

LESSONS FROM REFUGEE LITERATURE FOR ETHICAL REFUGEE SIMULATION EVENTS

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I do not remember the exact day, but I would guess it was sometime around last October when I found myself looking at a fence put up around the Saint John's fountain. The signs around detailed a migrant demonstration, in which students were going to sit, locked in cages, to protest the treatment of migrants at the US border. I did not participate, but I did ponder several questions on my walk back, including just what exactly this event was and what it meant. Most importantly, I asked myself: What makes a refugee simulation event ethical? Or, in other words, how does a refugee simulation experience generate an appropriate ethical response? The answer to this question is no doubt a complex one, and it could arise from just about any source or person. This paper, however, will use literature and media, and more specifically a literary critique of the novel *Exit West*, to answer that question. Literature and media must be used to answer this question because they provide valuable lessons for the depictions of migrants and the ethics of these portrayals. Literary analysis clarifies that refugee simulation events can only be ethical when the person is aware of the delicate balance between being the migrant and the limitations of the model, when the simulation takes into context historical and political factors, and finally and most importantly, when the simulation focuses on the everyday, mundane experiences of the migrant.

Before fully grappling with what makes a refugee event ethical, this paper must first define what a refugee event is and why it is so important. Refugee simulation events, sometimes referred to as

games, are simulation experiences designed to help create awareness, arouse emotions and encourage participants to take action on behalf of refugees.¹ For example, an event staged by the Red Cross involved a six-hour “journey” in which participants escaped a war zone, traversed “minefields,” and were subjected to violations of their human rights (represented by the taking of participant tokens).² There are no set criteria, rules, or even necessary elements for these events, only that they raise awareness and induce action on behalf of the refugees. While exact numbers are unknown, they are becoming increasingly popular, popping up on college campuses, churches, and other spaces worldwide.³ This increase in popularity directly mirrors the increase in refugees around the world, with some current estimates putting the number at around 26.3 million, a sharp increase from just decades ago.⁴ This displacement has led to a number of different formulations of governmental policy and national consciousness towards these refugees, both of which impact their subsequent treatment. When done correctly, refugee simulation events can be a powerful way to create awareness and empathy towards migrants and refugees, inducing positive action at both an individual and societal level. However, because of their lack of structure and formal rules, these events can also exploit the refugee, generate pity without action, or even worse, create animosity towards them. Hence, the question over what makes a refugee simulation event ethical, in this case meaning generating the appropriate response of awareness (without pity or animosity) and motivation for action, is an extremely important one as these refugees increasingly shatter borders and obliterate the current state of the world so defined by divisions among peoples and countries.

¹ The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). “Passages: An Awareness Game Confronting the Plight of Refugees.” <https://www.unhcr.org/473dc1772.pdf>.

² The American Red Cross. “American Red Cross Simulation Shows Day in the Life of a Refugee.” <https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/Red-Cross-Simulation-Shows-a-Day-in-the-Life-of-a-Refugee.html>.

³ The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). “Passages: An Awareness Game Confronting the Plight of Refugees.” <https://www.unhcr.org/473dc1772.pdf>.

⁴ UNHCR, “Passages,” <https://www.unhcr.org/473dc1772.pdf>.

Furthermore, using literary analysis and the media as a means to make this determination may seem foreign and strange, but when considered along with each one's purpose and lessons, it will become apparent why they not only should be used, but why they *must* be too. First and foremost, literature is, by nature, other-centered, meaning it shifts the focus from oneself to the other. Through literature's vast array of novels, stories, and books, all of which contain diverse and numerous characters, it introduces the reader to someone or something else. The reader, whether he/she knows it or not, must interact with these characters, their backgrounds, and their stories. Readers can dislike them, love them, or feel whatever else they may feel towards them – it does not matter. Instead, what matters is that all of these interactions are other-centered and outside of oneself, just like refugee simulations. The presentation of a refugee, someone who is likely very different from the participant, forces the participant to engage with the concept of a refugee and consequently, form an opinion of them, thereby defining the ethical nature of the event.

Beyond just providing examples, literary analysis takes it one step further in determining the ethics and consequences of these “other” portrayals. This analysis, in turn, is so crucial for simulation events as they present a character, in this case a refugee, to a participant in the hopes of generating a specific response. Thus, using literature as a blueprint – since it presents refugees differently – turns ethics, something that is generally abstract and hard to define, into something concrete that can then be used for the event. This is why it is essential to look at politics, philosophy, etc. through the framework of literary criticism, as literature provides examples and illustrates a sort of roadmap over how to conduct these events. Undoubtedly, these events could be conducted without the help of literature, but to do this would disregard a crucial resource for making ethical determinations.

Media, too, is helpful in answering these questions because of its prevalence and impacts. The fact of the matter is that the media is incredibly pervasive in today's society; according to a 2018 *Statista* survey, the average American watches about 5.9 hours per day of news.⁵ The reason for this prevalence, as most can relatively assume,

⁵ *Statista Surveys*. “Average Number of Hours of Local TV News in the United States in 2017 and 2018, by Day.” [statista.com/statistics/878891/average-hours-local-tv-news/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/878891/average-hours-local-tv-news/).

is the general public's desire for information, and more specifically, political information.⁶ People turn to the news because it keeps them informed of the current events of the world and the country, including about migrants. Thus, due to this pervasiveness, media is one of the few things that impacts all rungs of society, from the views that individuals hold to the very way governmental policy is formulated.⁷ In the specific case of migrants, media coverage plays a very important role in both individual views and governmental policy and therefore must be included in this discussion.

Inherently stated in the importance of the media, and perhaps also one of its biggest contentions, is its ability to tell events objectively and truthfully. While the media does, without a doubt, display real-world events and real people, it does not necessarily display them in a completely unbiased manner. In a study analyzing major news outlets' depictions of 2015 Syrian refugees, Chouliaraki and Stolic find that media portrayal limits migrants to five different typologies, each of which "situates refugees within a different regime of visibility and claim to action."⁸ These five typologies range from visibility in biological life to visibility as threat, each one containing advantages and disadvantages; for example, portraying the migrant as biological life generates empathy for the migrant but fails to consider the context of their suffering.⁹ When people look to the media as a vehicle of impartial truth, they are blinded to the fact that the pictures they see in front of their eyes are filtered and displayed in a certain way and

⁶ Anke Wonneberger, Klaus Schoenbach, and Lex van Meurs. "Interest in News and Politics-or Situational Determinants? Why People Watch the News." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 55, no.3 (July 2011): 326, doi:10.1080/08838151.2011.597466.

⁷ Stefano DellaVigna and Elian La Ferrara. "Economic and Social Impacts of Media." *NBER Working Paper Series* 21360 (July 2015): 34, https://www-nber.org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/system/files/working_papers/w21360/w21360.pdf.

⁸ Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic. "Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee 'Crisis': A Visual Typology of European News." *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (September 2017): 1162, doi:10.1177/0163443717726163.

⁹ Chouliaraki and Stolic, "Rethinking Media Responsibility," 1168.

particular order in accordance with the media outlet's goals and needs. In this way, media can be seen to parallel literature through its different presentations of the other and the different consequences of these portrayals.

This similarity alone could be justification for the use of media in helping determine ethical refugee simulation events, but further insights into the differences between media and literature reinforce its use. The first and most obvious distinction is that media has a real-world grounding. Even though it may not present refugees in a completely objective matter, the media still displays real-life refugees and situations and the consequences of these presentations, providing a nice contrast to the imagined characters present in fiction. However, this real-world grounding is not without its drawbacks, as this eradicates the ability to portray the interiority of different characters, something that is helpful in refugee events. Furthermore, when attempting to generate the appropriate ethical response, expectations must be taken into account. In literature, there is little expectation on the part of the reader that what he/she is reading is true, while a viewer of the news does have an expectation of truth and real-life events. In a refugee simulation event, the line is increasingly blurred between these two expectations. The experience or person the participant is simulating for the day is likely not real, while the hardship and experience displayed is real. This is why the most effective way forward is to utilize both media and literature and its subsequent expectations.

Therefore, both literature and media can help determine an ethical refugee simulation. Literature exhibits other-centeredness and the ability to display different characters and the ethical nature of these portrayals, while the media, such an important factor in today's society, adds to this by anchoring portrayals of refugees in real-world events and scenarios. Put simply, each one contributes something the other cannot, and when conducting an event that blends truth and fiction, it becomes incredibly important to incorporate the lessons derived from both.

Now, because a refugee simulation event is neither fiction nor media, it might make sense to logically conclude that these events are free of all bias and are therefore the best method to evoke an ethical response, but this is not so because both the group putting on the event and the participant carry their own biases and perceptions. Whether it be a university or a non-profit organization, the group

presenting the experience has their own motivations for telling the story *their way*. Even if these are good intentions, such as inducing more support for migrants or raising awareness of their plight, they still must be considered in light with their limitations, consequences, and advantages. Just like any novel or news story, a university can craft the simulation around the message it wants to display, such as an event that emphasizes a helpless migrant, something that might generate pity but do little to inspire action other than donations. Even more importantly, however, is the actual participant's preconceived biases and beliefs, as these will directly affect the way he/she interacts with the experience. A person who knows refugees or has even been one himself/herself will interact far differently than a privileged college student due to the fact that his/her life is "both enabled and limited by material resources, by circumstance and fate."¹⁰ People are a product of their experiences and beliefs. Thus, it becomes apparent that in order for the event to generate an ethical response, the participant must engage with the simulation accordingly, recognizing his/her own preconceived biases and the limitations of the model, while at the same time feeling as if he/she is the migrant and engaging fully with the experience.

This implicit bias in the construction of an ethical event and the subsequent need for a critical participant is directly paralleled in literature through the author's use of narrative form. Authors have specific pressures, agendas, and desires when writing stories that all impact the narratives they create. Hale deems this the "ethicopolitical basis" of literature, in which the "representation of character in the novel is never free from the threat of instrumentality, either from the subjective source of narration or by the threat of objectification posed by literary design."¹¹ This is seen in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*; in telling the story of Nadia and Saeed, Hamid makes several important decisions on how to portray the migrant and how to tell

¹⁰ Roger Silverstone. "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life." *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 764, <https://muse-jhu-edu.cuhsl.creighton.edu/article/37634>.

¹¹ Dorothy J. Hale. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 124, no. 3 (May 2009): 318, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614333>.

their story, but most importantly, he depicts the migrant as a universal human, in which we are all migrants, rendering what many consider to be the exception of humanity as ordinary.¹² This concept of the migrant as a universal human is shown in the novel through its interjecting stories of people stepping out of doors and its numerous quotes that insist on a common humanity. For instance, Hamid writes: “We are all migrants through time.”¹³ Taking into account this narrative form is so crucial for the reader, as without acknowledging or recognizing it, there can be no grappling with the importance of the novel or the issues it raises. In the specific context of *Exit West*, Goyal notes how this universalizing of the migrant can emphasize a common humanity but fail to reckon with the important historical contexts that force these migrations.¹⁴ It is here, in this realization of the narrative form’s limitations and consequences, that ethics lies.

Along with the necessity for an open-minded and critical participant, literary criticism also reveals a second component of an ethical refugee simulation event: the inclusion of appropriate historical and political context. Without this inclusion, an appropriate response is impossible because the participant gets only part of the refugee and his/her story.

For all of the benefits that Goyal notes about universalizing the refugee, she also details its drawbacks, namely its loss of historical and political context: “Hamid naturalizes the fact of migration in a way that evacuates the specific historical experience that generates it, rendering banal what must remain historical.”¹⁵ In the novel, there is never a mention of any city, place, or country, and while this generates a feeling of familiarity and closeness with Saeed and Nadia as the story unfolds, it also does a great disservice to migrants and refugees everywhere. These migrants are not migrants by choice, and they are not simply escaping from a neglectful government. These are forced, stratified migrations that are often the result of intervening, profit-seeking governments or a “failure of the international

¹² Yogita Goyal. “‘We Are All Migrants’: The Refugee Novel and the Claims of Universalism,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 244, doi:10.1353/mfs.2020.0019.

¹³ Mohsin Hamid. *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 221.

¹⁴ Goyal, “We Are All Migrants,” 251.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

community” to adequately respond such as in the case of Syria.¹⁶ To render the migrant as without place or origin ultimately fails to capture the main story of the migrant. Consequently, it follows that any refugee simulation event must detail this.

Here too, it might be tempting to say that the lack of specificity in fiction is a contrast to the media’s commitment to facts. But I argue that it is not just literature that falls victim to a deletion of origins; the media also loses the historical and political context from which migrants flee through its sensationalizing of the migrant and its vivid imagery. The importance of media in telling the story of refugees to society as a whole cannot be understated, and because of this it becomes paramount that the media tells the whole story, and not just part of it. However, multiple typologies studied and identified by Chouliaraki and Stolic simply provide striking images like “intimate snapshots of individuals or couples, such as a crying child, a mother with her baby or a rescue worker in action.”¹⁷ While these images easily induce an intense emotional response, they still fail to consider the other complex factors that brought the migrant to that very spot where their picture was taken.¹⁸ It is, quite literally, a snapshot, and the refugee’s story cannot and should not be limited to a snapshot. In this way, media falls into the same trap as *Exit West* in omitting the very roots of migration, and this must be corrected in a simulation event.

However, this inclusion of historical context, along with an aware, critical participant, still does not fully constitute an ethical refugee simulation event. In order to truly generate the appropriate ethical response, a simulation event needs to include a third and final component: the everyday experience of a migrant. Through these mundane, seemingly ordinary experiences of a migrant, a basis for ethics forms that bridges the gap between a person and migrant.

Exit West demonstrates the power of the ordinary and mundane and is a stark contrast to the sensationalizing of the refugee that is so apparent throughout media coverage. One of the most striking things about reading *Exit West* is that, although it is a refugee novel, it contains absolutely no journey experience. By displaying Saeed and

¹⁶ Amnesty International, 2016, qtd. in Chouliaraki and Stolic, “Rethinking Media Responsibility,” 1168.

¹⁷ Chouliaraki and Stolic, “Rethinking Media Responsibility,” 1168.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 1169.

Nadia's travels via magical doors, Hamid "refuses to spectacularize the refugee."¹⁹ Instead, he displays them as two ordinary people, doing things such as smoking weed, playing on their phones, and even going to school. This could not differ any more strongly than the media's spectacular portrayal of migrants, in which they consistently fall victim to either displaying the migrant as a helpless, vulnerable figure or as a hero, a champion of a long and perilous journey out of Hell and into paradise.²⁰ This depiction is deemed by Silverstone to be "sensation without responsibility," giving humanity little moral responsibility in their everyday life.²¹ While it can be worthwhile to highlight these stories, these journeys are simply not the reality for many refugees. They are neither helpless objects that need sorrow and pity nor conquering heroes that deserve praise and honor. Many refugees fall somewhere in the middle, and this is what the refugee experience must capture in order to generate the appropriate ethical response.

A refugee simulation event must capture the everyday for two reasons: first, the everyday creates our commonalities with one another and thus becomes the basis for our relationships; second, the everyday is what individuals are the most comfortable with and know the best, so by altering this and erasing what they think they intimately know, the simulation event helps participants gain a deeper understanding into what it means to be a refugee.

In *Exit West*, the everyday becomes the very connector by which a reader can identify with Saeed and Nadia, which, in turn, reinforces the concept of a common humanity. Take something as simple as Nadia streaming music from the internet; this is not something that is generally noteworthy to the plot, but to gloss over this misses the brilliance of the novel.²² This detail is a way in which the reader, who seemingly has downloaded music from the internet, identifies with Nadia, a person who is likely far different from her. Countless other examples of this exist, but the overarching point is that these little, mundane experiences create and sustain a common humanity.²³ The reader identifies with Nadia because of her everyday life, as in this

¹⁹ Goyal, "We Are All Migrants," 253.

²⁰ Chouliaraki and Stolic, "Rethinking Media Responsibility," 1173.

²¹ Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion," 763.

²² Hamid, *Exit West*, 208.

²³ Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion," 761.

case it might be the only thing that Nadia has in common with a college-age student in the US. But through this connection via the everyday – resisting the spectacular – relationships form, and a sense of empathy develops.²⁴

Along with the uniting power of the everyday, the mundane is what a person experiences the most and therefore knows the best, so by challenging and changing the everyday, the experience achieves a suspension of judgment by forcing the participants to deeply reconsider themselves and others. Daily lives, routines, schedules – they are all so familiar and comfortable. Thus, it follows that upsetting this would generate the most frustration and the greatest feeling of alienation and alterity – the precise locus of the ethical value of literature.²⁵ One way Hamid illustrates this confrontation with alterity is through Saeed and Nadia attempting to see each other in the novel: “Without work there was no impediment to Saeed and Nadia meeting during the day except for the fighting.”²⁶ The genius of this quote lies in Hamid’s ability to downplay the violence in the story and make it almost like an ordinary, everyday experience. Obviously, this is not the case for much of the world, and in reality, it is the exact opposite. Thus, the reader must face a much different everyday reality than theirs, creating a deep crisis and a confrontation with alterity, which leads to a severe reconsideration of oneself and others.²⁷ To further illustrate this point, consider the hypothetical of a normal boyfriend and girlfriend relationship in which they see each other constantly, having no impediment other than time; now, put violence right in the middle of them. Would this disturbance of the everyday not lead to a drastic reconsidering and awakening of self, other, and what is important – or, in other words, ethics? Silverstone argues that it would, as the viability of everyday life consists in our ability to engage fully with the system – a system he/she knows.²⁸ Change the system, reawaken the mind. The everyday is simply the system the participants know the best, so by introducing differences of the everyday, they recognize the limitations of their ways of knowing the other, leading to “the possibility that we might change for the better,

²⁴ Goyal, “We Are All Migrants,” 249.

²⁵ Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics,” 318.

²⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 73.

²⁷ Silverstone, “Complicity and Collusion,” 764.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 761.

that we might actively try to judge less and undergo more," thereby creating the ethical response.²⁹

What the everyday creates is two things; one, a common humanity through shared experiences that can sustain relationships and unite people across cultures and times; two, it can be the method in which the highest securities in life are scrutinized, ultimately leading to a dramatic reorientation of the world, ourselves, and others. And both parts are so key for an ethical refugee simulation. The participant must feel united with the person they are simulating, as if they could almost be them. Additionally, the simulation experience must delve deep into their everyday experiences and comfort, bringing the participants great frustration in order to obtain the freedom to reassess refugees. These two things are only possible through mundane, everyday experiences. Whether the simulation includes something as simple as eating a crumb of bread or attempting to sleep on the ground, the everyday must be involved because it is precisely through the everyday that "an ethics of care and responsibility are enabled."³⁰

Refugee simulation experiences can be a powerful way to demonstrate the experience of a migrant and generate an appropriate ethical response. Using lessons learned from literature and media, a proper refugee experience can only occur with an open-minded and aware participant, the acknowledgement of the proper historical and political context, and finally with the experience of the everyday – the very essence of ethics. Ethical representations and responses to migrants are not only important for migrant's sake, but also for the world and humanity as a whole. Because, whether we realize it or not, refugees are increasingly breaking down borders and shattering the world's nicely delineated countries and boundaries, for better or worse. The world must not only be ready to accept that, but also to help assist them in any way possible. Refugee simulations are a powerful way to start this process, but more research, added to this, is necessary in order to empirically examine their effectiveness. Regardless, this is a start, and we must become aware of the reality of the world, of refugees, and even of the everyday – including something as simple as walking down the mall and stopping for an event.

²⁹ Hale, "Aesthetics and the New Ethics," 324.

³⁰ Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion," 764.

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