Socio-ecological resilience in Sharon Bala's
The Boat People

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The rapid proliferation of resilience discourse, used to denote the capacity of individuals and ecosystems to adapt in the face of adversity, has given rise to a variety of theoretical conceptualizations and transdisciplinary perspectives (Fraile-Marcos 2020). Socio-ecological resilience is one of the strands of resilience thinking that emphasizes the way "people and nature relate to and organize around change" (Folke, Colding, and Berkes 2003, 354). It has been defined as "the capacity to adapt or transform in the face of change in social-ecological systems, particularly unexpected change, in ways that continue to support human well being" (quoted in Folke et al. 2016, 41). Although this understanding of resilience commonly engages with climate change, it has also been used to deal with other global challenges including "migration issues, political decisions, [or] belief systems" (41). It is in this context that contemporary scholars have questioned the nature of a concept that may be unethically appropriated or manipulated for political purposes.

Brad Evans and Julian Reid's book *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* is perhaps one of the most important contributions to the skeptical understanding of socio-ecological resilience and its recent usage in a neoliberal context. Evans and Reid question the political effects of applying the discourse of resilience to the management of contemporary risks and crises, since resilience is now prompted "by liberal agencies and institutions as the fundamental property which peoples and individuals worldwide must possess in order to demonstrate their capacities to live with danger" (2014, 2). Resilience then has become "the new ethics of responsibility" that calls upon individuals to prepare, adapt, cope, and rebound to unexpected circumstances on their own (6). This view of resilience has been described by many scholars such as Jonathan Joseph, Danny MacKinnon, Kate Driscoll Derickson, and Mark Duffield as conservative, since "it privileges the restoration of existing systemic relations rather than their transformation" (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013, 263). In other words, resilience encourages individuals to "prepare for, adapt to and *live with* a spectrum

of possible, perhaps *unknowable* risks" rather than "planning to overcome predictable or known threats" (Brassett, Croft, and Vaughan-Williams 2013, 223). The aim of preparedness, however, "is not to prevent these events from happening, but rather to manage their consequences" (Collier and Lakoff 2008, 11). This means that resilience promotes a passive attitude on the part of individuals, who are simply encouraged to accept, adapt, and cope with disasters and crises. This conceptual axe of resilience is especially relevant for dealing with recent humanitarian crises posed by refugees. These subjects are often encouraged to become resilient and to adapt to adverse living conditions despite the injustices and structural incongruences they face in host countries.

This article attempts to problematize and deconstruct the current use of socio-ecological resilience as a response to mass migration through the analysis of Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018). Winner of the 2019 Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction and the 2020 Newfoundland & Labrador Book Award, *The Boat People* – inspired by the historical MV *Sun Sea* incident – recounts the story of a group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers who arrive in Canada on a cargo ship in 2010.[1] Drawing on Philippe Bourbeau's study of resilience, this paper probes Bala's literary rendering of socio-ecological resilience as a government strategy to deal with refugee arrivals and its current alignment with neoliberal discourses. Moreover, this article explores the principal motifs and formal features used in the novel to produce an aesthetics that highlights the chaos, uncertainty, and hopelessness resulting from the articulation of political notions of resilience. This article will therefore endorse literary theorists' belief in the active role of literature in the production and reconsideration of hegemonic resilience discourses in the context of forced migration.

NATIONAL SECURITY AND RESILIENCE IN *THE BOAT PEOPLE*

The Boat People follows the story of Mahindan, an asylum seeker widower who arrives in British Columbia with his six-year-old son Sellian looking for a safe place to start a new life after the Sri Lanka's civil war. Upon their arrival, Mahindan and the 500 Tamil refugees show happiness and optimism, since they expect to receive asylum and protection in a country that prides itself on a humanitarian tradition. However, this idyllic image of multicultural Canada is soon deconstructed when the Tamil asylum seekers find a hostile political environment hindered by discourses based on national security and restrictive refugee policies.

In her analysis of *The Boat People,* Eva Darias-Beautell draws on Jacques Derrida's theory to explain the paradoxical nature of hospitality as represented in the novel. While hospitality is "often defined as the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests or strangers", it must be noted that it also "marks the existence of a threshold between oneself and the other, the host and the guest, the national and the foreign" (2020, 70). In the novel, this threshold is grounded at the basis of the national security discourse that dominates contemporary regimes of biopower. This is embodied by the character of the Minister of Public Safety, Fred Blair, who considers the influx of boat people in the country as an imminent threat to the nation's sovereignty. This

character mirrors Prime Minister Stephen Harper's attitude towards the arrival of Sri Lankan boat people in 2010, when he declares that "Canada is a sovereign nation […]. We will protect our borders from thugs and foreign criminals and those who seek to abuse our generosity" (Bala 2018, 46).

In light of the chaos caused by the arrival of boat people in the country, socio-ecological resilience emerges as a desirable response to manage the challenging situation. As many contemporary scholars have pointed out, resilience "is often proposed as the solution to a range of otherwise seemingly diverse security challenges including, inter alia, flooding, cybercrime, terrorism, financial crises, and social disorder" (Brassett, Croft, and Vaughan-Williams 2013, 222). Accordingly, resilience is intertwined with the notion of security, especially within the context of international migration, since, as Bourbeau argues in his study, the discourse of resilience is considered "a viable strategy for contesting a securitised situation that is deemed inappropriate" (2015, 1959). Drawing on Mark Neocleous' thoughts on resilience, Sarah Bracke similarly contends that resilience "has subsumed and surpassed the logic of security, understood both as a structure of individual subjectivity and as a principle of national policy" (2016, 56). Bourbeau goes even further and distinguishes between three types of resilience, namely resilience as maintenance, resilience as marginality, and resilience as renewal, which will be applied to explore Bala's literary rendition of the articulation of political notions of socio-ecological resilience to deal with the arrival of Tamil refugees in British Columbia.

Minister Fred Blair's national discourse on the security of its citizens can be identified as a resilience-as-maintenance strategy, which, according to Bourbeau, becomes a crucial response "characterized by an adaptation in which resources and energy are expended to maintain the status quo in the face of an exogenous shock" (2015, 1963). Minister Blair appeals to the security of the Canadian population using spurious arguments based on no evidence, as can be observed in some of his interventions: "The vessel and its illegal passengers are part of a larger criminal organization. Make no mistake, there are terrorists on board. We must not let the smugglers win" (Bala 2018, 145). By using a political rhetoric of fear that transforms refugees into a threat to the nation and its citizens, Minister Blair attempts to bring about anxieties, indifference, and rejection towards the Tamil refugees. Consequently, he implements a series of marginal adjustment measures that become part of the national apparatus that controls and limits the lives of asylum seekers in the West. These include the imprisonment of the asylum seekers and the implementation of a bureaucratic process involving a number of detention reviews and admissibility hearings, which need to be passed in order to gain refugee status. Gigovaz, Mahindan's legal representative in Canada, explains the process as follows:

> The first step was to prove their identity. The government would inspect their documents. There were many forms to fill. There would be a review to decide if they could leave jail, then a hearing to determine if they could ask for refugee status. And then another hearing to see if they would be given refugee status. It was a process, and the process would take time. No one could say how long. (Bala 2018, 26)

Although the process appears to be logical, Priya – the law student who is trying to understand the incongruences implicit in Canadian refugee policies – perceptively notes that "the detention reviews, the admissibility hearing, [and] the Refugee Board hearing [become] a long series of judgments, each an opportunity for failure and deportation" (49). The novel's attention to the bureaucratic obstacles and the inextricable gap existing between policy and practice show the resilience of a state biopolitics that attempt to "protect the social cohesion of a society" (Bourbeau 2015, 1963) by adopting a resilience strategy that eschews the opportunity for transformation and renewal.

The use of detention centers to manage migration flows has been identified by Bourbeau as an example of resilience as marginality, as it brings "changes at the margins that do not fundamentally challenge a policy" (2013, 12). Although detention centers are designed as transitory places, more often than not they turn out to be what Serena Parekh calls a "de facto long-term solution" (2017, 3) where asylum seekers become "surplus humanity" (Franke 2010, 318). This mechanism of control only criminalizes refugees who are in turn defined by dehumanizing categories that only emphasize their exclusion and abjection in the host country. Such a dire reality becomes the epicenter of Bala's novel, as most of the narrative takes place in a prison in Prince George, British Columbia.

Contrary to their optimistic expectations, Tamil asylum seekers are forced to wear handcuffs as soon as they are intercepted off the coast of British Columbia. They are also forced into orderly queues in order to be checked and stripped of their few possessions. In the case of Mahindan, the confiscation of his personal objects representing his most cherished memories – his grandfather's suitcase and the remaining possessions he carefully stored in it: his wedding album, his wife's death certificate, and the keys to his house and garage (Bala 2018, 11) – showcases the power of a system that both controls and deprives asylum seekers of agency and humanity. After this episode, Tamil asylum seekers are sent to a detention center where their vulnerability and uncertainty are accentuated as they are subject to "the legal and social systems of Canada represented by individuals who think in terms only of right or wrong" (van Herk 2020, 5). Thus, the detention center emerges as a way of "depriv[ing] refugees of a place in the common realm of humanity, contribut[ing] to their reduction to bare life and impair[ing] the[ir] ability […] for agency, their ability to be recognized as speaking and acting agents" (Parekh 2017, 100).

In his study, Bourbeau identifies a third type of resilience known as resilience as renewal that "is characterized by responses that transform basic policy assumptions and, thus, potentially remodel social structures" (2013, 16). This type of resilience emphasizes the transformational aspects of the concept, which in the context of international migration implies the reformulation of national discourses and security policies that point at mass migration "as a window of opportunity" (16). I would argue that Bala's novel does not contemplate this optimistic take on resilience as demonstrated by its circular narrative structure, which begins and ends with Mahindan waiting for admissibility. Its structure rather emphasizes the worst effects of the resilience mechanisms used by Canadian authorities to maintain the status

quo. Bala reinforces the nefarious effects that these mechanisms provoke on asylum seekers through the use of different narrative techniques that echo the irregularities of a system characterized by the adoption of marginal resilience strategies.

Some of these features, which have been already discussed by Darias-Beautell in her analysis of the novel, are the use of very "short and sharp chapters that convey a sense of fragmentation", lack of "control" and quick pace characteristic of a bureaucratic process which can neither be predicted nor controlled (2020, 72, 74). These short chapters do not follow a chronological order, but instead "move back and forth between Sri Lanka and Canada", combining the (hi)stories and points of views of different characters (71–72). Such an experimental narrative attempts to mimic the disorientation experienced by the Tamil asylum seekers in prison. Moreover, by removing the "quotation marks for direct speech" (76) and the signs introducing dialogues in the novel, the author constructs a blurred narrative in which dialogues intermingle with the characters' thoughts, echoing the disturbing and chaotic effect that the incongruences of the system and the disparity of refugee law provoke in the Tamil asylum seekers. These narrative features contribute to the interrogation of the use of resilience as a government strategy grounded in the securitization of national boundaries and, in doing so, to the deconstruction of what Darias-Beautell calls "the utopian dimensions of hospitality" that characterize the Canadian imaginary (71).

NEOLIBERAL RESILIENCE: CRUEL OPTIMISM AND HAPPINESS

Despite the uncertainty and despair caused by the use of resilience mechanisms aimed at protecting national boundaries, Mahindan is constantly moved by his faith in a better future for his son and himself in Canada. His belief in Canadian hospitality does not allow him to envisage the tremendous problems he will have to face in the near future. He constantly normalizes the situation, believing that his separation from his son and even their incarceration is "temporary. Like sending the boy to boarding school" (Bala 2018, 22). His blind faith in the nation's generosity and social justice leads him to justify the political measures adopted by the Canadian authorities. He thinks to himself that this is the way the Canadians proceed; they "must have their own special procedures" (25).

Moreover, Mahindan entertains fantasies about the possibility of living what Sara Ahmed calls "the good life" (2010, 6) and, as a result, he remains closely attached to "conventional good-life fantasies", including "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality" (Berlant 2011, 2–3). This idea is visible from the beginning of the novel, as Mahindan constantly dreams of the day he will be released from prison and will be able to rebuild his life again with his son Sellian: "Once he and Sellian got out of detention, Mahindan would get a job. Cars were the same from one country to another. He could work changing tires or even pumping petrol. It did not matter what he did once he got out" (Bala 2018, 86). In order to achieve his fantasies he must follow his own motto: learn English, get a job, find a small place to live (86). As Aritha van Herk argues, this "mantra […] becomes a recitation of desire, a hope for some future, however precarious" (2020, 8).

Yet, the question is: will Mahindan's optimism allow him to achieve his fantasies of a new beginning in Canada? What are the negative implications of adopting a neoliberal optimism? As Lauren Berlant claims, the problem is that "there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built" (2011, 192). The Tamil asylum seekers are seduced by promises of a better future and they must be resilient and adapt to adverse circumstances. This means that in order to achieve a Western lifestyle, they are forced to remain imprisoned, thereby yielding some foundational human rights. In other words, the Tamil asylum seekers are encouraged to adopt a resilience that "move[s] fairly swiftly from thinking about the dynamics of systems to emphasizing individual responsibility, adaptability and preparedness" (Joseph 2013, 49). This becomes what Bracke calls the "moral code" every subject must follow in neoliberal times in order to achieve security (2016, 62). In the novel, this is represented through Mahindan's constant concern for his responsibility for his own and his son's future in Canada. As an example, he puts all his effort into learning English, the language that can open up new opportunities for him and bring him closer to the Western lifestyle he has learned to desire. Mahindan also tries to instill in his son the importance of learning English as a prerequisite to assimilate and succeed in Canada: "You need to read and write in English if you are going to succeed in this country" (Bala 2018, 82). Mahindan's life in the detention center is somehow guided by his need to be self-sufficient.

This resilience strategy, however, ignites a sense of possibility which, in Berlant's terms, is nothing but "cruel optimism", that is, "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (2011, 24). Contrary to Berlant's contextualization of cruel optimism, which presupposes the agency of the subject attached to conditions of possibility, Mahindan's cruel optimism works toward "undermin[ing] precisely the possibility of substantial transformation", and, by extension, his agency (Bracke 2016, 64). Indeed, Mahindan's attachment to the possibility of a secure and stable life in Canada turns into a limitation that does not allow him to transform the system that oppresses him. Rather, he needs to remain stuck in prison and separated from his son for a long period of time, suspending his own transformation, "even though transformation might be part of its cruel promise" (70).

Such a cruel promise is somehow triggered by the system itself. When Ranga, Prasad, and Mahindan ask about their human rights as well as the process they must follow in order to achieve refugee status, they are not provided with appropriate information. Instead, the imprisoned asylum seekers are told that "it is all very complex, to do with legal definitions and bureaucracy. But not to worry, because the Tamil Alliance had hired lawyers to sort everything out" (Bala 2018, 25). Likewise, when Mahindan attempts to complain about his son being separated from himself in prison, the interpreter quickly says: "This is not Sri Lanka. *I promise you*, the boy is safe […] there is nothing to worry" (26; emphasis added). By using the language of promising, the system transmits to refugee claimants a sense of security that alleviates the uncertain present. As Claudia Aradau claims, "to promise means to create continuity from the present to the future" (2014, 84). Thus, the Canadian state attempts to hide

the uncertainties and hostility implicit in its bureaucratic system by fostering an optimistic hope of achieving a better future in Canada that requires patience and faith both in the country and in the system. This is the "moral code", using Bracke's terms, that subtly guides the lives of asylum seekers in the detention center (2016, 62), which at the same time implies the asylum seekers' infantilization, ignorance, and the removal of their agency.

UNCERTAIN FUTURES

As the narrative unfolds, Mahindan realizes that his motto or individual aspirations only allow him to endure the long waiting, but not to overcome it. After eight months of imprisonment and almost ten failed admissibility hearings, Mahindan remains in the same situation. The uncertainty that invades him throughout his stay in the detention center is reinforced through the use of stylistic features such as the open ending. By the end of the novel, many asylum seekers, including Prasad, Hema, and Savitri Kumuran, have passed their admissibility hearings. Yet there are many others like Mahindan who are still waiting for their final hearing to take place. The open ending resembles the uncertainty of the refugee system and serves to emphasize the circular structure of a narrative that begins and ends with Mahindan in the same circumstance: waiting for his status to be determined.

His fantasy of the possibility of improving his life in Canada gives meaning to his own stay in the detention center, yet as proved at the end of the novel, it provokes existential despair. It could be argued, then, that the ending of the novel becomes the culmination of Berlant's cruel optimism and an affirmation of the negative effects that it may provoke on subaltern subjects. It is worth quoting in full how Mahindan experiences this process from the moment he and his son arrive in the country until the present:

> Looking back, he thought those had been his happiest moments. When the Canadian boats circled the ship and the helicopter's blades chopped the sky over their heads. Standing at the top of the gangplank, the sun gentle on his face, gazing out over the parking lot to see the crisp white tents, the Canadians in their comical face masks. Sellian light as a feather in his arms, waving ecstatically at the crowd and shouting: Hello! Hello! That heady expectation, the profound relief, *both felt distant now*, far from his present reality. *Windows that would not open. Guards at every door. Endless waiting.* (Bala 2018, 144; emphasis added)

In this passage, there is a clear contraposition between the vision of a naïve Mahindan, who looks at Canada with optimism, and the reality of an "ongoing limbo" (van Herk 2020, 13). The detention center feels like an inhospitable space insomuch as its windows remain closed, preventing any exchange with the outside world and the doors are protected by guards, creating boundaries difficult to pass through. The white color of the detention center's walls no longer symbolizes purity and hope, but rather reflects the emptiness, cold, and feeling of isolation that impregnates the place and, by extension, the Sri Lankan asylum seekers.

The detention center now becomes an outer reflection of the characters' feelings of doom, gloom, and emptiness: "What Mahindan missed was color. The building

that five months earlier had struck him as modern and clean now felt sterile and heartless" (Bala 2018, 143–144). The luxury of clean water, the whiteness, perfection, and cleanliness of the detention center emphasized by Mahindan upon arrival – which function as a metonym for the country of Canada as a mythic haven, "clean with straight lines" (24) – turns out to be only a cloak that covers up the harsh situation the asylum seekers experience in this place. To put it differently, the precise geometry of the detention center disguises the irregularities committed against asylum seekers and refugees in Canada. The food in the detention center also becomes a reflection of the socio-political atmosphere that dominates Canada at that moment: "The soup was salty. String of noodles floated in the broth. The small orange turned to mush in his mouth. They did not taste like carrots. Canadian food was not bland, exactly. Its flavors were muted, like the colors outside" (252). The lack of flavors and colors metaphorically alludes to the attack on Canadian diversity as a result of national discourses that present international migration as a security threat.

Furthermore, the failure of socio-ecological resilience and the worst effects of cruel optimism on Sri Lankan asylum seekers are apparent at the end of the novel when Mahindan is about to go into his last admissibility hearing and is visited by his son. The father does not recognize him because Sellian looks like a Canadian child who does not play cricket anymore because "no one play[s] that here", but instead plays ice hockey (Bala 2018, 299). Sellian also speaks English like a native Canadian and Mahindan struggles to understand him well. The Sri Lankan father is gripped by a feeling of happiness for his son, who will prosper in this new country, but at the same time he is overwhelmed by a feeling of sorrow and nostalgia, for he feels he will not witness his son's progress in this new country: "Mahindan watched Sellian with wonder, this boy who was his son but looked and spoke like someone else's. […] The child, in whom Mahindan had once glimpsed his own youth, his wife's idiosyncrasies was *growing mysterious* to him. *Soon he would be wholly inaccessible*" (239; emphasis added).

During this visit, Mahindan metaphorically touches the Canadian life that is outside the detention center by inhaling the unfamiliar scents of his son (laundry detergent, soap, and shampoo). Yet, Mahindan realizes that those are "foreign smells of an unknown life that now belonged to his son" (Bala 2018, 216–217). It must be noted that although the novel condemns the ethics of the cruel optimism that subtly controls the lives of many displaced people in the detention center, who are not able to transform the system that oppresses them, it does not completely erase the sense of possibility, which is clearly embodied by Sellian, a second-generation Sri Lankan asylum seeker who successfully adapts to a new life in Canada.

CONCLUSION

The Boat People offers an example of the challenges asylum seekers and refugees face when national discourses spread fear and hostility towards the Other. In her account of the MV *Sun Sea* incident, Bala portrays how the policies of containment deprive refugees of agency and freedom. In doing so, the author presents a realistic picture of the uncertainty, precarity, and vulnerability caused by a legal process

that demands asylum seekers and refugees to be resilient. Moreover, by bringing to the limelight the populist national security discourses used by the government to exert fear over refugees, Bala's novel problematizes the interconnected notions of resilience and optimism in neoliberal times. As this analysis demonstrates, *The Boat People* also succeeds in conveying how the Canadian state imbues asylum seekers with hope by hiding the hostility implicit in its bureaucratic system, fostering then a sense of optimism for the future that is tainted with uncertainty. The narrative devices and the structure of the narrative symbolically recreate the uncertainty, hopelessness, and despair resulting from the articulation and implementation of political notions of resilience.

Thus, contemporary Canadian narratives like *The Boat People* demonstrate the potential of fiction to interrogate the paradoxes underlying the concept of socio-ecological resilience, especially within the context of forced migration, thus contributing to the redefinition of hegemonic resilience thinking. In doing so, *The Boat People* fosters a responsive ethics that prompts readers to rethink and reconsider their role as human beings in a global context where refugees and asylum seekers are often marginalized and negatively stereotyped.

NOTES

[1] As explained in the article entitled "Sun Sea: Five Years Later", written by the Canadian Council for Refugees, the approximately 492 passengers in the MV *Sun Sea* and the 76 in the MV *Ocean Lady*, who arrived ten months earlier, in October 2009, "represented just one per cent of the refugee claims made in Canada in those two years (there were 33,246 claims in 2009, 23,157 in 2010 for a total of 56,403)" (2015, 1). This gives us an idea of the large number of displaced people who are seeking asylum, protection, care, and social support in Canada nowadays.

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Socio-ecological resilience in Sharon Bala's *The Boat People*

This article examines the notion of socio-ecological resilience and its current alignment with neoliberalism in Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018). Drawing on Philippe Bourbeau's theorizing about the interconnection of resilience and security and contemporary studies of resilience, this article explores the current use of socio-ecological resilience as a government strategy to deal with global humanitarian crises posed by refugees and asylum seekers. Moreover, this article examines the main elements, motifs, and narrative devices used in the novel to produce an aesthetics that highlights the chaos, uncertainty, and hopelessness resulting from the articulation of political notions of resilience in neoliberal times.

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