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### A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspective of W.H Auden's Refugee Blues

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#### Abstract

The present ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, has resulted in an influx of Ukrainian refugees to Western Europe. The retrieval of bodies on the Italian coast of migrants from countries like Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan trying to escape from their countries due to war, economic crisis, has become a common sight. The problem of sheltering refugees from war torn has become a major

political and humanitarian crisis in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Taking the current geo-political scenario into consideration, this paper attempts to examine W. H. Auden's perspective on the plight of refugees in his poem 'Refugee Blues', published in 1939, which calls for more flexible immigration laws by European countries on humanitarian, moral and ethical grounds.

**Keywords:** Migration, Refugees, Loneliness, Exile, War

#### Auden's Use of Rhetoric in 'Refugee Blues'

In 1935, when the persecution of Jews was at its peak in Germany, W.H. Auden married Erika Mann, a German Jew, the novelist daughter of Thomas Mann when it became apparent that the Nazis were intending to strip her of her German citizenship. Most countries of Europe had closed their borders to Jews and had revoked their passports. Knowing Auden's homosexual status, Erika Mann readily agreed to a marriage of convenience, to escape from Nazi Germany.

W.H. Auden witnessed the persecution of Jews throughout Europe in the 1930's. Auden dubbed the 1930's as 'a low and dishonest decade' in his work 'Another time' published in the year 1939. He used the power of literary art to move the public and the reader through his poem 'Refugee Blues', in order to call for a change in refugee policy of asylum countries. (*Moral Affects through "Wind" and "Bone,"*). The poem is considered to be the first song in his collection of poems, '10 songs'. Auden wrote the poem when he was in New York, having sailed to New York along with his partner Isherwood, to escape the media, on temporary visas in the year 1939 ("W. H. Auden," 2023)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Auden has made a deliberate attempt to exercise the rhetorical power of poetry to move the public and the reader towards the plight of the Jewish refugees. During the year 1939, when the poem was written, the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps across Eastern Europe had begun. In the poem, the speaker tries to flee the country, to escape the Nazi persecution, but all the neighbouring countries had closed their doors. Those Jews who had immigrated to UK and Scandinavian countries before 1933 were fortunate. The Jews who had been living since centuries in Europe suddenly felt unwelcome, marginalised, and isolated in their home country. When they tried to flee eastern Europe in 1939, their passports were no longer valid, and neither were they allowed to apply for fresh passports. In the speaker's words, they were as good as 'dead'. When he went out into the street, all the speaker could hear was Hitler's call to eliminate all the Jews since he felt that they were stealing the bread of the native Germans. The speaker reminisces the good times he had with his family, but now sees that he is not welcome anywhere, his erstwhile friendly neighbours look at him with hostility and suspicion. He sees several houses which had many doors and windows but none of them will open the doors to him. His attempts to understand what is going on is met with hatred and fear. Overnight he has become an enemy of the state, a traitor and an unspeakable death at the hands of the Nazis seems to be the only escape from his fate. The speaker compares his plight to animals like fish, dogs and cats and rightly feels that they have more freedom than him and they are luckier than him since they were not German Jews. Cut to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Europe has a new humanitarian crisis that of accepting or rejecting the refugees from war torn countries due to its geographical affinity with Central Asia.

### The Refugee Question in Europe in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was formed in 1950 in the aftermath of the second world war to rehabilitate and help the survivors of the holocaust, and the families of soldiers who had either fled or lost their homes. Seventy years later, UNHCR continues to give humanitarian aid to refugees from war torn countries like Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia and Democratic Republic of Congo. According to UNHCR report in 2015, Turkey became the largest refugee hosting country worldwide with 1.59 million refugees and Lebanon with 1.15 million refugees. But once these countries started enacting stricter immigration laws, Syrian refugees started fleeing to Western Europe since 2015. In 2021 Germany became the biggest host country with 1.24 million refugees, half of whom are from Syria. In addition, Germany hosts 2, 33000 asylum seekers and 27000 stateless persons. Germany also supports the worldwide work of UNHCR. (Refugees, UNHCR).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, employment has become even more difficult for Syrian refugees in their host countries. The other challenges faced by the refugees are restrictive family reunification policies, uncertain legal status, and rejection of immigration status. Around 12000 Syrian refugees have also sought asylum in Cyprus, since 2011, since Cyprus has less stringent immigration laws and require less documentation. Some Syrians have managed to complete their education and are employed in professions like opening their own small businesses like shops and restaurants, teaching, research, architecture etc. Some Syrian refugees have become citizens through marriage with the local Cyprus population and are actively assisting as volunteers in helping other Syrian refugees get assimilated to Cyprus. (*Syria Refugee Crisis-Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus*).

Though some European countries have welcomed the refugees from war torn countries, Europe has considerably changed its stance towards refugees from some countries in the aftermath of the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks in Paris, and terror attacks in London in 2005. Another instance is that of Salman Abedi, a native of Manchester, UK, returned to enact violence at his home in the U. K after having received training in Syria. These incidents have naturally created a negative perspective about 'the Muslim refugee' especially from war torn countries like Syria (Abbas, 2019). This has resulted in securitization of European borders. Countries like Hungary have set up fences on their international borders to prevent influx of migrants. Several countries have sent their own personnel to patrol the Mediterranean sea, to prevent the migrants from reaching their shores and send them back to their home country.

While examining the process of granting asylum to the refugees, it has become imperative that the host countries in eastern Europe and UK collect and disseminate evidence in a scientific manner from asylum seekers and their testimonies, and a thorough background check with the help of experienced advocates, though that may not be a substitute for a complete psychological assessment. (Turner, 2015)<sup>[4]</sup>.

### Conclusion

It is important to seriously consider W. H Auden's views on the plight of refugees while trying to find an aggregable solution to the highly complex migration crisis in Europe. As

Europe adopts stricter immigration laws to deter refugees from entering their country, illegal migration of human populations through smuggling and trafficking has become a common occurrence in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The discovery of bodies of several migrants including infants floating in the Aegean Sea as recently as December 2022 and February 2023 highlights the complexity of the problem. Though political leaders of Italy voiced their sympathy on the plight of the refugees, much needs to be done on the political front by the European Union. People desperate to flee from war torn, politically and financially unstable countries like Somalia, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, etc continue to risk their lives crossing the seas in the hope of being rescued in the process and somehow land up on the shores as asylum seekers. Once they do arrive in the host country, they realise that the decision-making process of the country in question is probably biased against them which only exacerbates the traumatic situation for the refugees.

Economically developed countries need to recognise that migration as such has seen a tremendous growth in all the developed countries of the world. Financial aid through trade and development must be given by the developed nations to the poorer countries and efforts should also be made to address the root cause of the problem. The economically developed countries of Europe must intervene in war torn countries of Central Asia and Africa and try to find agreeable solutions with the warring groups and thus work towards conflict resolution. Countries should work towards lending humanitarian aid to war torn countries and try to improve trade relations with them and work towards nation building and generation of employment in those countries. Immigration policies and systems should be able to recognise the deserving asylum seekers from the 'bogus' ones as tightening their borders will only result in people smuggling illegally inside their countries (Turner, 2015)<sup>[4]</sup>. The granting of immigrant status should be decided on a case-to-case basis about asylum seekers without compromising on the humanitarian values of fairness and justice.

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