
Enrique's Journey: The Perilous Quest of Undocumented Migrants for a Better Life

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Abstract

In this article, an attempt is made to analyse the plight and predicament of illegal migrants crossing the Mexican border to reach the USA for a better life. Sonia Nazario's Enrique's Journey is an account of a child protagonist Enrique, who travels from Honduras to North America through deadly routes to meet his mother and becomes the subject of an unjust border. Children like Enrique and other millions of migrants from underdeveloped countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador undergo a harrowing experience when they cross the border to escape from civil war, impunity, and poverty in their countries. At the border, the inherent rights of all human beings with the promise of true democracy become meaningless: refugees and undocumented migrants are victimised by national sovereignty policy and compelled to live bare lives. In this paper, I will attempt to analyse the problems of displaced people based on different grounds: Who are undocumented migrants? What is the cause behind forceful exit from their own country? Why have they been encountering unspeakable suffering while crossing the border? How is the matter of hospitality understood? Do they find themselves in a safer zone and freedom in an unwelcome space? Such questions are discussed using theories on migrants and refugees.

Keywords: hope, hospitality, suffering, undocumented migrants, unjust border**Introduction**

In this paper, I will focus on the harrowing odyssey of undocumented migrants seeking a better life in a foreign land. The moment when the Nation-state fails to solve basic to life-threatening problems, particularly during civil wars and the like, people are reluctantly compelled to accept chaos, poverty, insecurity, and even death threats from every corner. As

such, civilians find no alternative than to (illegally) seek a better and more optimistic life in other spaces. But, the journey to reach their destination looks more horrific than they ever imagined. Hence, to develop my argument, I have divided this paper into three different sections: First, the anarchy created in the homeland due to civil war which compels the citizens to leave their native countries and become undocumented migrants; second, the deadly routes and grave suffering of the migrants while crossing borders; third, migrants' efforts and the outcomes of all these struggles of their journey to search for an optimistic life in an unwelcome space. I will conclude my paper with a discussion of ways forward. To substantiate my ideas, I am using theories based on refugees and migrants as methodological tools.

Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* recites the freight journey of Enrique, the child protagonist of the novel and undocumented migrant who travels through Honduras to the US to meet his mother. The book has projected all the obstacles of the journey completed by Enrique and thousands of other undocumented migrants who dream of reaching other safe grounds. The children from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, along with other migrants want to be with their families and rejuvenate the hope of survival. But the question is, do they get peace, better shelter, and security in the host land, or is all the endeavor in vain? Who would guarantee the right to have rights: individual sovereignty, coexistence, and freedom of movement in the host land as they have no political space in their home county?

Enrique's Journey has evoked a wide range of critical responses, reflecting often parallel and differing arguments on migrants. It appeals to concerned authorities to consider the problems faced by migrant children who are putting their lives at risk to find a family. The issues of migrants and refugees have been taken into consideration in academia. For Flanders and Debra (2007), this novel has become an inescapable social commentary as it includes the voices of the voiceless (p.699). Contrarily, Lawston and Murillo (2009) present a

counterargument that Enrique's Journey is merely a reaction to discourses of law and that the writer has failed to "historicize and contextualize immigration notions" (p.41), specifically the notions that migrants need a better life and that the United States is superior to migrants' countries (p.42). This suggests that the bitter truth behind the failures of countries like Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala has not been displayed by Nazario, instead, she has portrayed the U.S. as a superior country that can provide shelter to those in need. However, scholars like Russell (2015) argue that the U.S. (and Canada) cannot be moral leaders in supporting Mexican and Central American migrants (p.1). He accuses them of creating the problem through their vested economic and political interests. Despite this, there are still stances in favour of the novel. For instance, Sulzer (2020) opines that Enrique's story presents "firsthand experiences" of migrants during "deportation, language discrimination, and racism" (p.12). Furthermore, Anderson has studied Enrique's Journey through the "transnational social lens" (p.26) and believes that refugees' cultural and social identities do not exist when they become undocumented. These perspectives highlight the broader understanding and responsibilities of nation-states in shaping the destinies of migrant children.

Nazario picks up the painful odyssey of modern refugees entering the USA through the Mexico border. Reyes (2010) opines that it is particularly difficult for children to navigate and as such, children become easy objects to and of migration laws. (p.302). In this regard, human rights activities focus on modification in the law so that detention policy and substantive immigration law would work properly. Interestingly, the book's end heavily addresses issues of migrants' trouble narrative, border issue, transnationalism, and the narrative of the nation's supremacy; however, detailing the history behind the migration, and the gruesome reality of their journey with the hospitality and brutality are yet to be addressed. So, I argue this text is an account of the harrowing odyssey of undocumented migrants who

seek an optimistic life outside the national border. Reasons like nation-state failure, nationalistic discourses, territorial sovereignty, and the principle of us versus them dichotomy push refugees into more significant risk.

Post-War Chaotic Situation in Tribal Countries

The aftermath of civil wars and conflicts in the tribal countries forces civilians to leave countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Looking through historical eyes, civil wars between 1950 and 1970 instigated Central Americans to mass exodus. Beneath the horrific journey of refugees, the question of nation-state failure exists. How does a country exist when its population has to cross the nation's border for basic survival? What compels them to leave their homeland, adopting the dreadful journey to reach the U.S. through the Mexican border? The cause behind becoming a refugee is social exclusion by any means. The sole responsibility of the state is to provide justifiable guardianship to its people. Sovereign individuals are fleeing from their homeland where the state has failed to protect the vulnerable from violence, poverty, and persecution. Khilnani (1997) argues that failed societies are easier to rule than to change and new rulers only hold on to the power of the throne (p.20). Just like Khilnani's argument, after the civil wars in those tribal countries, the nation-state fails to address the dream of civilians. Instead of establishing peace, a flourishing economy, law, and order, these countries witnessed gang culture, poverty, economic depression, impunity, and so on, which triggered the flow of migrants and displaced a swath of the population out of the country. After the civil war, natural disasters in the 1990s also played an essential role in increasing the number of undocumented Salvadorans and Honduran migrants who entered the U.S.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as individuals fleeing outside of their countries of nationality who are under a 'well-founded fear of persecution,' but the characters in *Enrique's Journey* do not meet these criteria as they embark on their journey driven by

poverty and the search for family reunion. Adults are leaving their countries to escape grinding poverty whereas children are reluctant in search of seeking motherly love. These migrants are not recognized as refugees by legal standards. Agamben (1995) believes that 'when the rights of man are no longer the rights of the citizen, then he is truly scared' (p.117). In other words, when rights are divided into human and refugee rights, these undocumented migrants are deprived of civil rights, security, and hospitality from both government and public sectors and are always in fear. However, these migrants are conscious that they are fleeing for a better future elsewhere, and their perseverance overrides their fear. They are optimistic about building their lives and hopeful that their future generations will not have to endure the same pains they are experiencing (Arendt,1976, p.110). Despite lacking legal acknowledgement as refugees, these migrants demonstrate determination to secure passage and resilience, even in the face of constant fear.

Sufferings while Crossing the Borders

The journey of migrants is imbued with the overlooked human rights issues. The freedom of movement and the right to live and work are inherent rights of an individual, but for refugees, it is almost beyond their imagination. During their journey, migrants experience the challenges related to their rights to safety, dignity and freedom. Despite supranational agencies and humanitarian agents working to mitigate the problems of civilians and guarantee the right to have inherent rights, migrants have faced unimaginable torture while crossing the borders. At first, people become refugees within their home grounds, and the second is the border, where they hope something is better, it does not take long to shatter that hope. Sonia Nazario (2006) highlights stories of single mothers who want a better life for their children and start a terrific journey from their homeland, tribal countries, to their dreamland, the USA. Their decision to leave them home alone costs a lot, and children cannot repent of the pain of being abandoned by their mother. Enrique finishes his journey to meet his mother, Lourdes,

but his resentment towards her is higher, and he ends up in immoral activities in the US. He travels “12,000 miles, 122 days, and seven futile attempts” (p.185) and his wish to be near his mother cost him both physically and psychologically.

The dreadful journey of migrants begins on the Freight Train. The name ‘Freight Train’ resembles the imagery of awful and murderous consequences faced by migrants. She states, “The journey is hard for the Mexicans but harder still for Enrique and the others from Central America...La Migra Agents are other common names of terror...migrants are hunted like animals by corrupt police, bandits, and gang members deported from the United States” (p.19). Nobody is accountable for the swath of migrants: rape, looting, and murders are common; for example, “Karen, a fifteen-year-old girl who had been raped by two gangsters” (p.12). Individual existence is a far cry for the migrants. A Honduran teenager in southern Mexico who “had been deported to Guatemala twenty-seven times” (p.15). This has resulted because they are undocumented, away from their territory. Such brutality becomes especially true in what Gottmann (1951) calls a “partitioned space” (p.153). In this partitioned space, it is undoubtedly true that migrants have suffered more at the hands of the officials, agents and locals at the border. Elden (2007) argues that territory has no fixed terrain. Similarly, Foucault says, that a territory is more a “vibrant entity” than just an “economic object of land” (p.99-100). Despite this understanding of territories, not having a fixed territorial trap has constantly victimized migrants and made them confined to a bounded space of suffering and exclusion.

Death and blood sound the same in the lives of refugees. Sticking to the regional differentiation and dire nationalist attitude guides them inhumanly. Coutin (2005) has a similar warning that death becomes the final “manifestation of illegality”. That is a reason why the novel mentions the death of hundreds of migrants due to “asphyxiation” (p.143). This would not have happened if borders were easy to cross. Migrants at first are more

human than any other object. To add to their woes, these migrants do not have a proper burial; they are crushed and taunted. Despite knowing the horrific picture ahead, children like Enrique risk their lives to set the goal of finding mothers in the so-called promising dreamland USA.

The life of a refugee has always been in bare condition: measured only biologically, not politically. When natural and political rights are overshadowed by national sovereignty, individual sovereignty and dignity remain bare. Agamben (1995) attributes the existence of bare life to the absence of national sovereignty (p.53). This explains why a refugee's life is not counted; instead of getting respect after death, they remain nameless in the novel as a mere "hole in the cemetery with fetuses and stillborn babies" Nazario (2006, p. 87). They are in between as if in no man's land, hanging between and deprived of their natural rights. Enrique and other undocumented migrants are not political animals as they have no access to political space; their journey turns into a nightmare for girls and women: rape and sexual assault are common to them when they resist bandits' demands. Despite the contention from scholars like Arendt that even foreigners should gain protection from the same land (p.280), the reality is beyond imagination. Rapes, physical violation and mistreatment are considered forms of general denigration and humiliation of Central Americans in Mexico, as they are perceived to come from less developed countries. This horrible treatment based on country position highlights the grim reality faced by migrants like Enrique, whose lives are reduced to mere survival, stripped of their dignity and humanity in a hostile environment.

The journey of migrants across the Mexico-US border has been marked by a violent struggle for survival, where national sovereignty and territorial control manifest in deadly forms of exclusion and brutality. The bloody game of territory occurs on the border offering "drugs, despair, and death" (p.126). The river, Rio Bravo synonymous with terror that forwards an ultimate treacherous path to reach the US, swallowing the life of migrants

through the whirlpools by “sucking them under,” “smashing their heads against rocks” or “their legs cramp and they sink” (p.146). The river is a symbol of taming control which, Arendt argues, has been there since the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 (p.269). Migrants are entrapped at the border; returning home is bloodier, and they would rather die than go back. The imagery of security guards on the freight cars, particularly watching for the refugees and scanning the cars with an infrared telescope, suggests that returning home means dealing with these guards again. Such dealing is nothing less than death itself. This bias and hatred of national sovereignty may reach the level of xenophobia.

Hospitality

Enrique’s Journey highlights the urgent call for ethical humanism. Migrants are deprived even of conditional hospitality from the host country and are treated like aliens trespassing on foreign territory. In *Paper Machine*, Derrida (2005) argues that both conditional and unconditional hospitality are 'equally imperative' as the law of hospitality supersedes common rules (p. 67). Absolute hospitality requires laws to achieve finite cosmopolitan hospitality. To offer, refuge rights in the host country, constitutive law is necessary. But first, migrants must be welcomed without expecting reciprocity, which rarely happens. When Nazario, a journalist, begins her journey following Enrique’s path, she repeatedly experiences vulnerability. She highlights the constant danger of being mugged or raped for months, regardless of any legal documents she (or anyone) possesses.

The ruthless treatment of the migrants as an outsider questions the ethical responsibility of host parties. The being exists when one practices ethical hospitality. In “Foreigner Question”, Derrida (2005) highlights unconditional hospitality that treats the refugee as the absolute other, where “hospitality [must] begin with the unquestioning welcome” (p.29). To him, unconditional hospitality is like getting salvation where the welcome face is unaware of what they are doing. They have to be welcomed unconditionally,

no matter how harmful or risky, to destabilise the peace of the host land. In *Enrique's Journey*, cities like Veracruz, Oaxaca and Presidio are known for their kindness where migrants enjoy proper food and shelter. Enrique and other migrants are experiencing ethical and unconditional hospitality from the locals and the members of churches. Interestingly, the dispute between police and church volunteers reflects the differentiation between conditional and unconditional hospitality. While the police officers see helping the Central Americans as a crime, the church sees it as not being illegal and, shows responsibility despite constantly observing state security, helping the absolute other without asking for their name and identity. In other words, the church illustrates an “unquestioning welcome” (p.29). In his book *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1997) mentioned the core idea of ethical hospitality—the concept of “Face of Other” and “Cities of Refugee”. Ethical responsibility exists when the face welcomes the other in such a situation when one is hardly worried about one's life. The welcome face puts oneself at risk while reusing the other.

Hospitality bears interrogation when a condition applies while serving humanity. A wounded Enrique is rescued by Carrasco, Mayor of Oaxaca. Meanwhile, Adan Díaz Ruiz, mayor of San Pedro offers hospitality but the condition under which he does so is to save money as burying him costs thrice as much as curing him (p.53). In *Adieu to Emmanuel* Derrida (1999) writes, “Hospitality becomes the very name of what opens itself to the face, or, more precisely, of what 'welcomes' it. The face always lends itself to a welcome, and the welcome welcomes only a face, the face that should be our theme today” (p.21). The face means a human face, an ethical face, and a humanitarian face that can address the empathy of others. Still, migrants are being treated like aliens and inferior in *Enrique's Journey*. Thus, unconditional hospitality is a must to address the problem of millions of displaced people worldwide who hope to be settled in different parts of the world.

Quest for Optimistic Life in Unwelcomed Space

The enduring suffering and unfulfilled dream that Lourdes experienced in Honduras exemplifies the harsh realities faced by migrants who seek a better life. They find themselves trapped in a cycle of hardship and disillusionment. The promise she made to the children that she would return home and make a safe home for the children is yet to be fulfilled. Lourdes is at a crossroads; the risk of being singled out by police and hoping to get something better in unfamiliar territory. Her imaginative world and the reality she has been facing are two great ironies of almost all migrants. Carrying a fake social security card and getting a job is more painful than the problems she went through in her homeland. Her dream of bringing her children in two years or returning to Honduras to build a house and grocery store has never been accomplished. Lourdes is an ambassador of millions of single mothers who struggle in the host land for the sake of their children. Following the footpath of his mother, Enrique reaches the U.S. to meet the same fate crossing many futile attempts at the unjust Mexican border.

The biased treatment of migrants is not a solution. The more we make unjust rules, the deeper the pain humans face. Unjust treatment and flawed immigration policies only exacerbate human suffering. It urgently needs compassionate and fair solutions. Zapata-Barrero (2013) argues that immigration selection and return policies are a representation of a dystopia (p.181). Unsurprisingly, migrants face multiple problems even after reaching their dreamland: migration policy and the illegal settlement risk of deportation. The feeling of being an outsider hinders social adjustment, and family reunification shakes the base of happiness and individual freedom. On top of that, they are not citizens as they are not equal to others, enjoying all of their natural rights (Balibar, 1991, 45). The state of being a non-citizen migrant distances them from others; they lose their subjectivity and political rights. Lourdes characterizes the US as the only hopeful place in the world (Nazario, 2006,

Enrique Journey, p.18). The same pseudo-hope and prosperity encourage migrants to accept the challenge ahead. The disguised images of “New York City’s spectacular skyline, Las Vegas’s shimmering lights, Disneyland’s magic castle” evoke Lourdes, and she wants to get it for her children (p.18). So, this eagerness and hope for better survival should be addressed by stakeholders whosoever they are.

The pain of abandonment by parents is unfamiliar to the children like Enrique. The “dream of finding their mothers and living happily ever after...and the romanticized notions of how they should feel toward each other” is mesmerizing (p.186). But it differs when reality intrudes. Belky, daughter of Lourdes, remarks that the absence of motherly love can be fulfilled by any means (p.249). Enrique, the witnesser of adversity, repeats the same mistake for her daughter. At first, he travels through Honduras to the US, leaving behind Maria, a pregnant girlfriend. Despite knowing the pain of abandonment, he decides to bring Maria, leaving his daughter with grandma hoping better days may come (p.191). Hence, *Enrique's journey* reflects the painful cycle of abandonment that many migrant families endure, perpetuating a legacy of separation in the pursuit of happiness.

Undocumented migrants often struggle to access state-sponsored camps or shelters. This reality speaks to the issues of unconcerned human rights and the persistent gap between reality and political ideals. It is not the case of the state of exception or bare life, but it’s concerned with the subject of the rights of human beings. Enrique is a subject of human rights and a plural political subject who always needs to fight for his rights. He is the by-product of political interest. Politics lies between man and his righteousness, and his privileges are suspended by state sovereignty. UNHCR (1951) mentions, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. The people in the novel are neither refugees nor asylum seekers but illegal migrants reaching out for survival. It contends the human rights declaration and its nature of promising democracy as Derrida (1994) argues in *Specters*

of Marx, “Democracy to come” (p.23). It is not a condition of perfectibility and the possibility of coming in the future. He says that democracy is the concept of the regime or political manufacture that keeps a link to the promise of repetition. This absence of democracy reveals the failure of political idealism to protect the rights of the most vulnerable refugees in a perpetual state of exclusion and uncertainty.

Conclusion

Enrique’s Journey presents an odyssey of 21st-century undocumented migrants who embark on perilous journeys to find a better life, hoping to find the democratic ideals and human rights they believe await them in the United States. Individuals from impoverished countries leave their homes, where survival seems impossible, and set out for the U.S., the Promised Land of democracy and human rights. However, the reality they encounter is far from what they expected. The dual policies of first-world countries have devastated the lives of millions of migrants, akin to closing the front door while leaving the back door wide open. For these migrants, democracy remains distant and nearly unattainable. They are left with no better option than to live a bare life, unable to return home, enjoy any hospitality, or experience true freedom even after crossing the border. Therefore, the codification of civil and human rights in the Declaration of 1989 needs to be amended to include an ethical dimension. Additionally, the development of conditional hospitality and the concept of a borderless world, similar to the European Union and Schengen countries, must be put into practice. It is crucial to recognize that refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers are civilians first and foremost, with the right to move freely. The principles of democracy and human rights require a global commitment to revising existing policies and adopting a more ethical, updated, and inclusive approach, ensuring the right to live with dignity and freedom of movement.

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