citizens. As Guled reflects, "Guled's immediate thought is that he is going to die. Either in battle, or for a crime he cannot yet comprehend: for playing football, for wearing shorts, for listening to music, for going to a secular school; his offenses are several" (Rawlence 30). What the militia considers offenses are simply normal activities for the public, which provide them with essential forms of entertainment and relief. Even if these activities are not critical for survival, they should remain personal choices, not dictated by those in power. The constant threat of death for violating these arbitrary rules makes it impossible for people to live independently or freely.

Among the many harsh restrictions imposed by the militia, women bear the brunt of the oppression. They cannot walk the streets without a male relative, and if they go out alone, even in emergencies, they face severe punishment. This treatment forces many families to arrange early marriages for their daughters as a means of protecting them from further abuse. The militia soldiers, armed with weapons, are feared by the people, but the true power lies in the pervasive fear that dominates the population. As Rawlence poignantly writes, "It is fear, not sticks that make it a prison" (Rawlence 38). It is not the fear of God that compels people to follow the rules, but the fear of punishment from those

in power. The people living under this regime maintain their own faith in God, grounded in ethical and moral beliefs, but the arrival of the militia with their authoritarian rules forces them to abandon these practices in order to survive under the threat of violence.

After enduring severe hardships, many people are forced to escape to refugee camps, which, while providing some aid, are still controlled by those in power. The overcrowded conditions in these camps make it increasingly difficult for refugees to meet their basic needs, and only a few who manage to escape with some wealth can survive. “On the day Guled arrived, the camps held nearly 295,000 people. Twelve months later, at the end of 2011, there would be half a million” (Rawlence 40). Hunger remains a prevalent issue in the Ifo camp, just as it does in other camps, with the vast majority of the residents suffering from starvation.

Exploitation of the refugees’ labour is another undeniable issue in the camp. Despite paying the same prices as others in the market, refugees are forced to work long hours for meagre wages. They are desperate for any income, as even a small amount helps them survive. Taking Nisho, for example, a Somali refugee living in the Dadaab refugee camp and works as a porter and carries more weight than machines, all for a fraction of the payment that would be given to a non-refugee worker. He is unaware that his labour is being exploited. The traders in the camp know they can take advantage of the refugees’ vulnerability, paying them far less than what their labour is actually worth. The situation is a direct consequence of the lack of power that refugees hold over their lives. They are caught in a system where they have no bargaining power, no unions, and no way to secure fair compensation for their work. In this context, the refugees are trapped, not just by their circumstances but by the exploitation they endure in exchange for survival.

In addition to the exploitation of labour, refugees in these camps are systematically denied the opportunity for education. Their only means of survival is through physical labour, as education is out of reach. Nisho, who has lived in the camp for some time, offers job suggestions to Mahat, a new arrival. “He suggested shoe shining. Then later, a more promising line: firewood. For miles around the Dadaab camps, there is a halo of stumps, the trees ravaged by the raiding parties of refugees gripping their insistent axes” (Rawlence 50). However, as they soon realise, these jobs do nothing to improve their situation. Instead, they lead to physical deterioration and mental exhaustion, as they work tirelessly without the proper nourishment. The inadequate rations and the exploitation they face are a clear reflection of a system that values profit over human dignity. Families are forced to ration their already insufficient food and even sell what little they have just to survive. This situation is not one of misfortune alone; it is a systematic failure that prolongs the cycle of poverty and suffering for the refugees. The question must be raised: why are these refugees, already stripped of their rights and resources, forced to endure such exploitation without any recourse? This is not just an unfortunate reality; it is a fundamental injustice that needs to be addressed.

Isha, a Somali woman refugee living in the Darfur refugee camp is a farmer forced to leave her home due to drought. Her situation represents the harsh reality many refugees face when their livelihoods are destroyed by external forces. Despite her deep attachment to the land and hope for survival, the economic instability and inflation in her region push her to the brink. “By the turn of the year 2011 staples were up eighty per cent. In earlier lean times, Isha had relied on the government that had brought maize, oil and trucks of water but now, under al-Shabaab, there was little” (Rawlence 53). This situation highlights the stark divide between the powerful, who control resources, and the powerless, who are

left to suffer. Isha's loss of dignity in the camp reflects a deeper injustice: the rich and powerful dictate the fate of the poor, leaving them to grapple with hunger and loss.

In the camp, displaced individuals struggle with their own hopes for freedom. Kheyro, a Somali refugee taking refuge in the Darfur refugee camp is a mother who dreams of resettling in a safe country like Canada and invests everything in this aspiration. However, she is crushed when told she will not be granted resettlement. Yet, her drive to escape persists. "Kheyro, too, for the first time in her life, was planning on leaving the camp. It wasn't quite Canada, as she had dreamed, but it was an adventure – further into Kenya – and it felt like a divine reward" (Rawlence 196). Her shift from the lofty goal of resettlement to a more modest escape mirrors the unfulfilled dreams of many refugees who are repeatedly let down by the lack of power and opportunity. Over time, the camp becomes not just a temporary refuge, but a place of routine, where the hope for freedom fades as individuals adjust to their grim reality. This endless disempowerment underscores the harshness of a world where the few in power dictate the lives of the many, leaving the displaced to settle for what little they can grasp.

In analysing Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns* through the lens of Hannah Arendt's theory of power and statelessness, the refugee experience depicted in the book resonates deeply with Arendt's concept of the 'right to have rights.' Arendt argues that the most vulnerable individuals, particularly those who are stateless, lack the power to claim their rights, making them susceptible to exploitation and oppression. The refugees in Rawlence's narrative, like those in the Ifo camp, are deprived of this basic right, caught in a political and social system where they are not recognised as full citizens or individuals with inherent dignity. This condition is exemplified in the arbitrary and oppressive rules imposed by the militia, which strip away personal freedoms, as well as the exploitation

they endure within the refugee camp, both of which highlight the dangers of unchecked power.

*A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi is a poignant work of fiction that recounts the traumatic experiences of Tareq, a teenager thrust into the life of a Syrian refugee due to the ongoing political upheavals in the country. The novel critiques the strategic use of violence as a mechanism of fear and control, aligning with Hannah Arendt's assertion that power and violence are fundamentally incompatible. The story opens with Tareq's idyllic family life, shattered when a barrel bomb decimates their building. While Tareq is rescued by Ahmed, a member of the Syrian Civil Defence, the explosion claims the lives of many of his loved ones. His brother Salim's body remains unaccounted for, highlighting the chaos and inhumanity of the conflict. This tragedy starkly illustrates the calculated brutality of those in power, who exploit violence as a tool for self-preservation, disregarding the cost to innocent lives.

In the aftermath, Tareq's father resolves to seek financial help from his brother in Raqqa to escape their devastated homeland. This decision, however, brings the family into the heart of ISIS-controlled territory, a place where power manifests through oppressive and draconian rules. The journey itself is perilous, with bribes to soldiers draining their limited resources and underscoring the extortionate structures built on fear. Upon arrival, Raqqa reveals itself as a stark dystopia: a society micromanaged by extreme regulations that criminalise individual expression. Jeans and trimmed beards are forbidden; women are mandated to veil themselves entirely except for their eyes, and even products featuring models' faces are banned. Such conditions reveal a disturbing continuity of authoritarian control, echoing historical totalitarian regimes.

Abawi's description supports Arendt's idea that true power cannot depend on violence. In Raqqa, the way ISIS controls the city shows how government can collapse

into a rule based only on fear and force, similar to what has been seen in fascist regimes. The novel asks readers to think about how these kinds of oppressive systems continue to exist and how deeply they damage human dignity. By telling Tareq's story within this larger setting, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* becomes more than a personal tragedy. It becomes a strong reflection on how power, violence, and human suffering are connected.

The arbitrariness of their rule further highlights the unpredictability of power maintained through violence. Punishments are inconsistent and often serve the immediate interests of those in control. Civilians face extortion, beatings, arrest, or death without any form of due process. Tareq's father is compelled to pay a bribe to protect his family, fully aware that arrest could result in severe consequences. Abawi recounts how individuals are subjected to extreme punishments for minor infractions, such as being pulled from buses for wearing tight-fitting pants and forced to walk over 200 kilometers back to Aleppo (Abawi 38). These instances reveal the extent of dehumanisation under the militia's rule, where the absence of legal protection exposes individuals to arbitrary and often brutal treatment.

Upon entering Raqqa, Tareq and his family are confronted with a grim spectacle: young men publicly executed and their bodies displayed to instil fear. Tareq's description of "three human heads on metal spikes, bloated from the sun, eyes still open but lifeless" (Abawi 45) reveals the extent of brutality exercised by ISIS, a non-state group that has usurped control from the recognised government. Although Syria remains a sovereign state, Raqqa's residents live without the protection normally afforded by citizenship, rendering them effectively stateless. The imposition of arbitrary violence in place of lawful governance strips individuals of their basic rights and leaves them vulnerable to unchecked power. *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* portrays Raqqa as a space where the collapse of legitimate authority creates a void in which rights are no

longer guaranteed. Through this depiction, the novel interrogates the loss of the right to have rights and the precarious condition of individuals abandoned by both national and international structures of protection.

After returning from Raqqa, Tareq's family faces a harsh reality: their limited resources mean that only two members can try to escape. Tareq's father makes the painful choice to send his son and daughter on a dangerous boat journey in search of safety. Yet this attempt at escape does not bring freedom, but instead leads to new hardships. The sea voyage, with forty-four passengers crammed into a boat built for ten, shows the extreme desperation of people who risk everything just to survive. Abawi captures this tragic truth, "They feared a death at home; instead, they died searching for life" (Abawi 75). For Tareq, the journey is a fight to stay alive and to protect his sister, Susan. The overcrowded conditions and the constant danger of drowning reveal how easily refugees are stripped of protection and dignity. Their lives are reduced to a struggle for survival, highlighting how statelessness denies them not only a home, but also the basic right to be recognised as human beings with rights.

The refugees lose everything they have built over the years in a single moment, leaving them to endure life without their possessions, dignity, or identity. This deep loss forces them to face a painful displacement, where they are no longer recognised for who they truly are. As Abawi points out, "They were no longer the people they were born as. At the will of a war, they went from being doctors, lawyers, storekeepers, students, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons to refugees, foreigners, freeloaders, terrorists, enemies. Labels that didn't represent their true selves" (233). Tareq's family, like many others, is forced to act against their deeply held beliefs and values just to survive. Under the rule of those who claim to be the sole interpreters of their faith, they must suppress their disagreement and comply, knowing that open resistance could cost them their lives.

This highlights the loss of religious freedom and personal agency in their lives. Their situation reflects a broader reality where statelessness strips people not only of material security but also of the right to hold onto their identities and beliefs.

The novel also brings attention to another danger faced by refugees—human trafficking. On the island of refuge, Susan is abducted briefly, showing how the traffickers prey on the most vulnerable. The act happens suddenly, suggesting that the abductor had been planning it for some time. Tambini Stollwerck describes this harsh reality, “Refugees are especially vulnerable to human trafficking due to language barriers and difficult living conditions” (Tambini Stollwerck 2). Refugee children, with little protection, are often targeted by traffickers who see them as easy opportunities for exploitation.

The emotional impact of Susan’s abduction is undeniable. Even after her rescue, the trauma lingers, and she often breaks down in tears when the event is mentioned. As Abawi writes, “She didn’t talk about the trip very much; when she did, she would cry” (Abawi 240). Her experience shows that refugees suffer not just from physical danger, but also from deep emotional scars that last long after the immediate threat is gone. Refugee children, often ignored in discussions about displacement, become easy targets in a world that fails to offer them safety or dignity. The refugees’ safety is also put into question during their journey across the sea to an island near the border. Their lives are at risk as they are crammed into a boat with no safety equipment. The last of their money is taken from them for this dangerous journey, which pushes them toward death. At one point, they are forced to jump from the boat to escape the sinking vessel, leaving them with no choice but to face the ocean’s deadly threat.

Through Tareq’s and Susan’s experiences, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* reveals the many struggles of displaced families. The exploitation of refugees, whether

through overcrowded boats or human trafficking, raises serious questions about the lack of protection for people fleeing conflict. These acts of cruelty show the need for change to ensure refugees are treated as human beings rather than mere numbers or opportunities for abuse. In *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, the application of Hannah Arendt's theory on the incompatibility of power and violence is evident in the depiction of the authoritarian regimes that Tareq and his family encounter. Arendt argues that true power is built on consent and collective action, while violence is a coercive force that seeks control through fear and intimidation. In Raqqa, the brutal dominance of ISIS and the Shabiha militia exemplifies this tension, as their rule is upheld by violence and fear rather than genuine power. The arbitrary and cruel punishments inflicted on civilians, the use of terror to maintain control, and the public executions all reflect how violence undermines legitimate authority and erodes human dignity. Abawi's portrayal of the human cost of such violence underscores Arendt's point: power that relies on force is inherently unstable and ultimately destructive, not only to those subjected to it but also to the legitimacy of the power itself.

Sharon Bala's novel *The Boat People* critically examines the effects of power dynamics, political manipulation, and ethnic marginalisation in the context of forced migration. The story centres on Mahindan, a Tamil refugee, whose displacement reflects the broader violence driven by political agendas. Through Mahindan's journey, the novel explores how militarised governance and political agendas not only force people from their homes but also strip them of their autonomy and social stability. The transformation of Mahindan's homeland, from a place of natural beauty to one ravaged by conflict, underscores the far-reaching consequences of political violence on both individuals and communities. By placing individual stories within broader systemic critiques, *The Boat People* highlights the global scale of forced migration and displacement. The novel questions the ethical and political frameworks that govern migration and refugee policies,

calling for a re-evaluation of the assumptions that underpin them. Through its detailed portrayal of Mahindan's journey and its critique of power structures, the text encourages a deeper analysis of the intersection between sovereignty, human rights, and the treatment of marginalised communities on the move.

One significant issue of power politics that persists in all refugee crises caused by ethnic conflicts is the use of systemic violence to maintain dominance. Rotberg, in his chapter titled "Sri Lanka's Civil War: From Mayhem toward Diplomatic Resolution," specifies:

The transition from colonial rule to independence may be easier to manage in conditions of great plurality and diversity, or where the population is nearly homogenous. But within Sri Lanka's population of 18 million, the Tamil minority is sufficiently sizable to pose a potential threat, not in reality, but in perception, to the Sinhala majority (4).

In *The Boat People*, Sharon Bala illustrates the consequences of statelessness and the denial of the right to have rights, particularly in the context of forced migration. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory, statelessness, or the loss of national identity, results in individuals becoming 'rightless,' stripped of their fundamental rights and protection. Mahindan's displacement as a Tamil refugee exemplifies this process. His forced migration, driven by ethnic violence and political manipulation in Sri Lanka, transforms him from a citizen with rights into a stateless individual, deprived of autonomy and subjected to systemic violence. The dehumanisation he faces, both in Sri Lanka and later in Canada, highlights how stateless individuals are treated as outsiders, often denied dignity and basic rights. This treatment reveals how political violence transcends national borders, perpetuating statelessness and reinforcing the idea that power rooted in violence ultimately denies individuals their right to have rights.

Priya is a law graduate who is undergoing her internship and she is a Canadian citizen with a Sri Lankan Tamil background. Her observation of the refugees reveals their deeply impacted state, with their physical frailty serving as evidence of the hardships they have endured. These individuals, who survive the arduous journey, arrive in a position of legal uncertainty, often stripped of their previous identity. Bala illustrates this precarious status “As far as the law is concerned, you have no status. To stay here, you must first become a refugee, and this is a little complicated” (34). The issue with those in power is their tendency to consolidate and intensify control by oppressing weaker groups. Refugees from Myanmar, Syria, Sudan, and Sri Lanka have faced varying intensities of crisis, but the root cause of their plight has been ethnic hatred, with one group displacing another. Only when authorities embrace Arendt’s view that power is best used for the collective good can society progress toward unity and equality.

The boat journey from Sri Lanka to the shores of Canada illustrates how the lives and deaths of asylum seekers seem to hold no significance for those around them. “He smelled the sourness of his skin, the raw animal stink of the bodies all around” (Bala 8). This striking image of Mahindan and his son Sellian’s journey captures the stark reality faced by asylum seekers—leaving behind a land ravaged by war, only to be reduced to mere bodies wherever they go in search of refuge. As stateless individuals, whose deaths no longer provoke concern or responsibility from any governing authority, they become human debris, heaped together in the vessel of escape. Stripped of dignity and identity, these people nonetheless cling to hope, yearning for a new land where they can fight simply to stay alive.

The separation of families during times of crisis is one of the most devastating consequences faced by stateless asylum seekers upon reaching the shores of Canada from Sri Lanka. Mahindan and Sellian had the liberty to remain together in their homeland,

even when the threat of death loomed large. However, in their country of refuge—Canada, they are treated as ‘non-persons,’ a term Arendt uses to describe the stateless, and are separated without regard for the basic human need of a child to be with his father during such a traumatic period marked by war, bloodshed, displacement, and the loss of his beloved mother. Father and son are forcibly taken to separate detention centres, subjected to a system that shows little concern for their emotional or psychological well-being. In their struggle for survival, they endure brutal separation and a life that resembles imprisonment. The father and son cry helplessly, overwhelmed by the forceful parting in an alien land:

Appa! No! He’s my son! The metal between his feet rattled and Mahindan felt his weight tip forward. The men on either side of him yelled as Ranga reached bound hands out to catch him. By the time Mahindan was upright, the guard had Sellian draped over his shoulder and was carrying him away. Some of the women in line had turned to watch. They shouted at the guard in Tamil to stop. Sellian was mutinous, kicking and beating his fists on the man’s back. The juice box fell; purple liquid pooled in a puddle on the asphalt. (22)

The people on becoming stateless beings go through different problems at different places. Though Mahindan goes through separation from his son and his homeland that he loves, he still feels that they are fortunate to have escaped from the brutalities of bombs and bloodshed. He describes the war-stricken land to the lawyers in Canada. “It was better to come upon a place where the bombs had already fallen. Death had taken its due and moved on. All the time, we were passing bodies, Mahindan told Charlika and Priya” (Bala 119). The situation of Tamils in Sri Lanka, as described by Mahindan depicts the vulnerability of marginalised people in a power dominated society, where they are reduced to just bodies, as specified by Arendt.

The people, on becoming stateless beings, undergo a range of hardships depending on the geographical and political spaces they move through. Mahindan, though deeply affected by the forced separation from his young son and the loss of his homeland to which he remains emotionally bound, still considers himself and his child fortunate to have escaped the immediate and continuing brutalities of bombs, crossfire, and relentless bloodshed. In an attempt to explain the depth of suffering endured by the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Mahindan recounts his experiences to the Canadian lawyers who handle his asylum case. “It was better to come upon a place where the bombs had already fallen. Death had taken its due and moved on. All the time, we were passing bodies, Mahindan told Charlika and Priya” (119). His words bring out not only the violence of war but also the vulnerability of those who are left without protection in their own homeland. The condition of Tamils in Sri Lanka, as described by Mahindan, reflects how the marginalised are pushed to the fringes of society and denied political and legal recognition. Once displaced, they are no longer considered citizens, but are instead reduced to anonymous figures in a sea of suffering. As Hannah Arendt points out, the stateless are not merely people without homes; they are people without the right to have rights. With no authority willing to recognise their existence as part of a political community, they are viewed only as physical bodies in transit. In this light, the people fleeing the war in Sri Lanka are stripped of their former identities and thrust into a condition where their survival is tolerated, but their humanity is neither acknowledged nor protected.

Memoirs, fiction, and non-fiction have captured the plight of refugees in numerous ways. The selected books effectively highlight the harsh realities faced by millions of displaced individuals. However, it is the media, through newspapers and articles, that provide the most immediate and brutal accounts of current refugee crises, which are often more severe than the narratives in books. As Volkan states, “On 22 March, 2016 three

coordinated attacks occurred in Brussels, Belgium, killing 32 bystanders and three attackers, and injuring over 300 individuals. ISIS claimed responsibility for these attacks” (Volkan 22). These reports confirm that the situations described in primary sources align with the daily struggles refugees endure, a stark reminder of the ongoing brutality driven by power politics.

The political structures of dominant societies have historically sought to impede the survival of the oppressed. When rulers perceive that the oppressed are making strides toward improvement, they intensify obstacles to prevent any progress. Gail M. Presbey’s article, “Hannah Arendt on Power, Concern and Coercion,” outlines five stages of power misuse by authoritative rulers, “In the fifth stage, violence, there is no choice at all; people are directly physically compelled. Perhaps people are imprisoned; chained; dragged; muffled; or shot as an example to others. For Arendt, this is the height of impotence; it shows the group or ruler’s inability to convince its subjects in any way, by any means” (Presbey 30). Rulers often justify their brutal control as the most effective method of governance. In doing so, they manipulate public perception, ensuring that their actions, however violent, are viewed as legitimate by their supporters. Many citizens, who benefit from the rulers’ favor, accept these justifications, even when faced with widespread violence against the oppressed. These supporters come to see the displaced and marginalised as alien invaders, not fellow human beings deserving of empathy.

The data disseminated by rulers typically serve to reinforce their own narrative, while the media, under their influence, portrays the oppressed as aggressors. By controlling what information is released to the public, rulers can manipulate the truth to suit their agenda. As noted by the *BBC*, “The government, which puts the number of dead at 400, claims that ‘clearance operations’ against the militants ended on 5 September, but *BBC* correspondents have seen evidence that they continued after that date” (*BBC* 1).

Journalists, often at great personal risk, strive to report the truth, but in many regions, the media's efforts to expose the brutality of those in power are thwarted. The suppression of truth persists where those in authority maintain control over the flow of information.

Articles in newspapers often question the reliability of the data collected, highlighting that it is shaped by the rulers, not the affected victims. As Gillsäter notes, “A lack of or gaps in data limits our ability to accurately measure poverty, the impact of crises and policy shocks on refugee populations” (Gillsäter). The available data on refugee poverty itself is alarming, and the true conditions of these populations may be far more dire than can be imagined. It is difficult for the average person to grasp the level of deprivation refugees endure, particularly when starvation becomes a daily reality. Moreover, rulers often ensure that refugees have little to no means of communication with outsiders, effectively silencing their suffering. The world, therefore, has a responsibility to seek the truth, rather than accept the statistics presented by those in power as absolute.

In an article published by *The Independent* on December 7, 2024, titled “Death is Chasing Us,” Bel Trew and Rana Najjar document the harrowing experiences of refugees in Lebanon staying at Kansafra, Syria. One victim describes, “My son wakes up crying at night from fear of the airstrikes. Our biggest worries are the Russian and Syrian planes bombing us. How can the fabric of a tent withstand a missile?” (Trew and Najjar 1). This testimony mirrors the horrors described in the refugee narratives of Syria, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, as discussed in this chapter. These accounts underscore a pervasive issue: the abuse of power affects the most vulnerable, those who are rendered powerless by their social circumstances. The theoretical concepts of Arendt —specifically the concepts of power for the collective good can be used by theorists, researchers and policy makers, for the betterment of refugees and other minorities in the world. Through the promotion of peace and equality, the brutalities that persist in society be eradicated.

This chapter closely examines the loss of political, social, cultural, economic, and legal agency experienced by refugees, drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of statelessness and the 'right to have rights.' Through an analysis of select primary sources, it traces how individuals—once citizens—are stripped of their status and rendered powerless due to the loss of citizenship in their homeland. The study identifies systemic oppression, ethnic conflict, and discrimination as the underlying forces that transform citizens into refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. As Arendt observes, these individuals are not only deprived of legal protection but are also denied recognition as human beings within society. The chapter argues for the equal rights of all individuals, regardless of their life conditions, and seeks justice for those whose agency is systematically erased. It emphasises that refugees are far more than displaced bodies or human debris, yet statelessness often reduces them to precisely that. This raises a disturbing question: is there a further level of degradation beyond this erasure? If their political and social selves are obliterated, what remains of their bodily autonomy? The next chapter turns to this urgent concern, exploring how refugee bodies are further dehumanised and denied agency through the banality of evil embedded in the everyday workings of society.