



‘We Are Still Alive’: Violence, Resilience, And The Search For Lost Self In Nikita Lalwani’s *You People*

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ABSTRACT:

Migration is considered a last resort for human survival, especially among refugees. However, the survival of refugees often comes at the cost of losing/leaving their family and loved ones in their hostile homeland. Clinical research shows that refugee survivors often suffer a deep sense of shame and guilt for surviving the violent trauma, while others could not. This psychological response is known as “survivor’s guilt” that stems from the morality of an individual subject. This paper follows the philosophical discourse of Amber. L. Griffioen on analysing the impact of survivor’s guilt on survivor victims. The present study utilizes Nikita Lalwani’s *You People* (2021) as a case study to explore the impact of guilt on refugee survivors and how this psychological reaction retrospectively helps the survivors to re-build their lost self.

KEYWORDS: survivor’s guilt, violence, forced displacement, resilience, human survival, psychological response

At the worldwide levels, there is a constant upsurge in the mass displacement of individuals. It is estimated that in 2024 more than 120 million peoples are forcibly displaced due to fear of persecution, torture, ethnic tensions, human rights violations, political conflicts or environmental disasters (UNHCR 2024). Consequently, migration is thus regarded as the last resort for human survival. However, the very notion of survival is to “remain alive, outlive others, and endure one’s life” under life threatening conditions such as war, migration, natural catastrophes, poverty, and illness (Perl 14). To simply put, surviving denotes the state of mere existence of individuals who have endured violence, while others could not.

Not all migration experience considered to be the fight for survival, yet in the context of forced displacement, refugees are said to be the survivors of systemic violence and politically driven torture. This systemic violence upon humans, by other humans, aim not just to overpower their domination but to subjugate the resilience of a particular community, thereby robbing agency and autonomy of individuals. These refugee survivors experience intense guilt and shame for their inability to resist subjugation and for mere ‘surviving’, while leaving their loved ones in the hostile home countries. This paper follows the philosophical discourse of Amber. L. Griffioen on analysing the impact of survivor’s guilt on survivor victims. This paper is an exploration of how Shan’s experience of survivor’s guilt as a positive force that aids in reclaiming his lost self.

Nikita Lalwani is a contemporary Indian diasporic novelist and she is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her third novel *You People* (2021), followed by *The Village* (2012) and *Gifted* (2007), highlights the precarious conditions of refugees with the specific focus on the arduous journey of Shan, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee, as he struggles to reunite with his family. The novel centres around Shan and his colleague Nia, a Welsh waitress and both of whom work for Tuli, a mysterious and charismatic owner of the Pizzeria Vesuvio, an Italian restaurant, which serves as a haven for all the illegal immigrants, especially to the Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants. Having survived the Sri Lankan Civil war and post-migration to Europe, Shan is grappled with guilt and shame of having left his family behind in the hostile environment. However, Shan's regains his lost self, only when he decides to save his family, thereby saving himself from the guilt. The narrative shifts between Shan and Nia that offers a profound perspective of lived experience of refugees and media narratives that often vilify them. Through a deeply humane narrative, the novel examines the complexities of migration, survival, and vulnerability of refugees.

The UNHCR's definition of a refugee delineates the precarious condition of refugees, as someone who are highly exposed to several traumatic incidents which includes the "trauma related to war and conflict, persecution, violence, and torture, experienced by themselves as well as loved ones" (UNHCR 2024, G. Theisen-Womersley 30). The protagonist of *You People*, Shan, a Sri Lankan-Tamil, who has endured culminative hardships before leaving his home country for survival. Shan, the survivor of torture, writes a detailed letter to Tuli about his physical and psychological suppression that he endured in Sri Lanka. In the letter, he lists down every single act that he was exposed to such as: "...1. Whipping with wire, 2. under water, ... 3. rope neck, ... 4. plastic bag, ...5. wire on fingers" (Lalwani 103-104). The clinical psychologist G. Theisen-Womersley in his book *Trauma and Resilience Among Displaced Populations: A Sociocultural Exploration* (2021) mentions torture as "unimaginable madness" and it is "purposefully taught, organised, elaborated, and perpetuated by humans against other humans" (31).

In addition to it, Shan recounts the horrific death of his father at the hands of atrocious mob. Shan's father, a minority Tamil journalist, who had been abducted by the Sinhalese army for reporting the execution of five students in Trincomalee. After several days of torture, Shan's father was found only to be:

Discarded from a jeep in the dust, like a big old bruised aubergine rolling off a vegetable cart, that's how Appa came home... Don't look directly at them or it will burn you, that kind of bad, if you imagine it. (Lalwani 92)

Here, Lalwani reflects the reality of several Tamil journalists who died for daring to report such heinous crimes of the Sinhalese mob. Shan's powerlessness is foregrounded where he avoids to look at the eyes of the perpetrators. His powerlessness is a result of torture which acts as an instrument of oppressors to destroy the agency of the victim. As the psychologist William Gorman emphasizes in his article *Refugee Survivors of Torture* (2001) that the motive behind to the variety of cruel, inhuman, and degrading (CID) treatment is to not just uncover any statements, rather to make the subjects "internalize their imposed condition and feel incapable of resistance" (444).

The continual exposure of torture affects not only the body of the victim, but also the mind as the psychologist Pearl Fernandes in his article *Assisting refugee survivors of torture and trauma: An existential perspective* (2024) claims that "the resultant sequelae of trauma and terror can damage one's identity, causing shifts in belief and assumptions related to safety, justice, interpersonal relationships and existential issues" (280). Thus, Shan as witness to horrific murder of his father forces him to escape Sri Lanka.

The unpredictable nature of refugees' journey often results in one's survival at the cost of leaving/losing their family and loved ones behind. Clinical research shows that refugee survivors often suffer a deep sense of shame and guilt for surviving the violent trauma, while others could not. This psychological response, where both guilt and shame co-occur predominantly to manifest what Dr. Stanley Cobb and Dr. Erich Lindemann introduced as "survivor's guilt". In the novel, Shan as a refugee survivor who has been both a witness of horrific death of his father and a victim of torture himself. As a consequence of it, Shan flees war-torn Sri Lanka when the agent appeared with a ticket in exchange of some extra money. His departure is not choice, rather a necessity to save his life as he recounts to Tuli, the owner of the Pizzeria Vesuvio:

I knew they would come looking for me, those SLA guys I told you about before – they were coming every week or two by that point, harassing us, that’s why I didn’t tell them where I was going. I didn’t want to put them in danger. Devaki, Karu. I never thought that I would...lose them...But the agent said I could bring them here within a week of arrival (Lalwani 91).

However, Shan’s uncertain journey continues, even after escaping Sri Lanka. His intention of reuniting with his family feels like a distant dream to him as he does not know the whereabouts of his family. Throughout the novel, he carries the burden of not only being separated from his family but also suffers from guilt for having survived without them.

Though guilt and shame may seem identical, however they focus at different aspects of the individual. Guilt is often characterised as a belief that “one should have acted differently during a traumatic event” (Young et al. 2) and thus resulting in a sense of shame which negatively self-evaluate from others’ gaze (Griffioen 45). Simply put, guilt concerns on the individual’s action while shame pertains to the self-image. In the novel, Shan experiences pervasive form of survivor’s guilt, where his guilt is a consequence of his survival and also for his perceived failure to protect his family. It is evident as Shan admits “[i]t was a mistake, a mistake, a mistake to leave without Devaki and Karu” (Lalwani 96). Shan feels responsible for the uncertain fate of his family and Shan perceives his escape as a moral transgression of his self. Moreover, Shan survives the conflict physically but he is psychologically distressed about whether his family is still alive or not. However, it is important to note that Shan’s escape, without his family, is not a decision made by him. Rather, he was forced to undertake his journey in a life-threatening condition.

Shan’s inability to protect is a result of his lack of control and power over the traumatic event. As the philosopher Griffioen points out the relationship between how agency of victim is robbed due to the traumatic event in her article “Regaining the Lost Self” (2014) as:

It is not difficult to see in what sense traumatic events threaten one’s sense of autonomy. Indeed, it is likely that a perceived lack of autonomy is often (at least in part) what makes an event traumatic for a subject in the first place (50).

Moreover, the physical and emotional violation caused by the perpetrators dehumanizes Shan where he lacks ability to act as a rational individual. His lack of autonomy and control over traumatic events threatens Shan to escape in order to survive. His sudden departure is an outcome of his powerlessness that instigate the experience of shame and guilt, thus loss of the self.

The self-conscious emotions, guilt and shame, are often seen as negative feelings and associates with self-destructive behaviour. However, in survivor’s guilt, these subjective emotions co-occur that help in positive and self-(re)-building emotions (Griffioen 52). Survivor’s guilt as a psychological response helps trauma survivors to make amends and opportunities, where reparation is taken. In the novel, Shan carries the invisible baggage of his past trauma and believes that he is responsible for disappearance of his family. Even after several months of his arrival to Britain, Shan undertakes a lot of effort to find his family. For instance, he helps Tuli, the owner of Pizzeria Vesuvio, in return Shan seeks Tuli to find his family.

Guilt as a coping mechanism helps Shan to move forward with his life, rather than self-loathing for his past action. With the help of Tuli, Shan locates his family, Devaki, his wife and Karu, his son in Germany. The sense of self is rebuilt only after Shan speaks with Devaki and Karu over call as Shan reflects: “OK. I am OK. He is OK, you are Ok? Meaning: I am alive, he is alive, you are alive? We are still alive (Lalwani 131). These lines underscore not only Shan’s reunion with his family but to his self. As Griffioen delineates the significance of survivor’s guilt among trauma survivors as:

The narrative of autonomy established via survivor’s guilt can help her recover a sense of meaning and thus of integrity, even if it results in a radically different worldview than the one implicitly held pre-trauma (52).

Survivor’s guilt helps Shan to gain the sense of control over his action. This is exemplified in the novel when Devaki and Karu were held by smugglers, who demands more money in return of their release. Shan believes that the choice to retrieve his family back to safety is dependent on him as Shan affirms “[s]till, he knows one fact for sure – it is up to him now” (Lalwani 187). Thus, Shan goes to an extent where he stabs the agent who tries to monetize his suffering. Shan’s act of violence denotes his retrieval of power and agency over his life and choice. As a result, Devaki affirms to Shan over a call, saying that “[y]es, they release me after you

sent the money” (Lalwani 207). The release of Devaki from the clutches of the smugglers also symbolises the release of Shan from his guilt and regaining of his agency and his self.

In conclusion, survivor’s guilt in *You People* functions as a crucial psychological mechanism that compels refugee survivors to retrospectively reconstruct their lost identities. The novel illustrates how systemic torture and violence destroys the integrity of the individual, and thus the self. However, guilt as a coping mechanism helps survivors to retrospectively regain the autonomy and rebuild the self. Ultimately, Lalwani’s narrative underscores how survival is not just about endurance but about reconciling loss with the pursuit of self-restoration.

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