

Opinion – Refugee Hierarchy in Western Responses to the Ukrainian Crisis

Written by Piyumani Panchali Ranasinghe and Khalid Dader

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PIYUMANI PANCHALI RANASINGHE AND KHALID DADER, MAR 7 2022

'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,' but 'European', 'White', and 'civilized' seem to be freer and superior. The Russian war against Ukraine that erupted in late February this year has unmasked racism that we thought ended years ago since we (supposedly) live in a human rights oriented world.

In the 2015 migration crisis, the numbers of migrants attempting to enter Europe rose substantially due to ongoing conflicts and wars in the Middle East, the most prominent of which arose from the Syrian Civil War which began in 2011. We saw the limitless unseaworthy boats that sunk, wiping not only migrants lives but their memories and experiences. The world witnessed various heart-wrenching videos and images of children drowning at sea. And, some others were pushed back, sexually harassed, and robbed of their human dignity on the borders. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. These people risked their lives for survival, searching for a decent life away from war and insecurity. This crisis has been going on for years, and European countries still do not have a fair system to deal with these migrants from the Middle East and North Africa.

Nevertheless, as the Russian war against Ukraine has erupted in 2022, the European Union has miraculously, and quickly, found a system to help Ukrainian migrants who are fleeing the war. Amid the welcoming and solidarity from European countries, some European journalists have uttered jarring statements. 'They are not refugees from Syria, these are refugees from Ukraine...They're Christian, they're white, they're very similar...,' said Kelly Cobiella of NBC News. Having listened to what Cobiella said left us thinking, 'similar to what?' Similar to the White European West? The implication of this statement is grave and marks a distinction between 'the acceptable refugee' and 'the unacceptable one'. To be treated with 'equal rights and dignity' is to be 'acceptable enough' in the White Western eye. To be 'acceptable enough' is to be similar to the adjectives outlined by Cobiella – Christian, White and not from the 'wrong part of the world.'

As we reflect on the implications of Cobiella's statement, we are reminded of Achille Mbembe's words, 'The racist subject sees the humanity in himself [themselves] not by accounting for what makes him [them] similar to others but by accounting for what makes him [them] different.' The distinction Cobiella makes is long present in the European refugee as well as migration policies. Distinctions made in this regard are evidence of race being continued to be used as a tool to define and uphold the colonial enterprises of segregation, especially in the incumbent refugee crisis in Ukraine.

As we watched the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine in the past weeks, we simultaneously witnessed several brutal attacks against innocent Palestinians, including children. However, BBC reported David Sakvarelidze, a Deputy General Prosecutor from Ukraine, stating 'European people with blue eyes and blonde hair being killed' was 'really emotional' for him. In line with this logic of humanity, for one to not be killed the prerequisites are blue eyes and blonde hair. A video of a Palestinian girl confronting an Israeli soldier has remained unnoticed for ten years until the Western media got hold of the video claiming that she was a Ukrainian standing up to Russian soldiers, only because she is blonde and white.

Added into the mix of blue eyes and blonde hair, are other requisites such as prosperity and wealth. Peter Dobbie, a

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correspondent for Al-Jazeera noted (for which Al-Jazeera later issued a public apology), ‘these are prosperous middle-class people, these are not, obviously, refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East’. The implication of this statement is comprehensible if one follows the blue-eyed-blond hair logic. As Frantz Fanon penned in his book ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ ‘How could the good and merciful Lord be black? He’s a white man with bright pink cheeks...One is white, so one is rich, so one is handsome, so one is intelligent.’ These statements particularly leave us questioning our agency, sense of self and humanity in the world we live in. To receive empathy, if security is too big ‘an ask’, should one desire to be white with blue eyes and blonde hair? What does it mean to be without blue eyes and blonde hair? More precisely, what does it mean to be not European, if you are a refugee?

According to Charlia D’Agata on CBS news, it means you are not civilized, and hence are not entitled to inherent human rights and dignity. D’Agata specified that ‘Ukraine is not a place like Iraq or Afghanistan that has seen conflict raging for decades’. Whilst it is stifling to listen to D’Agata’s racist commentary with his own disclaimer ‘with all due respect’ and ‘I have to choose words carefully’; it is even more infuriating to listen to his assessment of ‘civilised-ness’. D’Agata infamously stated, ‘This is a relatively civilized, relatively European city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen. I have to choose those words carefully too’. There are two predominant implications of this statement. First, one cannot expect a conflict to break out in relatively civilized European places. Second, one cannot even ‘expect’ or ‘hope’ for conflict in relatively civilized Europe. In line with the first implication, Iraq and Afghanistan are projected as uncivilized – although both countries with a civilizational history dating back millennia and have endured catastrophes owing to Western invasions in the past decades. According to Lucy Watson, a correspondent for ITV ‘the unthinkable has happened. This is not a developing, third-world nation – this is Europe’. The usage of terms such as ‘unthinkable’ and ‘cannot expect or hope’ shows how blind the West continues to be to its own historic atrocities against the ‘rest’.

These comments made by journalists and public personnel are indicative of the oppressive racial narratives that are continuously nurtured by the Euro-Western political complex. They are both ideologies as well as tools of control used to maintain socio-political institutions which propagate racism and inferiority. Evidence of this is the statement made by the Greek Migration Minister, Notis Mitarachi on 1 March. In Mitarachi’s eyes, Ukrainians are the ‘real refugees’. We are not going to contemplate the antonym of this term because it could mean anything from fictional and imaginary to mythical.

The Western world constantly needs myths to justify its power. According to Mbembe, these myths range from believing the West as the ‘birthplace of reason, universal life, and truth of humanity’ to idealizing the West as the ‘most ‘civilized’ region in the world’. As Mbembe points out, the West may even believe that they ‘alone invented the rights of the people’. The conundrum of the West is also just that. Relying on myths to hold on to power and dismissing the racialization that continues to permeate its institutional structures. For the West, universal human rights are not necessarily universal in practice. On the contrary, they remain dualistic. The rights of European, civilized humans vs. the rest, who may be considered human, subject to the arbitrary prerequisites of the West.

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