

Book Reviews

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Shira Sebban (2023). Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People: Bridging Borders for Freedom. McFarland, softcover, 236 pages, \$39.95. pISBN: 978-1-4766-8537-3, eISBN: 978-1-4766-5009-8

Shira Sebban's *Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People* is not one for the faint-hearted. One would feel that Sebban has put the reader parallelly on the boat to witness the modern Vietnamese refugee plight as they sail with paddles of hope only to be hit by currents of emotions, trials and tribulations to a much-yearned resettlement on a shore where the refugees could let go and just be.

Sebban, whose parents had once upon a time been Jewish refugees, is a writer, editor and member of Supporting Asylum Seekers Sydney (SASS). She was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in June 2022. The research required for the book has been acquired from English- language, Vietnamese and Indonesian sources. The book serves as a well-researched account of the narrative and has a repository of pictorial evidences and legal data to back up all the facts. Apart from being the guardian angel and saving grace in these people's lives', Sebban has done commendable and praiseworthy work in collating all the data and putting them down in the book.

What hits the most throughout the seven chapters of the book is how the author has captured and put down with extreme and vivid detailing; the sequence of events. The roots of the desire of these refugees to flee from their land plunged from factors such as the seizing of property by the Vietnamese government, the loss of livelihood owing to Chinese attacks to their fishing boats and discrimination attached to being Catholics. The precarious plan to escape was then made by renting out boats and carrying supplies of food for the journey. The perception, legalities, stringencies and various dimensions of other state governments in their policies when it came to accommodating and rehabilitating refugees is also embarked upon extensively in the book.

The refugees were dead scared of being sent back to Vietnam owing to the severity of the treatments of the police and the heavy jail terms. This is the story of Vietnamese refugees as they flee from their land to be in other states such as Australia, Indonesia, the U.S.A and Canada.

Alongside this, the earnest, relentless and resilient quests of the author and multiple human rights lawyers in brainstorming and jotting down plans, finding leads, organising funds, reaching out to various organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Amnesty International, Vietnamese Overseas Initiative for Conscience Empowerment (VOICE) etc to the responses of the various organisations involved, the heavy imageries of the detention centres and the struggle for life and livelihood amidst deemed illegalities are what frames the picture of the Vietnamese refugee ordeals against the “look for a better life, a birthright of any human being.”

The book holds its ground in conveying to the readers, the lack of agency and uncertainty the refugees faced. It was particularly disturbing when each time, one would assume ‘that this would be it’, whenever a flicker of light and channel of hope would appear, only to see them jostled to the ground like mere blocks of legos. Evidently, the storytelling is a combined pursuit of the fiery resolute of the author, and the will of late human rights advocate Ngoc Nhi (Ann) Nguyen in wanting to echo these subaltern voices to the world. Sebban has also outlined how this narrative has not garnered much limelight in the Western and English language media which gives it reason, that this must be shared “to celebrate the families’ hard- won resettlement in Canada.” Although emotions are not undermined, the book is more rigorously laden with presenting the incidents factually.

Without a doubt, Sebban’s book will definitely make one reflect on the juxtaposition of uncompromised State Security and National Interest to the heavy and helpless refugee realities across the world. From the struggle of seeking asylum in a foreign land, to having to endure trauma from endless repercussions and accusations in host states, being associated with smugglers, probable deportation of the refugees back to where they came from without even ensuring their safety or threats, being put in detention centres where refugees do not even see the light of the day, attending continuous interviews and signing agreements with the system, having to prove again and again, to the legalities being difficult to push through even if the case

is proved right.

The author could have provided a list of the individuals mentioned in the book and a brief profile on them at the beginning or end of the book since there are a lot of people involved in the book. However, the section titled 'Further Reading by Chapter' just shows the dedication given to the case studies of the refugees whereby there is more information regarding the abuses in detention centres, screening, support and sponsorship programmes etc that there is no stone left unturned in objectively portraying the state systems as it is. In this way, the lived realities of the modern-day boat people are an engaging eye-opener and sensitises the reader.

Considering the global events today, the refugee question may be a perplexing one but the book draws a call to action by policymakers in addressing asylum seekers and also the structural problems at the grassroots level that make people flee from their homeland which is supposedly the place where one should feel the safest. The physical and mental scars from identity and space politics becomes the genesis of their exodus, only to be deepened further by discrimination in the foreign land. On a personal note, the author's gift of an English-Vietnamese dictionary to each of the families upon losing their title as refugees due to acquiring Permanent Residence in Canada was heart tugging. It shows that the empathy in each of us must live to love, be aware and extend services to the destitute for the difference that we can bring will be a significant one.

The book would be a very valuable read for human rights activists, policy enthusiasts focussing on immigration policies, area studies scholars specialising on Southeast Asian states, Australia, U.S. and Canada as well as academics in Refugee and Migration Studies since Sebban's work serves as a first-hand case study itself. The book stands out for a number of reasons including, the fact that, it offers a contemporary narrative of boat refugees from just the past decade, a communal narrative in the way the experiences of the refugees are outlined together, human rights violations, placing their hardships in the perspective of broader discourses about justice and freedom and the way in which the organisations and states have their legalities, thus presenting the reader with the challenges and limitations faced, all of which can be studied to bridge gaps.

"Vietnam's Modern Day Boat People: Bridging Borders for Freedom" is

a compelling story that has lessons for everyone whilst also reminding us that, for every refugee, there is a struggle that they channelise so that theirs' becomes' a story about hope. This is ultimately, a story about strong warriors who persisted and made it.

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II

“Not many countries offer a second chance. The U.S. gave me that.”

– Jorge Ramos.

Immigration is viewed as a social process that brings a sense of betterment and growth to life. However, not everything about migration is sunshine and rainbows. The documentary ***The Other Side of Immigration, 2009, directed by Roy Germano***, covers the other side of immigration. It is based on a survey of over 700 Mexican locals, and aims to understand the minds of Mexican immigrants. It covers the hardships of the ones who risk it all for America and board “THE DEATH TRAIN,” as they face many difficulties like discrimination in the U.S., being treated like criminals, and even killings of those who cross the border.

The documentary kicks off with one of the locals sharing his first-hand experience of the hardships they faced, how the ones who go to the United States to stabilize their future are ill-treated, and how this is an outcome of their own actions. The documentary sheds light on how the United States spends a considerable sum of financial resources for the very purpose of catching and deporting immigrants who are considered a burden to the U.S. economy. To understand the nature of the Mexican immigrants, the documentary has four aspects: the rural economy, the politics, the money, and

The first segment comes to the forefront as over half of the Mexican population has migrated to the U.S., all in pursuit of a livelihood and a better life. Why? To be ahead of the others, “like them.” Who are the ones with big expectations for things that hold the potential to change their lives? These individuals have crafted a fantasy world where all they see is the money they make in the U.S., which overshadows what they can make in their nation. However, below this glorified allure of wealth lies multitudes of other untold stories. The locals say they don’t even recognize their men when they return. The ones who return hold a sense of superiority and think they are more enlightened than those who stay behind. They believe that the

U.S. is a place where one can shape themselves, with the government allowing them to be anything they want. A “necessary evil,” as the locals call it, migration is not a choice but a necessity because they believe a community like theirs could not survive independently. They argue that it is no longer worth toiling in Mexico, where U.S. imports dominate the market share. It kills the local market business for the locals, so leaving their homeland seems more logical.

To give Mexico another shot, the municipal government has launched programs for the locals that cover 80 percent of the start-up costs. However, these initiatives by the government face low participation. The documentary covers the reasons underpinning this issue. The lack of awareness and the prevailing corruption make the locals resist these initiatives to the extent that they prefer to take the risk of migrating to the U.S.

The deep-seated distrust between the people and the government compounds the lack of awareness. One of the courageous locals, Maria Elena, revealed the corrupt acts of the mayor and how people have to appease him and are often coerced to vote for him, or else the government program benefits will be taken away. Maria reveals how the mayor lies to the center to get the money; his heists are uncovered by Maria. Artemio, another local, lamented that their government is the most corrupt, as corruption prevails at every single level of government. He expresses his feeling that there is no sense of fraternity among their own people, which is why Mexico stands where it does now.

People trust those who migrated to the U.S. and are sending in resources

more than they trust their own government due to the monetary funds they send back home. The documentary sheds light on the number of sacrifices the immigrants make to gain economic opportunities after moving to the States. When it comes to pursuing a better future for themselves and their families, immigrants know no limits. These individuals are willing to starve themselves to gain economic opportunities for a bright future for themselves and their families. We can also see that these immigrants can go to extremes for their economic advancement.

A local mother, Carolina, voiced how she never left Mexico and yet felt she had migrated since her husband and their six sons went home to work in the

U.S. Both those who leave Mexico for employment and those who remain suffer. The ones in the United States face hardships, and the ones at home die in worry for the ones away from home. Carolina's husband, Javier, tells

how they have to choose the hard way and travel through a long, never-ending desert where they have to travel along with smugglers. If anything happens during the trip, no one cares to help, abandoning the person in need in the middle of nowhere. Towards the end, an old native suggests improving Mexico from where it is now, which viewers may find thought-provoking.

The documentary profoundly dives into the concept of "illegal development" roaming around Mexico. This concept of illegal development shades away the complexity of economic relationships between Mexico and the United States. It also states that most of the funds used in Mexico's development are those that immigrants transfer back to their homes after shifting to the United States. This case highlights how immigrants' funds contribute to Mexico and the development of their families. This shows how both the economies of the United States and Mexico are interconnected.

I liked various aspects of the documentary, as it covered a vast range of ideologies to cover the hardships of the Mexican migrants. It had a myriad of perspectives from the locals and presented reality. It did a great job explaining real stories by real people without any flamboyant production tactics or catchy music. The documentary created an eye-pleasing visual consistency by using several cameras for different angles. I liked how the documentary did not just explore the hardships suffered by the Mexican immigrants but also discussed possible solutions for the locals. The documentary is a must-watch if you want a deep insight into immigrant issues. I would recommend

the movie to students and teachers. Apart from professionals and individuals in the education industry, the documentary is also an easy watch for the general public.

Aditi Tiwari is a bright person with a big smile on her face. She aspires to work hard for her growth. She is a people person and is highly approachable. She has a keen interest in writing fiction and enjoys reading as well. She does not lose her cool easily and is there to learn from experiences.