



The Politics of ‘Bare Life’ in Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People*: A Biopolitical Perspective

Pradip Sharma

Department of English
Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract

*Through the biopolitical study, this paper digs out the problems of five hundred survivors who enmeshed in the war torn Sri Lanka and Canadian sovereign power as projected in Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People* that dramatizes the problems of the immigrants. A large number of Tamil people escape from Sri Lanka to Canada because they were under extortion and duress in their homeland. Unlike their expectation to get a safe haven in Canada, they undergo Ariadne’s thread like unending trial for refugee status. Neither they enjoy rights at home nor abroad, which the novel dramatizes and subscribes Foucauldian biopolitics, which investigates into the effect of politics in human life. Largely in biopolitics, politics imbricates into life. The asylum seekers from Sri Lanka in Canada fall victim of power technology at home and abroad. They are subjugated to endure the hegemony of the regime that reduces them into ‘homo sacer’ whom injustice can be done with impunity and their life into bare life, life without political rights. Like a muselmann figure during the holocaust, they undergo the trial and are kept in between belonging and non-belonging, which is inclusive exclusion. They strand like the persona non grata whose significance as human is outnumbered.*

Keywords: *Biopolitics, inclusive exclusion, governmentality, refugees, homo sacer*

“In order to make a concrete analysis of power relations, we must abandon the juridical model of sovereignty. That model in effect presupposes that the individual is a subject with natural rights or primitive powers; . . . and finally, it makes the law the basic manifestation of power.”

- Michael Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*

Introduction

In Michael Foucault’s genealogical analysis of the regime, the juridical order of regime deems an individual as a subject with natural rights or primitive power but finally it curbs these rights from him and ‘make him die.’ Set in a Sri Lanka riven by the civil war, Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People* articulates the ordeals of Sri Lankans while attempting to evade the civil war and their desperate attempt to seek asylum in Canada. They search for a minimal form of life as the refugees, but get a tag of being the

terrorists by the Canadian authority. This article contends to investigate into the power technology usurped by the regime to deal with the asylum seekers, which is politicized. Consequently, the refugee seekers in Canada are excluded from the social mainstream. In this context, this research attempts to explore the political aspects of what I contend as inclusive exclusion of refugees' simple life in terms of Agamben's theory of "homo sacer." In order to examine the politicization of their innocent life, the foci rely on the relation between bare life, political life and the camps where the refugees reside during immigration trial in Canada. Further, it delves into the *Muselmann* concept, ushering their shackled body that produces the evidences of outlawry, a condition of socially exclusion even in the democratic regime.

Narratives on Sri Lankan Asylum Seekers in Canada

Bala's *The Boat People* dramatizes the blues of the asylum seekers in Canada whose ordeals equalizes them with the Jews' trauma during the WW II or the ordeals of African slaves during the slavery era. As the civil war accelerates in Sri Lanka, the laymen have been badly treated as an instrument by the waging parties. By and large, the armed group started forceful militia recruitment and extortion. Furthermore, the state turns out to be careless to vanguard its citizens. So Mahindan and other laymen make the narrow escape to safe haven in Canada: ". . . these were the survivors. Arrival of the fittest" (17). The dismay is that there they undergo asylum trial along with the detention and are stranded as *persona non grata* or people who are outlawed like the werewolf or the bandit in Agambian homo sacer discourse who are socially excluded and supposed to be unqualified people. Notably, Mahindan and other five hundred Sri Lankan asylum seekers juxtapose with Agambian *zoé*, a simple natural life deprived from citizenry rights that can be outlawed as if it is a bandit and whom any harm can be made in *Homo Sacer*. Apart from this, the asylum seekers are also subjected as terrorist and kept in the camp which is unqualified life, opposite to *bios* (qualified life). The life in detention camp is so traumatic that they are turned into *Muselmann* to witness the ordeals from home to abroad.

Through the biopolitical lens envisioned by Michael Foucault, this paper proposes to explicate *The Boat People* in which life of refugees and Canadian politics collide together. The Canadian sovereignty that exerts controlling of power over the five hundred boat people further links with Foucault's notion of biopolitics that takes life itself as the object of the law. The term "biopolitics" has been derived from the Greek words "*bios*" denoting life, and "*polis*" meaning a city-state. So, it is a recombinant term, which means that life imbricates into a state, and designates the interaction between life and politics. In particular, biopolitics is the conjunction of life and politics i.e. the use of power over body. Foucault explains: "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question" (*History of Sexuality* 143). Here, Foucault's archeological reading of Aristotle links 'additional capacity' of life with politics that determines the value and position of life in the city-state. It is important to realize that from the same plain, a critic rightly traces out the 'additional capacity' of Mahindan and his fellows to escape from Sri Lankan civil war and search for the security, which turns out to be problematic in Canada. He explains:

The Boat People tells the story of how a boat with five hundred Sri Lankan asylum seekers docks in Vancouver illegally. The group are faced with allegations of terrorism and are forced to be detained and separated from their loved ones. Potentially a threat to Canadian security, the refugees are forced to undertake trial after trial. (Christofi)

This narrative by Christofi dramatizes the fact that how the refugees are subjected to terrorism and kept in custody after their Herculean attempt to find a safe place from the war-torn country. The Canadian authority regards them as the upcoming challenge for the Canadian society and made them go through the unending traumatic trials.

As per the narrative from the novel, to manage the populations of the refugees and administer them they are categorized, separated and reduced to the state of terrorists. Exactly this type of dealing by the regime has been pointed out by Foucault while explaining biopolitics as: "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (*History of Sexuality* 138). This is how he characterizes the nature of modern state that controls of life to keep an order and manage the populations by ushering administrative technologies. He further elaborates biopolitics as the political rationality which takes the administration of life and populations as its subject. In this case, Agamben adds that how the power politics of the regime turns the denizens like Mahindan and his six years son into the outlawry even though they have not committed any crime. Hannah Arndt rightly explains outlawry legalese as: "Outlawry is a legal penalty that banishes wrongdoers from the community; it refers to a refusal to obey the law and a withdrawal of legal rights" (qtd. in Bunch 9), which means keeping people away from the lawful position. Indeed, the arrival of Sri Lankan people has been subjected as the breach of Canadian Border Act so that they have been kept in detention, which is the outlawing process against the natural rights of the people.

Foucault and Power Technologies

Foucault mainly explores two technologies of power when he delivered speech on sovereignty and governmentality. The first is the disciplinary technology operating often through institutions at the level of individual bodies while the second biopower is the regulatory technology, which operates at the level of populations and works on life itself. In his analysis of governmentality, there is the imbrication of biopower over biopolitics. For him, these terms 'biopolitics' and 'biopower' are to scrutinize the governing of life itself that replaces the earlier sovereign power over death. In fact, Foucault elaborates biopower as: "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and control of populations" (140). Mainly, biopower helps change life as per the biopolitical mechanism. It has two operating domains: use of power over individual body and power over population as a whole. Interestingly, according to him, biopower is both positive and totalizing. He explains: "a power that exerts a positive influence over life that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (137). He postulates biopower as a conditioning mechanism of life though it is not always coercive. It uses rules, regulations, and procedures to mould subjects' behavior also.

Coupling with the Foucauldian juridical administration of the body under the biopolitical regime, different layers of the Canadian custom trial over asylum seekers stands as an evidence of regulating the body of the immigrants: "Detention reviews, the

admissibility hearing, then the Refugee Board hearing: a long series of judgments, each an opportunity for failure and deportation" (*The Boat People* 49). With this chain of pervasive panopticon on the refugee, who could be deported also, Mahindan feels relief at the cost of avoiding the bloody civil war that had kept him in detention even in Kilinochi, Sri Lanka to make him militia. From there he had made a narrow escape for the safety of his six years old son. There is ironic tone when he experiences safety despite his habitation in the custody in Canadian Forces Base at Esquimalt that has: "white tents. Beyond was the ocean and the ocean and the harbor" (17). It reminds him of the appalling horror of the site equal to the American Prison camp, Guantanamo from where escape is almost impossible.

The surprising fact is that melancholy drives Mahindan but he is convinced that his detention and Sellian's liberty are appendage. He broods over "the arrangements for our future" (384) and Priya shares: "The men and women were separated and forced into orderly queues. The adults had their wrists and ankles shackled." Yet it is bestial treatment that the Canadian regime is performing, Mahindan is happy, "it is for our own safety" (11). He seems to be utterly subjugated not to know the process of making him and other refugees not belonging to Canada, a process of making them stateless. Exactly, Sherene Razack while dealing with Somalian survivors in Australia replicates this scene:

They keep the viewer at a distance, and show asylum seekers behind barbed wire fences. We are invited to feel a shudder of sublime horror at this fate, but we are never brought close enough to see faces, or engage with individual stories. This specificity might change our relationship to these images, and more to the point we might be brought from a generalized pity of the circumstances of these refugees, to anger at the injustice of our own policies. While barbed wire enclosures, like the open ocean, are treated as the law of nature, and asylum seekers as something like wild animals at the mercy of those laws, what we are really invited to experience is our own feelings and our own moral virtue. (62-63)

His reading of Somalian refugees seeking refuge in Australia replicates the similar treatment of the regime there in Canada too over Sri Lankan survivors. There is the same animalizing process to the refugees whose human right is ignored on the ground of security.

Engaging with the Foucauldian studies, Giorgio Agamben explains biopolitics as: "growing inclusion of natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power" (*Homo Sacer* 119). He also sums up Foucault's biopolitics and writes: "What follows is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history the possibilities of the social sciences are made known and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust" (*Homo Sacer* 3). His contention is to highlight the reductionist nature of biopolitics that rips off citizens from their civic life. Exactly this one has the replica in the novel as asylum seekers are tagged as terrorists and shackled and kept in the detention camp. Priya refers to the radio message of the border police: "We took control of the vessel twelve nautical miles off Vancouver Island. ... The migrants were taken into custody and were now conducting a deep search of the ship" (6) and there is the sign that reads: "Send the illegals back! Go home terrorists!" (16). This points out the pretty miserable

condition of the refugees who are ostracized as terrorists and unacknowledged by the state apparatus as humans but alterity who have no right to enjoy abroad.

Ostensibly, the sense of othering and stripping away or banning people from observing rights, in Agamben's view, has an ancient biopolitical root that he traces out from "Aristotelian definition of the *polis* as the opposition between life (*zen*) and good life (*euzen*)" (*Homo Sacer* 7) as the categorization of *zoé* and *bios*. In *Means without End*, Agamben elaborates *zoe* as zoological life equal to animal and *bios* as biographical body that speaks and is consigned rights. He frames biopolitics as a form of politics that excludes citizens from the city life and are subjected to be outside of the law. His investigation in *Homo Sacer* circulates around the political function of the sacred man "who may be killed but not sacrificed" (8) because he is included in the law only by being excluded from it whom anybody can harm with impunity. Moreover, he is deemed to be already dead. Conversely, the *homo sacer* (sacred man) is included in the law by way of his trial and exclusion from ritual sacrifice while at the same time stripped of citizenship. And deemed to be killable without committing homicide (*Homo Sacer* 22). This sacred figure has, for Agamben, its origin in archaic legal structures banning lawbreakers, placing them in an ambivalent position both inside and outside of the law.

Boat to Bare Life

Truly, *The Boat People* appropriates an Agambenian sense whereby the refugees are under unending trials just to make them feel excluded from the society who has no position at all. Surprisingly, five hundred survivors decked on British Colombian Island in Canada have been converted into the *homo sacer* or sacred men. They bear no rights and the Canadian statecraft has even made them commit suicide when some of them are declared illegal and deported. Before they are assigned the refugee status they lead the life of *zoe*, life equal to the beast. A critic points out the zoological life of the asylum seekers: "Instead, the group is thrown into prison, with government officials and news headlines speculating that hidden among the "boat people" are members of a terrorist militia infamous for suicide attacks" (Jamalzadhin). Zamalzadhin's critique on the step taken by Canadian government sharply hints out "the technologies and tactics of domination" (*Society Must Be Defended* 34), the power processes of the authority over the survivors that has spread onto grassroot to violate the human right of the refugees who turn to be stateless in the democratic regime. Indeed, this attempt is to make them lead 'bare life' of *homo sacer*. To do so, the Canadian authority is trying to tag the survivors as terrorists. In consort with it, to Farrell, biopolitics "relates to the practice of modern nation states and their regulation of their subjects through an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and control of populations" (1). His aim is to bring home the dominating nature of biopolitics that subjugates people as in *The Boat People*, the survivors are subjugated as terrorists.

Agamben forwards his thesis of *homo sacer* who is subjected to bare life through werewolf ban as evidence imbibing idea from Carl Schmitt, the Nazi jurist who deals with how the constitutive political body of people turned into population: a demographical biological entity. By the same token, the Canadian authority to manage demographic data declares Ranga (one of the refugees) like a person as a terrorist affiliating him with the Tamil waging group. Indeed in the sense of Foucault, it is "invasion of humanity by the state" (*Birth of Biopolitics* 76). Since ancient times,

sovereignty has relied on a continuous state of exception in which bare life is irreducibly indistinguishable from politics. Which Agamben decries as the life of a human being constrained by the politics of a state and by culture is termed as "bare life," and the state she/he lives in is called "state of exception." Further he elaborates:

A state of exception (German: *Ausnahmezustand*) is a concept in the legal theory of Carl Schmitt, similar to a state of emergency, but based in the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good. This concept is developed in Giorgio Agamben's book *State of Exception*. It is a state where the sovereign has the power and where law is indefinitely 'suspended' without being abrogated. (1)

Agamben's stand is that to subjugate the citizens the regime declares the emergency that suspends law which is known as the state of exception. Largely, the regime has the privilege to suspend the law in the name of good governance, which reduces citizens' rights. Further, it legally bans the inborn rights of human beings that are curtailed and innocent people and that are included in politics only to create the state of exception, thereby the civic rights are forbidden.

The ban is the recurring order to banish the werewolf launched by the sovereign for the protection of regime and threaten to exile certain lawbreakers from the community as werewolves or bandits. Exiled as a being that is neither entirely human nor beast, the person who has been banned from the city is, like *homo sacer*, a sacred figure who can be killed without culpability like a wolf, but not sacrificed. In the figure of the werewolf, animal life and political life have merged to the point where they are indistinguishable. As Agamben makes it clear, the ban does not draw a sharp limit between humanity and animality, city and forest, but rather blurs the boundary between such oppositions. He elaborates:

The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without a relation to law and the city. It is rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup-garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither. (*Homo Sacer* 105)

The bandit is outlawed from city life and ruptures the borders between human and animal by narrowing the scope of the sovereign's authority over his being alive. The traumatic narrative of Mahindan evidences it: "The Sinhalese, they hate Tamil. We were treated like animals. They just do not understand life" (166). This story by Mahindan mirrors what has been done upon the layman in the name of politics. Treating one group as if they are animal, justifying werewolf or the bare life and the threshold of *zoé* and *bios* as explained by Agamben.

Back to the novel, Mahindan when he faced the hardship in learning new language and suffers from aphasia he recalls his grandfather as the staff during the colonial era who would speak English but later when Sinhalese overtook the regime, the Tamil were excluded from the statecrafts. Priya narrates: "His grandfather had spoken English. He had gone to London for his studies and worked as a civil servant in Colombo until Sinhala Only Act ended his career..." (12). This archeological exposure of Sri Lankan history acts as a sovereign ban imposed upon the Tamil in their birthplace that

caused the retaliation in Kilinochi. The neutral Tamils were doubly marginalized by the waging groups. Mahindan reflects on why he has been interrogated more than a dozen in the detention reviews because the bus that he had repaired carried a bomb. Upon its explosion of the bomb, the innocent foreigners were killed. Mahindan recalls:

If I (Mahindan) had refused, he would have beaten me. If I had refused him again, he would have killed me The cadre would have set fire to our home allowed my wife to burn inside. The things they did to us... you cannot imagine. Sinhalese army, Tamil Tigers . . . we were nothing to them. (169)

In fact, Priya graphically illustrates Mahindan's narrative, which mirrors the ground reality of how the laymen in war torn Sri Lanka were under Damocles' Sword. The Tamil civilians were excluded from both sides. They were badly reduced to an instrument. This forceful inclusion by the rebel group helps the survivors to be excluded in Canada.

Later, it seemed that Ranga like the refugee claimant are included in the immigration trial to be excluded in Canadian society that caused his suicide. Is it the death or murder? Who is responsible for his death? His death signals Canadian impunity, beyond law. He died like the bandit or the werewolf. In addition, his death ruptures the boundary between humanity and animality. From the hellish war front, they made a Herculean attempt to escape in a retrofitted cargo boat to Canada. Finally, upon these refugee claimants, there is more than thirteen detention reviews. This episode evidences the subjugated life that is ripped off from the rightful position in the society which Agamben calls 'inclusive exclusion.' In line with this notion, Agamben unveils the tyrannical nature of the sovereignty that perpetually violates human rights. The citizens are included in a state mechanism only to be excluded from political rights, which is *bios*. By executing judicial power, the citizens are tagged negatively and are stereotyped who has no value in the society.

Tuning with this reductionist state character, the forced removal and incarceration of the displaced people are underscored as follows:

[S]ubjecting foreign asylum seekers to the processes established by rule of law is the same as the forced removal and incarceration of law-abiding citizens. It's a false equivalence that blights a novel already struggling under the weight of political opinion: Bala vilifies the Canadian Border Services Agency and the draconian immigration laws. (Freeman)

Her reading of *The Boat People* also proves the subjectivation of refugee claimants as *homo sacer* who are *persona non grata* and belonging to nowhere. The detention and the lengthy trial upon the survivors highlights Agamben's sovereign ban on the werewolves. Further, denying the refugee status by the Canadian court exemplifies the juridico-politics of Canada that regards survivors as the object of politics.

To Agamben, this form of life is 'bare life.' The ban merges, to a point of indistinction, *zoé* "the simple fact of living common to all living beings," and *bios*, "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group" (1). However, 'bare life' is not simply the sheer fact of living as we understand it through *zoé*, a 'being alive' that humans share with all other plant and animal life. On the contrary, the bare life of humans is something that has been performatively produced by sovereignty; it is a

political concept of life that belongs as much to *bios* as it does to *zoé*. The ban constitutes the political power of the sovereign, by suspending the law and including bare life in the political realm that also designates who is to include and who is to exclude.

Apparently, Agamben's *homo sacer* is an iconic hero, a remainder of the exclusion that creates room in the political sphere: "The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere" (*Homo Sacer* 83). Yet in this formulation, the sacredness of *homo sacer* is not sanctified and offered for ritual sacrifice, which is also a state of exception. Ranga who commits suicide shortly after he got the decision of Court on his deportation. In the light of human rights, his suicide does not sanctify his death nor is counted as unlawful killing. Not only this, the lives of refugee claimants also are redeemed as unwanted in Canada whose lawful entry is under the perpetual hearings. For them, to hold refugee status in Canada seems uncertain because the novel ends when Mahindan enters the hearing room. It refers that his life is in the threshold of *bios* and *zoé* tilting more to the bare life.

On the *prima facie*, Agamben accuses the western politics as prone to create 'bare life' – the life of *homo sacer* – through excluding it from the sovereign community: "bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (7). This tie between law and bare life, he argues, is pervasive and is always operative presupposition of sovereignty (106). Thus, Agamben's biopolitics stands as a performative concept that produces two outcomes: it transforms all humans into werewolves (socially excluded people) whose deaths hold no meaning; and it fortifies the power of the sovereign that has the prerogative of including the *zoé* into the realm of *bios* in order for excluding it. Tuning with the narrative of the novel, the subjugated animal life (*zoé*) of the refugees is sure for them both in Sri Lanka and Canada, whereas the political life that ensures human rights is nowhere. Yet their body comes under the scrutiny of state and they are socially ripped off.

The Ariadne's thread like long hearings of Mahindan in Canada hints out the replication of inclusive exclusion of the citizenry that the modern regime prefers. Mahindan is one of the asylum seekers who is not welcomed by the Minister Blair, which refers to the fact that the regime entertains keeping people in the state of exception, primarily turning the immigrants into the living dead, *Muselmn*. The refugee claimants are the *Muselmann* figures who have bare life being excluded as 'superstes,' people who have experienced an event from the beginning to an end, stripped of human rights equal to *homo sacer*, to bear ordeal at home due to the civil war and on the Canadian port as unacknowledged refugees. On the *prima facie*, Mahindan's case is inclusively excluded in Canadian governmentality when he is stranded between belonging to Sri Lanka and non-belonging to Canada. He is the paragon of *Muselmann* not speaking like the animal who witnesses the sovereign denial in Sri Lanka and in Canada, *persona non grata* means unacknowledged person.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, Mahindan and other five hundred Sri Lankan survivors in Canada have stranded between their zoological and biological life. It justifies Agambian notion

of homo sacer who is hemmed by inclusive exclusion under the power technology of city/state. The latent character of modern state is to outlaw its denizens by creating the state of exception which the Canadian Government has done in regards to Sri Lankan refugee claimants. The lengthy trial in their case, deportation, and separating Mahindan from his six years son illustrate the fact that biopolitics of the city/ state curbs citizenry rights in the name of managing populations and providing them good governance. Apart from it, the parochial racist attitude of Blair like politician proves the intermingling of life with power politics of the state in Canada. Finally, granting and not granting asylum in Canada at the cost of refugees' earlier life in Sri Lanka proves to be explicit enmeshing of life with the interest of the state. Largely, the Canadian juridico-politics turns out to tag the refugees as persona non grata, who do not have social value like of the bandit in Agamben's homo sacer discourse. Thus the refugees are *superstes* of Sri Lankan and Canadian politics that subjected them to outlawry. It deduces the biopolitical fact of administrating life as per the design of state.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford UP, 1995.
- . *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- . *State of Exception*. U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Bala, Sharon. *The Boat People*. Doubleday, 2018.
- Bunch, Mary J. "Outlawry and the Experience of the (Im)possible: Deconstructing Biopolitics." Dissertation. University of Western Ontario, 2010.
- Christofi, Phoebe. "Book Review: *The Boat People* by Sharon Bala." *Glam Adelaide*, 18 August 2018, www.glamadelaide.com.au/book-review/
- Freeman, Ru. "Seeking Asylum but Finding Heartbreak." *The New York Times*. 23 February 2018, www.nytimes.com/.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge. History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1). Translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, 1998.
- . *Society Must Be Defended*, translated by David Macey, Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-79*. Translated by Graham Burchell and edited by Michael Senellart, Picador, 2008.
- Jamalzadah, Mozhdah. "On the Humanity of *The Boat People*." *Canada Reads*, April 2018, www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/-boat-people-1.4593607.
- O'Farrell, Clare. *Michael Foucault*. Sage, 2005.
- Razack, Sherene. *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism*. U of Toronto P, 2004, pp. 62-63.