

Europe's 2015 refugee/migration crisis – can the  
Subaltern speak?

Introduction to Postcolonial Theory

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## Abstract

2015 saw a monumental geopolitical event take place on the shores of Europe, namely, the ‘European Migration/Refugee Crisis.’ The term is given to a period beginning in 2015 when rising numbers of people arrived in the European Union (EU), travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through Southeast Europe. There has been much academic debate surrounding this perceived crisis, one being the name of it, is it a refugee, or a migration crisis? This is the first thing this paper will look into. Moving on from this, there will be then an insight into how Europe reacted to this event, with a special focus on the print media of the United Kingdom (UK), and how it perceived those involved in the crisis, and whether it was a fair portrayal. In contrast to this, the final part of this paper before concluding, will look into a documentary series by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which showed first-hand the journey of some individuals fleeing their homes to come to Europe. Looking into both forms of media will allow us to build on the ideas of the Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to see whether or not the subaltern can speak, and if any criticisms may also arise.

## Introduction

Migrants and refugees entering Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia have presented European leaders and policymakers with their greatest challenge since the global financial and debt crisis. ‘Most of the migrants came from Muslim-majority countries’<sup>1</sup> of regions south and east of Europe, including Western Asia, South Asia and Africa. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the ‘top three nationalities of entrants of the over one million Mediterranean Sea arrivals between January 2015 and March 2016 were Syrian (46.7%), Afghan (20.9%) and Iraqi (9.4%).’<sup>2</sup> According to Eurostat, ‘EU member states received over 1.2 million first-time asylum applications in 2015, more

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, (2015), “*Europe’s Migration Crisis*”, URL available: <https://www.cfr.org/background/europes-migration-crisis> [accessed 19/09/17]

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2016), “*Monthly Arrivals by Nationality to Greece, Italy and Spain. January 2015 – March 2016.*”, pg. 2. URL available: <http://data2.unhcr.org/es/documents/download/47393> [accessed 19/09/17]

than double that of the previous year... four states (Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Austria) received around two-thirds of the EU's asylum applications in 2015.<sup>3</sup> As can be seen from the stats given in the introduction, the crisis that began in 2015, was monumental, and it required a massive response from those EU member states that were effected.

## Refugee or Migrant?

Given the sheer scale of the crisis, media discourse on covering it sometimes became blurred as to whether these people fleeing their countries were infact refugees or migrants. Rarely was a specification made clear to the wider audience of the difference, which led to the question, does it matter? There is indeed a difference, and yes it matters. The two terms have two different distinct meanings, and by ignoring this fact, the media led widespread confusion and misinformation. This creates problems for those on either side. It is crucial to distinguish the term, as the two different groups are entitled to different levels of protection and assistance under international law. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) helps define and separate the two terms.

## Refugee

The UNCHR defines a refugee(s) as:

‘persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution... Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as "refugees" with access to assistance from States, UNHCR, and other organizations. They are so recognized precisely because it is too dangerous for them to return home, and they need sanctuary elsewhere. These are people for whom denial of asylum has potentially deadly consequences.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, (2016), “Record number of over 1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2015”, URL available: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6> [accessed 19/09/17]

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2016), “UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’ – Which is right?”, URL available: <http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html> [accessed 20/09/17]

Refugees are defined and protected in international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol remain the cornerstone of modern refugee protection. The legal principles they enshrine have permeated into countless other international, regional, and national laws and practices. The 1951 Convention defines who is a refugee and outlines the basic rights which States should accommodate to refugees. One of the most fundamental principles laid down in international law is that no state 'shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened.'<sup>5</sup>

## Migrants

The UNCHR defines migrants as individuals that:

'choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government.'<sup>6</sup>

As can be seen, there is a clear difference to that of a refugee. This distinction is important to governments of states, such as Italy or Greece, which were and still are the main landing points of those fleeing their countries, who 'deal with migrants under their own immigration laws.'<sup>7</sup> Compared to a refugee, states do not have to take in migrants. Blurring the two terms takes away the specific legal protection states have to give to refugees.

How migrants and migration are described, categorised and represented is important. Indeed, it matters a great deal when it is done by politicians who represent us, and by news media whose 'cultural authority' is premised upon speaking truth to power and representing the world of events to us.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (1951), *"Convention and Protocol Relating to The Status of Refugees: Article 33"*, pg. 30. URL: available: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/3b66c2aa10> [accessed: 19/09/17]

<sup>6</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Chalaby, J., (1998), *"The Invention of Journalism"*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan)

## So, the 2015 crisis, refugee or migrant?

In fact, it happens to be both. 'The majority of people arriving in Italy and Greece especially have been from countries mired in war or which otherwise are considered to be 'refugee-producing' and for whom international protection is needed.'<sup>9</sup> There is however, a small proportion of those entering Europe from various regions who aren't refugees, and for whom it is correct to name as migrants.

It is important to echo the tone of the UNCHR, that 'choices about words do matter.'<sup>10</sup> Refugees are individuals who are fleeing war and persecution, and it is the duty of states to ensure they're protected. Migrants are not included in the legal assurance, so states act on their own accord. To highlight how these terms have been confused, and what it has meant, the next chapter will be an insight into the media discourse in the United Kingdom (UK), through two different various outputs, to see if, as Spivak elegantly put, can the subaltern speak?

## Media discourse on refugees and migrants

There are two kinds of media that will be analysed in this chapter, print media and a documentary. This chapter will draw in on those findings from both kinds, and show whether or not either can fulfil the premise that Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stated, on whether or not the subaltern can speak.

### Print Media – Newspapers

In the United Kingdom, media coverage via print, in regards to migrants, constructed a largely 'dehumanised image of migration, focusing on increasing numbers of migrants and

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

clandestine methods of entry.’<sup>11</sup> A study by the University of Oxford, looked into the press’ coverage of both refugees and migrants, in various papers from tabloids, like The Sun, and broadsheets, such as The Guardian in much detail.

Regardless of opinion, it is very clear not just in the UK, but globally, that ‘media presence and tone play a vital role in how the public perceives ethnic minorities.’<sup>12</sup> The report highlights the fact that the ‘national print media in the UK is very effective at setting the agenda.’<sup>13</sup> This in turn then has a direct impact on how ‘media coverage leads to changes in the importance of different considerations’<sup>14</sup> and impression upon people who happen to read that paper.

The study by Oxford University looked into cases in various papers, where the words migrant and refugee were used. The reason it did this was to look at the modifying words added to show how the print media portrayed these individuals. The report found that ‘migrants received more explicit mentions than refugees.’<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the top three modifying words for refugee, were all countries or religions. Which seems fair, given that refugees arriving in Europe are generally fleeing war and persecution in their homelands. These top three held 23.2% of all mentions.<sup>16</sup> For the word migrant however, the number one modifier found in the study, which held 30.4%, was ‘illegal’.<sup>17</sup> Given that the word migrant was used much more as the word refugee in the report, one may argue highlights the bias the print media holds, and the negative image it portrays of these individuals. Moreover, as mentioned previous in this paper, it may perhaps show that newspapers

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<sup>11</sup> (R. Cohen, 2006; Cohen, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Klingerer, M., et al., (2015), “Real World is Not Enough: The Media as an Additional Source of Negative Attitudes Toward Immigration, Comparing Denmark and the Netherlands, in *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 31(3), pg. 270

<sup>13</sup> Chong, D., &, Druckman, J.N., (2007). ‘Framing Theory’, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 10(1)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, W., (2016), “REPORT: A Decade of Immigration in the British Press”, in *The Migration Observatory Oxford University*, pg. 13

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, “Table 3 – Top Ten Modifiers of ‘Refugee(s), All Publications, 2006-May 2015”, pg. 12

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. “Table 2 – Top Ten Modifiers of ‘Immigrants’ or ‘migrants’, All Publications, 2006-May 2015”, pg. 12

aren't categorising between migrants and refugees. For example, a boat crossing the Mediterranean may include refugees and migrants. From this report however, it would appear likely that all those on board may have been described as migrants, and even worse, 'illegal' migrants, when in fact there is an internationally binding obligation to help those refugees on board that specific boat.

### Documentary – “Exodus.”

The other media source that will be used in this paper is the BBC documentary “Exodus.” The documentary followed the journey of several individuals in their journey fleeing their home countries with the hope to reach Europe. To do this, the film crew gave the individuals their own way to record their journey. Praise was found for the 3-part documentary series in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, one writer saying the documentary provides ‘the most powerful and moving account of the refugee crisis to date.’<sup>18</sup> By giving those individuals camera phones, they were able to show their own journey from their homeland to Europe.

Compared to the view and portrayal of migrants and refugees in the print media, the documentary is more inclined towards allowing the subaltern to speak. As Spivak argues in her essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”, by ‘speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society.’<sup>19</sup> By allowing those who are fleeing their countries film and take account for them-selves, the argument can be made that this is allowing them to reclaim their cultural identity, and provide reasons for fleeing, thus re-inscribing their subordinate position in society. In comparison to the print media, which takes it upon itself to label and speak of those in their own way, blurring the actual image of reality.

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<sup>18</sup> Gentleman, A., (2016) “*Shot by refugees ... Exodus, the shocking documentary that puts you on the sinking ship*”, in *The Guardian*, URL: available: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jul/12/exodus-our-journey-europe-review-bbc-documentary-bbc> [accessed 20/09/17]

<sup>19</sup> Spivak, G.C., (1988), “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), pg. 295



One criticism of the documentary series however, is that of language. The basis of this criticism comes from the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan post-colonial theorist. In his 1986 work *"Decolonising the Mind"*, Thiong'o talks about how the tool of language was used by colonisers in Africa and elsewhere during colonial times for the 'destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, ..., literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser.'<sup>20</sup> The real criticism that one can make from Thiong'o's work in regards to this documentary series, is that by imposing the English language on those featured in the documentary, colonisation is simply a continuation in this case, and perhaps one may argue further, in this case the subaltern is unable to speak, as they are still being oppressed by not speaking their mother tongue.

## Conclusion

To conclude, as can be seen from the work in this paper, there is much academic debate surrounding the issues covered. The conclusion drawn, is that clearly there needs to be a distinction made between those who are refugees, fleeing war or religious persecution for example, and migrants, who are leaving their homes for whatever reason. It is also clear, that newspapers in the United Kingdom, are not achieving this, which is putting those individuals leaving and fleeing their countries in grave danger. As established in this paper both categories of individuals have different requirements according to international law. The way the newspapers talk about these individuals would also lead to the conclusion that they are unable to speak for themselves, and held behind however that newspaper wants to portray them, which is clearly very unfair. The documentary *"Exodus"* appears to be on the right track to letting the subaltern speak. By allowing those refugees and migrants to document their journey themselves, they are portraying the truth of their situation. However, the criticism from the work of Thiong'o leaves a question to be pondered, are those who are documenting themselves really ending the colonisation by speaking English?

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<sup>20</sup> Thiong'o, N.w., (1986), *"Decolonising the Mind"*, (Zimbabwe: Publishing House), pg. 16

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