## Imprisoning the Refugee: Boochani's No Friend but the Mountains through Foucauldian Lens

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## Abstract

Violence need not always involve gory or bloodshed but "is constitutive of, intersubjective relations, institutions, language, logic, and subjectivity" (Rae and Ingala 2). Restriction of an individual's basic human right is a violation and violence upon his/her body. The paper titled "Imprisoning the Refugee: Boochani's No Friend but the Mountains through Foucauldian Lens" attempts to relate control of body with power through the reading of this memoir of Behrouz Boochani. Written and sent as multiple text messages from a mobile phone that the writer managed to smuggle into the refugee detention camp. the book exposes the systemic torture and inhumane treatment in such "prisons". In this paper, the Foucauldian concepts of biopower, subject, power and panopticism are used to study the refugee experience. The techniques of 'domesticating' an individual as a "subject" of a higher power through denial and restriction will be explained with reference to the work. The blatant violation of human rights by the system can be read as a project of subjugation of the human bodies. The memoir addresses the concept of kyriarchy in multiple ways. The intensity of violence upon an individual multiplies expands and grows in a system of intersectional oppression. The paper also describes how the writer resists the violence through the very act of writing and outrightly rejecting colonial discourses of terminologies. This memoir calls for international attention to the pathetic condition of the detention camps and the plight of the refugees who have migrated not by choice but out of no choice. Denving a person to flee from violence or forcing him/her to return to a place highly dangerous to live is

violence. The study also looks at how fear operates and controls the psyche and body of people.

**Keywords:** Refugee, Kyriarchy, Foucault, Panopticism, Power.

Behrouz Boochani's No Friend But the Mountain: Writing from Manus Prison exposes the systemic torture and inhumane treatment experienced in the Australian detention camps. This paper uses the Foucauldian framework of power, subject and Panopticism to understand the refugee experience. The study analyses how fear operates and controls the psyche and body of people. The paper looks into the injustice perpetuated by the system as a project of subjugation of the bodies. It also looks at the inhumane conditions perpetuated by the system as a project of subjugation of the bodies. This memoir calls for international attention to the pathetic condition of the detention camps and the plight of the refugees who, through a process of migration, have become subhuman. This paper shows how the 'subhuman' refugee is compared to Agamben's concept of 'life devoid value'.

The means using which the person migrates, and the methods and reasons for migration play important roles in the determination of one's connection with the structure of power. A migrant who does not have a permanent residence in a foreign country can be categorised into three groups- economic migrant, refugee and asylum seeker (humanity.org.uk/). An economic migrant is a person who has moved to a foreign land for better job opportunities, better educational purposes or improved living conditions and status. He/she has proper documents that permit his/her stay in the foreign land and has not run away from the home country for the fear of life. Returning to his/her home country does not threaten his/her life. A refugee, as defined by the United Nations, is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR 1951:3); while an asylum seeker is "someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status" (UNESCO:17). Legally speaking, a refugee has already been granted protection while an asylum seeker needs the approval of the immigration to fit into the definition of a refugee. However, both of these categories were forced to run away from their homelands to protect their lives. There are several restrictions imposed on both refugees and asylum seekers in the new country. The lack of immigration papers and other documents that grants them permission to stay makes their immigration illegal.

The Iranian-Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani was an asylum seeker from Iran in Australian detention camps while he wrote *No Friend but the Mountains* in 2019. He is also a human rights activist and a film-maker. Written in a blend of prose and poetry, *No Friends But the Mountains* journals his protracted boat journey from Indonesia, his detention at Manus Prison and the lives of fellow asylum seekers. It also documents his observations about the Australian immigration officials, guards and the local Papuan people. As he did not get permission to receive the Victorian Premier's Prize for non-fiction Award in person in mainland Australia, he had pre-recorded an acceptance speech for the media. He says,

With humility, I would like to say that this award is a victory. It is a victory not only for us but for literature and art and above all, it is a victory for humanity...A victory against a system that has never recognised us as human beings. It is a victory against a system that has reduced us to numbers (Behrouz Boochani 2019).

Many first-world countries like Australia have treaties regarding their humanitarian act of receiving and integrating refugees<sup>1</sup>. However, the reality of refugees is pathetic. The strict immigration policies<sup>2</sup> have rendered survival difficult for the refugees and asylum seekers.

The very act of writing is an act of resistance - resistance against the production of 'truth' by the State and its discourse. This resistance is an effort to bring out the 'truth' from the side of the refugees and a rejection of the 'truth' imposed upon them. Foucault says, "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault 1980:93). In order to produce/ circulate his version of 'truth' in the form of the memoir, Behrouz had to smuggle a phone into the camp and send the manuscript as text messages to the translator and editor. According to his translator, the memoir is strategised in a way that the legacy of Australia also includes "indefinite

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Some of the Australian programmes for the benefit of refugees include International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights." *humanrights.gov.au* https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commissiongeneral/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-humanrights, Accessed on 20 March 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> According to 1992 law, any non-citizen entering the shore without a valid visa can be detained indefinitely till a decision on his/her immigration status has been made which could be granting them a visa, releasing them to the society or deporting them to the country of origin. The UN observed that the mandatory forced removal of asylum seekers to the Manus detention centre (in Papua New Guinea) or Nauru for processing is a breach of the international standards of law as stories of suicides, violence and murders have emerged from the camps over the years. "Australia's Immigration Detention Policy and Practice" *Humanrights.gov.au*. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/6-australias-immigration-detention-policy-and-practice. Accessed on 3 Dec. 2019.

detention of refugees and asylum seekers deep within the nation's collective memory" (Behrouz 2018:394).

Boochani addresses the structure of norms that focuses on creating a "pure community" as a project of nationalism<sup>3</sup> which has a detrimental effect on non-citizens as it leads to the exclusion of other nations and people of other nations. This project of nationalism is a negative aspect of the Foucauldian idea of biopolitics. The biopolitics of modernity can be understood as a "political rationality" that focuses on the "administration of life and security of the population"<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, this challenges the position of the 'nonpopulation'. The refugees (non-population) who do not constitute the 'population' according to the governmentality, are cast out, debarred from entry to the mainland and forced to suffer in refugee camps. The excerpt from the memoir reveals how the nationalistic project is used as a moral justification for torturing refugees. The work of the security forces is glorified at the expense of 'othering' the refugees: "You're an army here to protect the nation and these imprisoned refugees are the enemy. Who knows who they are or where they're from? They invaded your country by boat" (Boochani 2018:141). By placing the refugees as threats to the population, their lives are deemed not fit to live which Agamben labels as "lives devoid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "The aim of nationalism is to create and maintain a single national identity, based on shared social characteristics of culture, ethnicity, geographic location, language, politics, religion, traditions and belief in a shared singular history". Triandafyllidou, Anna, 1998. "National Identity and the Other". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 21(4), pp: 593–612. DOI:10.1080/014198798329784.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> In the modern state, the power functions towards improving the conditions for the population, administering the body positively and ensuring security for this population. Such a power is a life-administering power (Foucault 1981, p.136). It is based on the thought: foster life and let die (p.138). Foucault, Michel, 1981. "Right of Death and Power over Life". *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1. Penguin, pp:135-143.

value" or not worth living, drawing from the medical context to denote mentally unstable or brain dead individuals. These lives are dispensable and therefore, such individuals are placed outside of judicial protection (Agamben: 139). The process of refugee migration renders these human beings as recipients of otherness.

The 1951 Refugee Convention, also known as the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951, is the major convention related to the status of refugees. Several countries are signatories and have agreed to the responsibilities of nations to protect individuals from persecuted countries. It is built on article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) with non-refoulement as the prime principle that "prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction when the person is at risk of persecution, torture or other serious human rights violations" (UNHCR 1951:4). However, in reality, the refugees were not believed and the threat of deportation persists.

*No Friend But the Mountains* is a testimony to the absence of its practice. The prison system is so harsh, Boochani notices that the intention of the officials is to force "the return of the refugee prisoners to the land from which they came" (Boochani 2018: 165). This is a violation of the law as these measures promote refoulement. The UNHCR states:

In 2001, States parties issued a Declaration reaffirming their commitment to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, and they recognized in particular that the core principle of non-refoulement is embedded in customary international law. It provides that no one shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom (UNHCR 1951:4). Before the refugees are transported to Manus Island from Christmas Island, the Australian officials create a demonic image of the people, the culture, the history and the landscape "with naked humans, dangerous insects and murderous mosquitoes" and scary ways of life (Boochani 2018:83, 87), so as to induce fear in the minds of the refugees. Fear controls the body and the minds of the people. "We are hostages- we are being made examples to strike fear into others, to scare people so they won't come to Australia" (Boochani 2018:107). The officials hope that such a warning would push the neardeath experiences that they had endured to get to the island and the reason that forced them to escape their homeland into oblivion.

In today's power structures, there is no single figure controlling others:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain; it is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands employed and exercised through a netlike organisation (Foucault 1980:98).

Boochani highlights such a power phenomenon in his work. He calls the power structure of the prison a kyriarchal system. Kyriarchy<sup>5</sup> refers to the complex system of intersectional oppression in which a person is oppressed by various factors like class, economic status, race and not just sex. This idea recognises the human tendency to take up the roles of dominant/dominated unconsciously or consciously even in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> "Kyriarchy is a theory about the nature of structural power developed in feminist biblical hermeneutics by feminist Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992 and describes multiple, interacting structures of power and domination". Osborne, Natalie, 2013. Intersectionality and Kyriarchy. *Griffith University*, Volume 14(2) pp: 130-151, https://doi.org/10.1177/ 1473095213516443. Accessed on 25 Dec. 2019.

absence of a stratified pyramid. Kyriarchy is a structure of oppression and privilege.

In Boochani's context, the translator of *No Friend But the Mountains* says that kyriarchy "represents the multi-structural nature of Australia's border-industrial complex - a being that orchestrates the systematic tortures inflicted in Manus Prison" (Boochani 2018:396). Apart from the superiority established by the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy, differences in race, class, gender, class, knowledge etc. are also causing discrimination. The refugee-writer does not simply blame and criticise the jailers for their torturous methods. Instead, he sympathises with the local population of Papua New Guinea who were once the "freest humans" (Boochani 2018:144). But now, since they are mere employees of the Immigration Department of Australia, they are also trapped in the system of kyriarchy. These locals are expected to follow the orders of the Australian and New Zealand officials for a meagre salary.

Even among the refugees, the ones who manage to save ration possess control over a person who relies on their extras. It is needless to say that the physically stronger ones exert power over weaker ones. For example, the former easily manages to break the queue for food and toilets as Boochani notes, "The prisoners have become wolves, a threat to everyone else" (Boochani 2018:174). Even the cook is aware of the situations where he can exploit and misuse power. He does not give food or milk that each prisoner is entitled to, even if it means to throw away spoiled food items the next day. When prisoners demand answers, all the employees play innocent. "All they can say is, 'I'm sorry, I'm just following orders. In reality, those who are apparently part of the system also have no idea what is going on" (Boochani 2018:209).

Conflicts start to rise between different groups (groups made by the authorities based on the country of origin) as each group tried to patronise the other. The manipulating power of the kyriarchal system is to govern by turning the prisoners against each other and sowing seeds of hatred between people (Boochani 2018:125). This purposefully contrived system oppresses the refugees through multiple interlocking kinds of stigmatisation including racism and xenophobia. The oppressive forces of the kyriarchal system also function outside of the factors described in the book. "Manus prison as an ideology hinders or eliminates the opportunity to know" (Boochani 2018:362).

This lack of knowledge of the general public regarding the conditions of the refugees adds to their oppression. Since the readers constitute a portion of that public, through this book he engages in a dialogue with the outside world with the hope of making them sensitive to the refugees' plight. "The prisoners have become wolves, a threat to everyone else" (Boochani 2018:174) is indicative of how the refugees are construed as threats to society and the security of the state. Since in modernity, governmentality aims at the security of the population, rendering a category as threats and systematically eliminating the refugees by total elimination (death), incarceration or exposing them to death by depriving all rights becomes justified in the biopolitics. Foucault in "About the Concept of the Dangerous Individual" brings in the idea of a 'dangerous individual'<sup>6</sup> to explain the criminality of mentally

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The term "dangerous being" was first introduced by Prinz in 1905 at the International Union of Penal Law in the context of criminal psychology. When a mentally unfit person commits a crime without any motive, since the act committed is linked to the very personality it constitutes, the aim of the law is not to punish, but to reduce the risk of criminality by therapeutic measures or by exclusion. "It enlarged, organized and codified the suspicion and the locating of dangerous individuals from the rare and monstrous figure of the monomaniac to the common everyday figure of the degenerate, of the pervert, of the constitutionally unbalanced, of the immature, and so on". Foucault, Michel, 2000. About the Concept of the

unfit persons. The inclusion of refugees within the state to exclude them as "dangerous individuals" beyond the law and expose them to death can be seen in Boochani's narrative. The absence of sentimentality does not indicate Boochani's ignorance of the vulnerability of the refugee. The narrative describes the various situations that keep them in a vulnerable condition. Denying the permission to use toilet and other basic necessities is also an exploitation of their vulnerability. Controlling the body manifests in several ways: from imprisoning the individual to subjecting the body to various humiliations. The writer has allotted significant narrating time to describing the dearth of proper toilets: "The floor is always in the same state: piss up to ankle" (Boochani 2018:160). The floor of these toilets is decaying concrete full of tiny crevices... accumulated grime and semen, shaved off hair (Boochani 2018:166). Despite its pathetic condition, it is also the only place a prisoner feels liberated. However, the authorities find excuses to monitor the toilets as well.

The refugee detention camp is a combination of the two types of prison systems that Foucault describes in "Panopticism". According to Foucault, there are two ways to imprison an individual. One, through confinement as in the leper's case, where he/she is in a state of seclusion from the main society so that the society remains to be a "pure community". Two, the arrest during plague where one is constantly watched over so that their actions are under surveillance (Foucault 1977:198). The emphasis on pure community is part of the negative biopolitics. The refugee explicitly reveals how one's stake in geopolitics determines the value of life. The question of 'who decides whose life is more important or worth saving' comes into play. The decision of whom to save or protect becomes a

Dangerous Individual. In Faubion, J. D (ed.), Power. New Press, pp. 176-200.

function of a sovereign in the excess of the biopolitics of modernity. What does not belong to the "population" has no political existence. Thus the refugee lives (non-population) can be dispensed with, by torturing them in refugee camps or deporting them to their country of origin which is a direct threat to their lives.

Being under constant surveillance guarantees ceaseless inspection or the illusion of it, which in turn promises obedience. Boochani's description of the prison gives the first impression of surveillance:

A cage/High walls/ Wire fencing/ Electronic doors/ CCTV camera/ Surveillance cameras gazing at twenty individuals/ Men wearing oversized garments/ Men with loose-fitting clothes hanging off them (Boochani 2018:82).

Installing CCTV cameras inside toilets is a project of surveillance. "Major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1977:201). A camp dweller says, "I feel that I am a criminal or a murderer" (Boochani 2018:86). Criminalising refugees allows the operation of torture. "What crime have I committed to justify cuffing me tightly and putting me onto an aeroplane?" (Boochani 2018:96). "Why do I have to be punished for what others might do?" (Boochani 2018:107). Through the rhetoric of fear, the kyriarchal system achieves subjugation of the prisoners. The different techniques of domestication include making people wait in long queues for long hours as illustrated in the chapter titled "Queuing as Torture"(Boochani 2018:189); cutting down on supplies; escorting them; regulating phone calls (an innocent man was denied the permission to make an urgent call to his dying father). All these enable them to create a condition of

dependency which in turn promises obedience. The only thing they could purchase is cigarettes. Pens and papers are never supplied, although there are provisions in the law.

From a helpless, meek and tense group of people, a violent and barbaric population is created by the inhumane conditions they are subjected to. Boochani writes, "...no one has the right to express the very human feeling of munificence" (Boochani 2018:184). The dehumanising experience is reflected in the language of the narration. The writer compares the prisoners greedily waiting for food with "animals" and "leeches" (Boochani 2018:195). He calls himself a "lowly fox, frail and weak, waiting to scavenge their leftovers" (Boochani 2018:196). As the days passed, the people who stood "like submissive sheep" (p. 90) have transformed into "gluttonous pack animals" (Boochani 2018:195). They live in a situation that could not function as a civilised society, instead in a crowd that functioned according to the law of the jungle and the power of biceps and muscles (Boochani 2018;47, 227). This system of the prison instils in the prisoners' perverse habits and sordid and barbaric behaviours. Their economic productivity is challenged since the people cannot engage in any job. Thus refugee camps perpetuate a culture of submission.

Boochani notes, "We are like puppets on a string put in motion with the flick of a finger. Every mind is caught up in a process that has become normalised. A Domesticating process." (Boochani 2018:190). The subjects' agency is subdued by the system. One of the major ways in which the body is controlled is by interfering with medical practices. The doctor by virtue of the position and knowledge assumes a superior position. The right to decide about one's body is suspended when any person is examined by the medical team, who are considered an agents of power. Thus medical knowledge is not only a privileged form of knowledge but rather a politicised knowledge which has the implication of governance. Once they have induced the fear of malaria in the prison inmates, they distribute pills which are usually given to "cows bloated from overeating". (Boochani 2018:155). They are frisked at least once a day and a slight suspicion leads to a detailed stop and search. Such examinations are not only mentally torturous but physically draining. He writes:

The frisking hands of the Papus/ The imposing stares of the Australian officers/the prisoners trapped in a tunnel of tension... the body left vulnerable/the body an object to be searched/Examined by the hands of others/The body susceptible to the gaze of others (Boochani 2018:306).

Nomenclature has a special place in the novel. The refugees are renamed as "Cow", "Comedian", "Prime Minister", "The Blue-Eyed Boy" etc. not only to camouflage their original names (for security reasons) but also to suggest the lack of a stable identity in a foreign land or the irrelevance of a name when they are just a flock of "docile sheep" or "pieces of meat" (Boochani 2018:352, 152). Renaming is a political act of erasing the past ties with one's own religion, country and nationality and their willingness to be a part of the host country. The narrative shows how refugees from a position of "waiting to be helped" transform into an individual with an agency (although very little in that sense). He casts doubt on the existence of a stable, coherent self (Flax 1987:624).

Boochani, in this work, also focuses on language and its use through renaming. He renames Manus Regional Processing Centre as Manus Prison, thus removing any euphemistic trait to the detention centre. The prison is described as "souldestroying", "enormous cage", and "hell" (Boochani 2018:111). The writer 'reveals' the real name of G4S, a group

that supervises the prisoners' activities, as Bastard's Security Company" (Boochani 2018:141). The choice of Farsi language in the manuscript sent to the translator and its translation to English bear political significance. The translator says that he was intrigued by Boochani's choice to write in Farsi, not Kurdish. "He was writing in the language of the oppressors [Farsi], even though he is a fervent advocate of Kurdish culture, language and politics. And the book was being translated into the language of his jailers and torturers [English]" (Boochani 2018:394).

The refugees, including Boochani, a journalist himself, are irritated and "frightened" when they find the journalists outside the airport. He is critical of journalists' behaviour that feeds on wars and miseries. Additionally, he wants to represent rather than be represented or become "objects of inquiry for these intrusive people " (Boochani 2018:91, 93). He also suspects a nexus between the media persons and the officials. His disdain for the Kurd interpreter in the detention camp is also evident when he expresses how insensitive her approach toward the refugee community is: "How idiotic for a person to want to show off to a bunch of poor and helpless humans by wearing those ridiculous clothes" (Boochani 2018:106). All the instances prove his desire for refugees' autonomy to re-present their reality. The inscriptions on the walls of the prison also indicate the refugees' desire to mark their memories, stories and even humble prayers like that of Nilou, a young girl who wrote "Oh God, do something, take us to a nice place. Kiss, kiss" (Boochani 2018:119). The people waiting to be resettled in hope deserve to be treated with dignity. "The feelings of weakness, of demoralisation, of inferiority" (Boochani 2018:100) add to their pain of being forcefully separated from their families and familiar places.

Boochani does not mention what led to his fleeing from Iran because the narration itself (of the risks of travelling by trucks and by boats) suggests the needlessness to reiterate the wellfounded fear of persecution. Most importantly, it also demonstrates the impossibility to prove or disprove whether an asylum-seeker had genuine fears of persecution when he or she left their country. Whether or not a government should consider the people who have come to a foreign land to escape persecution or war or genocide as 'threats to the security' of a country is an ethical question to be answered. By exposing the plight of refugees and the injustices against them, it calls for international attention to the pathetic condition of the detention camps and the plight of the refugees who have migrated not by choice but for the sake of their lives. Boochani's No Friend But the Mountains describes the torture in detention camps and the plight of the refugees denied the opportunity to live in dignity as humans. There are several means through which the mind and body of the refugees are controlled. Biopolitics allows a condition for the subjugation of the bodies to the extent of killing life for the sake of preserving life. The State perceives the foreigner Iranian in the Australian territory as an invader without understanding the circumstances of the migration. It constructs and perpetuates the refugee as a threat so as to protect its own population.

Although Foucauldian concepts of panopticism, surveillance and dangerous individuals bring out the subjugation of the refugee bodies, the theory falls short in explaining how the subjecthood of refugees emerges in the biopolitical state. The inadequacy of Foucault's theory in the matter of refugee is because refugee is not a direct subject (in the sense of a citizen) of the sovereign or State is one of the limitations of this paper. Also, a refugee detention camp is different in objective from other institutions like schools, hospitals or

prisons. According to Foucault, institutions like schools, hospitals, prisons etc have a function of discipline and reformation to perform. The refugees function in space that is beyond at the same time within the territory of the state /sovereignty or what Agamben describes as a "state of exception", ie: "a temporary and spatial sphere in which every law is suspended" (Agamben: 37-38). However, the existence of refugee camps can be explained with the help of biopolitics, a concept dealt with by Foucault in his works. Since the refugee is indirectly (though more intensely) under the control of the host country, the position of a refugee can be well understood using Foucauldian concepts.

Through the depictions of their lives, Boochani translates their everyday experience to the literary scene so that the history and trauma of refugees are preserved. The importance of including refugee stories in refugee studies is that it exposes the blatant violations of refugee rights and human rights which manifests as physical and psychological torture in liberal democracies to the reading public. Through the narration of their individual stories, the writer's intention is not to establish the veracity of the incident but to establish individuality of the refugees and humanise the figure rendered as subhuman. The paper explored the relationship between the power structure and the individuals who are within the political borders yet legally unprotected. The geographical distance between the camps and mainland Australia metaphorically symbolised the distance between the rights of the citizen population and the refugee population. This paper attempted to look at the various ways in which the body is subjected to the control of power structures. It also explored how fear becomes a tool for domesticating and controlling the refugees. Additionally, it also looked at the various ways through which a significant

group of people's lives becomes unworthy as they constitute the "non-population".

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