



In Another'(s) Land: The State of Being a Refugee in Philip Kazan's *The Black Earth*

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Abstract: In this paper titled, 'In Another'(s) Land: The State of Being a Refugee in Philip Kazan's *The Black Earth*, I aim to present the troubled life of Zoe Haggitiris who is forced to transform into Zoe Valavani. I aim to trace her struggles as a refugee in a new place of survival. She manages to hold on to her past as well as live in the present; thus being and becoming the Third Space, a complete symbol of hybridity. She survives, copes with the pain of the loss of her parents, home, identity and gradually adapts to the new place and new family. She endures the position of 'Other' and Subaltern thus making survival a possibility.

Key words: Refugee, home, identity, hybridity, memory

This paper aspires to trace the life of Zoe Haggitiris, alias Zoe Valavani who feels the pangs of being a refugee woman. Written by the London based author Philip Kazan and published in the year 2019 this novel closely follows the other historical fiction works that the author has produced. This novel examines the ways in which Zoe loses her home, identity and everything that matters to her the most, due to the socio- political climate of the period. The positioning of Zoe as a refugee lays the road map for her future. The paper aims to shed light on her struggles and experiences as a refugee who is also a woman, her identity formation and would situate and locate her in the third space, while simultaneously underscoring the pain of being homeless. In this era of wars and conflict between nations, the position of refugees, especially that of women is something that needs to be constantly analysed and studied. In this manner, this paper belongs to the current socio -political climate that prevails in the world. It is significant not just to record the reality of their lives but also the ways in which they cope and survive in a new place. Views of Stuart Hall with regard to cultural identity, Homi K Bhabha's concept of Third Space, Cathy Caruth's views on trauma and Gayatri Spivak's concept of subalternity would be used to support my argument.

Stuart Hall's concept of Cultural identity as explained in his pivotal work, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" helps to trace Zoe Haggitiris's transformation into Zoe Valavani. *The Location of Culture* explaining Homi Bhabha's concept of Hybridity and Third Space is an important text that helped shape the argument and position Zoe leaning towards two cultures. Also, Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as outlined in her work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* brings the traumatic experiences of Zoe to light.

Smyrna was one of the illustrious and ancient Greek cities. It remained a cultural and commercial hub of Asia Minor until the Turks invaded and destroyed the city in the year 1922. On September 9, 1922 the Greek presence in Smyrna ended and their historical legacy was erased (Claus 1). Three days later, a deadly fire broke out in Smyrna known as The Great Fire of Smyrna (Claus 1). Many people died in this accident. It is an unforgettable milestone in



Greece's long history. This political and historical movement created a huge impact on the citizens either displacing them or killing them.

This move has been fictionally rendered through Kazan's work which outlines the life of Zoe Haggitiris and traces the struggles she has to endure in a new place of survival and existence. Zoe's parents move out of Smyrna after the Turkish invasion. While they make their way to Athens in a boat her parents drown and die in the sea. Zoe is rescued by a ship carrying refugees to Greece where she is adopted by a person named Katina Valavani. Thus Zoe Haggitiris transforms into Zoe Valavani. Katina Valavani's husband is brutally killed by the Turks. So Valavani, her son Pavlo and Zoe become a new family. As refugees, they survive each day holding on to each other. Zoe faces physical struggles and emotional trauma as she gets through each day. Having lost her parents at such a young age and adjusting to new life with strangers is an extremely suffocating condition for a young girl like Zoe. She loses her home, identity and her sense of belonging.

Zoe hails from an affluent family and is blessed with good parents to take care of her but in the refugee camp, it becomes challenging even to get access to basic needs of life. While she is still in the refugee camp, she gets just a ladleful of soup and nothing else to eat. She is not given a proper meal and as a consequence she begins to feel dizzy. She feels desperate to use the restroom but is unable to find one. There are crowds of people milling around her and she doesn't know where to go and what to do. Finally she eats something: "She followed the desperate, jostling lines of people to where food was doled out. It wasn't really food, just water with cabbage, bits of gristle and bone floating in it, but she slurped it down and wanted more, though there wasn't any more to be had." (Kazan 48). She stands in the queue for officers to make a note of her details and is labelled an orphan and a refugee. It is here that Katina Valavani sees her and adopts her, promising to bring her up as her own daughter. It is from her second mother that she learns the meaning of refugee: "A refugee is... It's when someone has lost their home, and they haven't found a new one yet." (Kazan 61). They are taken as refugees to a camp in Athens since the Turks were trying to chase everybody from Asia Minor. Katina convinces Zoe to act as if she is her biological daughter so that no one gets a doubt. Finally they reach the refugee camp and are given a tent, clean clothing and delicious food. Zoe finally feels relieved and begins a new chapter in her life. She accepts Pavlo, the son of Katina Valavani as her own brother, thinking of the unborn brother in her deceased mother's womb.

The house that they stay in initially looks like a "roofless box made from three panels of thick plasterboard" with one more panel being placed alongside." (Kazan 81). The Refugee Settlement Commission seems like a farce with providing shacks and slums for the refugees. The situation is so grim that when they do move out they feel like it is heaven. When the commission gives them a new house, Katina Valavani describes it thus: "I know it looks like a shack but we'll have our own kitchen and our own lavatory. No more wading through other people's pee in the middle of the night" (Kazan 83). This tells us the harsh reality of the lives of refugees and the inhumane conditions in which they need to put up with in order to survive. All these emphasise that refugees are the marginalised, the 'Other' to the majority. Drawing from his deeply researched work on black diaspora, Stuart Hall in his landmark essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" defines the state of Others thus:

Moreover, the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference. Vis-a-vis the developed West, we are very much 'the same'. We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the



‘Other’. We are at the outer edge, the ‘rim’, of the metropolitan world - always ‘South’ to someone else’s El Norte (227 – 228).

Through their struggles, the non availability of resources to fulfill basic needs and the way others treat them, these refugees are clearly the ‘Other’ to people who are the ‘Center’. Seen through Zoe’s eyes the refugee children:

They flit through the city, which is as unreal to them as a stage set, invisible to everyone, even the police. At least they aren’t alone. There are a hundred thousand children just like them in the shanty towns of around Athens and Piraeus. They all look the same: threadbare clothes darned and patched and worn out from constant cleaning; brown, stringy limbs; stomachs that are always growling; and hair cut short to make it easier to comb out the lice (Kazan 88).

Days pass by living and adapting to the refugee lifestyle. Stuart Hall in his essay captures another concept known as Cultural Identity. He describes two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. “The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (223). Hence, Zoe Valavani as Zoe Haggitiris shares a common history and past with her parents and others like them who were forced to leave Smyrna following the Turkish invasion. So all these people from her own homeland who are now surviving in various different places form a collective self of similar struggles and experiences but are now living as different people with different identities. In a sense, it is a collective loss of identity, home, relationships and much more. It is this shared commonality that sustains them throughout their lives. This expresses itself through memories, rituals and practices. She often recollects her old life, places, people, the familiar scents and smells etc. Memory becomes a tool to recollect the past. She remembers her homeland, her own home and her parents. This echoes the collective pain of these people. The following sentences juxtapose the past with the present:

Hunger and the beating sun had long since emptied out her head of anything except a stuttering parade of images: Mama and Papa, waiting patiently somewhere inside the tent, perhaps drinking tea from china cups, smiling when they see her... But then that picture was replaced with the food stalls on the Smyrna waterfront: souvlaki hissing over charcoal braziers, plaited sweet breads, sugar-dusted Turkish delight. Nuts and dried fruit in great, wasp-invaded heaps (Kazan 57).

As she stands in the queue waiting to hear some good news about her parents, she thinks about all these mentioned above. She often recollects scenes and fragments from her own home; the marble top of the table in the kitchen, a glass of water consisting of grape jam and she even hears the voice of the cook, Miss Butland (Kazan 58). Food memories are evidently at play here, but the important fact to note is that they are also culturally and socially loaded with meanings. The food that Zoe recollects here locates her at a certain time and place in her life and presents the food of Smyrna and the kitchen as a space. According to theorists connecting food and memory, there are various concepts that could relate to this point. The above memory could be identified as ‘Synesthetic memory’ as pointed out by the food anthropologist David Sutton. It is a “process by which the senses work in union to convert a sensory moment into an embodied social and cultural experience that is then stored in memory” (Sutton 314). Also these memories are significant for the immigrant as it serves as an important



link between the past, present and future. “The immigrant constructs a place with a remembrance of the past (places from the land of origin, foods from such lands), adaptation to the present (the new home and culture of the immigrant), and the development of a hybrid place for the future” (Colby and Abarca 2). Zoe often recollects her old home, especially the kitchen: “I remember our kitchen- the smells mostly. It was always steamy and smelt like cinnamon and onions and baking. Will our new kitchen smell like that?” (Kazan 89). Though she misses her home, she gradually adapts to the new environment.

Apart from the food memories, Zoe remembers one moment which can be put down as collective memory. She remembers standing in front of a cliff as a group of people, the trees, the bushes, the sound of running water, and flowers along with an image of a woman in a white dress, and a man in tweeds (Kazan 90). But the memory of a refugee is one that Katina Valavani spells out like this: “Remembering what we had, and having to be grateful for that little box of a house. But I am grateful. We must be grateful, Zoe.” (Kazan 90). Remembering the past and also being grateful for the present is the attitude of Katina Valavani which she teaches her daughter Zoe.

In addition to memories, songs play a major role in recording the emotional trauma of being refugees, and their lost collective past. Zoe and Katina Valavani are seen singing songs during the initial parts of the novel. They use songs to express their emotions and also to mourn a past that they will never be able to go back to. For instance, songs are also a way by which the refugees cope with their new place of survival. In fact, Katina Valavani adopts Zoe as her daughter hearing her sing one day. And later she asks her to sing a song because according to her, ‘It makes things better, to sing’ (Kazan 53). Zoe starts singing the following song: “A black stone on the beach, my Lula, my Xanthoula,/ A black stone on the beach, my Lula, my Xanthoula”(Kazan 53). This is clearly an act of embracing the past, her home, and her story. Similarly, Katina Valavani sings a song later which can be seen from the lines below: “I’ll break cups because of the words you said,/ And glasses because of the bitter words/ Aman, Aman, don’t cry any more, my little girl...” (Kazan 93). And then Zoe begins to sing this way, “Elli was shapely,/ and her hair was black, her hair was black./Elli, Elli, the soldier doesn’t want you/Because you kiss with jaded lips”(Kazan 98). Zoe always remembers her position as a refugee girl and the dear daughter of her biological parents and records this sad reality in her songs. Thus through songs they express their emotional grief on being refugees. It is important to have a coping mechanism in place as refugees carry trauma and the scars of trauma within them.

Cathy Caruth in her work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* explicates in length about trauma and the effect of the same on individuals. She claims it is difficult to narrate traumatic experiences as they are not comprehensible:

...trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (4).

In addition, it is an event that returns back to haunt the victim (Caruth 6). She sums it up in the following lines: “The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (7). So in Zoe’s life it becomes hard for her to recollect what exactly happened the night she lost her parents in the sea. Though it has a belated effect,



it has a lasting impact on her. This is evident in the moment she narrates the incident to Tommy Collyer, an Englishman with whom she falls in love later:

I was asleep. But I have imagined this so many times. He was sailing along, through the Cyclades islands. There was a mist, but it was calm and he was a very good sailor. He had done this crossing many times. I was lying on the deck, by the . . . the bowsprit. It is strange, what things you remember, and the things you do not. *Bowsprit*. In any case, my father is sailing along, and my mother is standing next to him. And a big ship, a warship, perhaps, is suddenly there, coming out of the mist. They haven't seen our little boat. And in a moment. . . (Kazan 253).

She claims that she does not remember exactly and the number of pauses and words that signify lack of clarity in her narration explain how the trauma has stayed with her all these years.

Tommy Collyer, is another central character in the novel. He was born in Koovappally in Kerala and calls that as his home. His father is depicted as a British veteran of World War I. The family moved to England in 1922 from British ruled India. They went back since Tommy's father completed his military service in India. Tommy Collyer grows up in a tense environment and has an extremely difficult childhood as his father almost always snaps at him. The father is affected psychologically by the war and he takes it all out on Tommy. Hence, Tommy finds comfort only with this mother. After some time, his father leaves his mother for another woman. So, though not a refugee, Tommy also misses home and speaks about his homeland to his mother. Tommy and Zoe meet even as they are children, soon after Zoe is rescued from the sea. They meet and both wave at each other and have a conversation together. Zoe introduces herself and so does Tommy. He likes the way she sings, he discusses interesting information about colours with her. But he is soon taken home by his mother, leaving Zoe behind, all alone. It is during that moment that Katina Valavani finds Zoe and adopts her. Stuart Hall describes the second point of cultural identity. According to him,

This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather since history has intervened 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. (225)

It is this process of becoming that Zoe undergoes after the initial separation from her parents. Though she retains her identity as one common shared past with her ancestors, she is no longer Zoe Haggitiris to the outside world but Zoe Valavani. Zoe must now accept the reality surrounding her. She is no longer the protected, pampered only child of her parents but now has a mother who is biologically different, a brother and a new place and environment that she is forced to get used to. In this process of becoming a new person with a new identity, the harsh fact that she faces is this: "And Zoe, who for all of her short life had been given choices - which dress? This cake? That book?- understood that she would be given no more choices. It was an awful realisation..."(Kazan 62). But this feeling does not last longer.

Zoe gets a new identity and soon becomes one of the family members. She thus becomes one with the past as well as with the present and future. She develops a great bond with her mother and brother. They crack jokes, laugh, play and eat together. Katina was able



to identify Zoe from the crowd of refugees through her sweet, mellifluous voice. So both sing songs together at home and during public events. Katina Valavani earns her living through a dressmaking business. She creates fashionable dresses from cheap fabrics that look stunningly beautiful (Kazan 88). Sometimes she sends her children into Athens to find new designs so that she could use them to make new clothes. These rides on the tram are something that both the children look forward to and enjoy. At the same time, they are an 'Other' to the people. They are called 'dirty refugees' and people throw them coins with which they buy some fruit or pastry (Kazan 89).

Zoe and Pavlo also develop a bond with each other. She runs to his rescue once when he gets caught in a strife and the other boy calls him a dirty turk. She warns the other boy that she will beat him if he behaves the same way once more. She gets used to the new yet happy and simple lifestyle. She even forgets the fact that Katina Valavani is not her real mother as she is totally internalised being and becoming her child. She has even tried to forget her parents because she has come to terms with the fact that they have merged with eternity and will never come back. The novel says, "But they have no faces, because she no longer has faces to give them. And they are already fading. She can't keep them. They don't belong here"(Kazan 93).

Though she feels upset, Zoe slowly becomes familiar with the new culture. She mixes her culture, her lifestyle, her food preferences with that of the new place of survival. According to Homi K Bhabha's theory of hybridity, this is defined as, "It is in the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated." (2). He gives a name to the common strands of differences - Third Space - "the *in between* space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (38). According to Stuart Hall, the same idea is presented through the concept, 'The New World Presence'. In his own words: "The 'New World' presence - America, Terra Incognita - is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference..."(235).

Zoe is clearly an example of this Third Space; she mixes ingredients from Smyrna and Greece and exists in the Third Space. Through her own words she sums up existing in the interstitial space, "I can't explain it very well. Music. Sad, sad songs. Dressing in this way. Laughing at death. If you are not one of us refugees, if you have not come from Asia Minor, I don't think you will be able to understand." (Kazan 203). The name they give to their songs is known as Smyrneika, as these are brought from Asia Minor (Kazan 227). They also sing other songs called Rembetika and Zoe distinguishes between the two: "That is called Rembetika. That is our music. Smyrneika is our memory. Rembetika is our life now."(Kazan 227). The songs are usually about topics like death, murder, hopeless love, drinking, poverty. (Kazan 227). Zoe, after her second mother's death, creates a band, sings songs and earns her living. Thus songs become the bridge between her past and present. Songs portray the reality of their lives and give a sense of hope and relief in the backdrop of homelessness, fear and rejection.

Zoe often wonders about 'home' and feels dejected as one of the places is named as 'Nea Smyrni' after her own place of origin. She is not able to accept the level of comparison between the two disparate places and environments. She raises these questions: "Had the people who built the place ever been to the real Smyrna? How could they have dared name this crooked, matchbox town after her home? Where are the patisseries? Where are the goldsmiths? The beer gardens? Xenopoulo, with its escalators and the latest Parisian fashions?" (Kazan 82). She loses her second mother too after some time and lives mostly alone taking care of her brother, Pavlo. The feeling of an outsider, an alien comes through these lines: "Cafes where men in linen suits



sit at marble tables and read gigantic newspapers. It reminds her, of course, of home, though if she is honest with herself, Zoe isn't sure that she remembers what *home* really means" (88).

And this idea of 'home' connects with history as Homi Bhabha makes the connection:

The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres... The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting (9).

The merging of the political with the personal has had its effects on this family. Being without a house and home is a fact that confronts all three characters here. Zoe thinks that, "There was no going home. Everything was going to be broken from now on. Everything would be strange" (Kazan 62).

Later in the year 1942, there was a widespread famine in Athens and other countries during the second world war. History claims that the Greek famine during Nazi occupation killed at least three hundred thousand people (Claus 1). The mortality rate was at its peak during the years 1941 and 1942 (Claus 1). Food was sold through the black market and many people could not gain access to it (Claus 2). Zoe, and the whole diasporic community suffers the consequences of being refugees. They mostly live off chickpeas, nettles, carob pods and whatever they get out of her friend's rations (Kazan 286). She does not remember her last meal and as she undertakes this long journey to Piraeus, her body is not able to withstand the effect of hunger. She finds it difficult to relieve herself, finds that her breasts have disappeared and sleeps on the road out of extreme hunger and fatigue. In addition, she has heavy menstrual cramps and feels weak. She feels that: "Perhaps this is what it is like to be on the needle: this dreadful, all – consuming hunger" (Kazan 286).

This famine is the effect of political interventions in the place. The Germans have stolen all the raw materials which has eventually stopped them from producing anything (Kazan 272). The situation is so grim that, "No one has the strength to do anything but stand still. Women whose stockings, if they have them, are sagging from their shrunken legs. Men who, when they gather their coats around them, seem about to cut themselves in half" (Kazan 272). And Zoe's hands "are like webs of skin, translucent bones and blue veins"(Kazan 272). It is sad to note that due to political leanings and alignments, one party gets access to food but the other party does not. (Kazan 281). This has a drastic effect on the general public as they run helter -skelter in search of food.

More interesting and that which adds another dimension to the paper, is the positioning of Zoe as a subaltern woman. This can be seen in the words of Gayatri Spivak who raises these questions: "Can the subaltern speak? And can the subaltern (as woman) speak?"(14). As a displaced woman, this novel explores the ways in which Zoe's voice is silenced in a space that is largely patriarchal and foreign. Her body becomes a site of exploitation. One example to support this argument is the instance when Ioannis Pandelis, Captain of Security Battalion Four, touches her inappropriately and uses abusive language. The following lines mark his words:



Who keeps you safe so you can grunt your foreign shit, eh? The Battalions, that's who!...Go on then! Thank me in the name of Greece.' He grabs Zoe's wrist, pulling her hand down, twisting it until her palm is pressed against the bulging crotch of his trousers. "This is your house, isn't it, this little refugee kennel? Let's go inside". He leers, his face even redder. "You dirty little Turk, I bet...(Kazan 315).

Even though Zoe manages to respond and retaliate, her feeble voice is silenced by Pandelis's strong grip (Kazan 315). Despite these obstacles and threats, Zoe Valavani as a refugee woman survives through homelessness, hopelessness and despair. She manages to live in the Third Space and finally reunites with her lover Tommy Collyer after the end of the war and they truly depict a tale of love, struggle and endurance.

The central findings of the paper include the following points. Zoe Haggitiris, the central protagonist of the novel, is transformed into Zoe Valavani losing her home, parents and her identity. She represents the cultural identity of her ancestors as well as tries to gradually become the Third Space fusing both the cultures. She overcomes her physical and emotional struggles as a refugee by coping with memories of the past, sometimes re-living them and by singing songs. She withstands the famine, faces patriarchal oppression and reunites with Tommy Collyer. Other characters like Katina Valavani and Tommy Collyer also struggle in their own ways but exercise resilience and courage. Hence, Zoe and Katina Valavani completely emerge as diaspora identities according to Stuart Hall's following idea. His idea resembles Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the paper has exemplified the same through the analysis of the characters:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (235).

The research article has scope for future areas of research such as postcoloniality and its effect on memories and the relationship between memories, space and time. Travelling memory could be one more potential site of exploration.

Thus, Zoe Haggitiris alias Valavani survives in another's land through resilience, courage and endurance.

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