



Research Article

Grief Beyond the Shore: Loss and The Psychological Price of Freedom in Alan Gratz's *Refugee*

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Abstract

This research article aims to analyse and discuss the themes of death, grief, and displacement in Isabel's story in the novel **Refugee** written by Alan Gratz. This novel, which is set in the context of the Cuban refugee crisis of 1994, is a narrative of Isabel's quest for freedom and, at the same time, a narrative of her coming to terms with death. This paper argues that while Isabel's quest for freedom is a dominant theme, the death of a loved one while crossing the sea to freedom is a major factor that shapes Isabel's character. This paper aims to analyze and discuss Isabel's character development and how the death of a loved one is a major factor that shapes her character. Displacement, in this novel, is not just a simple act of migration but a complex and difficult experience that shapes the character of Isabel. This paper aims to show that while Isabel is granted freedom, this freedom is granted at a great cost.

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1. INTRODUCTION

War, political instability, and economic stagnation may cause families to seek refuge and freedom in another land. However, the journey to freedom is not always a smooth one towards hope, but rather one that is shrouded with fear, uncertainty, and loss. In **Refugee** by Alan Gratz, the reader is introduced to the reality of the refugee experience through the story of young Isabel, who flees Cuba in the midst of the 1994 crisis. Her journey across the seas becomes a powerful symbol of loss, sacrifice, and trauma. In this paper, the focus will be on the emotional turmoil that young Isabel faces, particularly the fear of loss, and the trauma that death inflicts on the young mind. While the young girl and her family seek refuge and a brighter future, the sea journey exposes them to life-threatening dangers that change them forever. Through the character of young Isabel, the reader will see how loss can never be regained and how the fear of death contributes to the young girl's transition from innocence to adulthood. In the end, the reader will see that the true cost of freedom is measured by the grief and sorrow that accompany it.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some authors have studied the mental and emotional states of refugee and immigrant children, focusing on the issue of trauma, adaptation, and identity formation. In the article by Mina Fazel and Alan Stein, the authors note that children who are refugees are at a great risk of developing mental health problems because of the violence, displacement, and loss they experience, which can influence the emotional development of the child (366-370). In the article, the authors highlight the mental and emotional states of the child, who experiences fear, grief, and emotional pain because of the trauma faced during the migration process. In the article by Delores C. S. James, the author highlights the mental and emotional states of immigrant children, who experience emotional stress, insecurity, and loss because of the migration process, as the child tries to adapt to the new environment (98-102). In the article by Kristin McCarthy, the author highlights the mental and emotional states of immigrant children, who experience anxiety, identity confusion, and separation trauma as they try to adapt to the new environment.

Margarete Rubik, in her discussion of refugee studies, examines Alan Gratz's novel **Refugee** and emphasizes the realistic representation of the refugee condition, focusing on the themes of fear, displacement, and survival. Rubik argues that the novel portrays the refugee journey as a painful experience that affects the refugee's identity and emotional condition, especially for young refugees (5-29). Similarly, Elisa Rustenbach's discussion of the refugee condition emphasizes the social and emotional challenges faced by refugees, such as the insecurity and exclusion they experience in the host countries (53-77). Amy Lifland, in her discussion of refugee crises, emphasizes the link between political instability and human suffering, highlighting the refugee condition as a product of socio-political conflicts, where refugees are the victims of such conflicts (9-10).

Despite the fact that these studies give an insightful view of the refugee experience, little attention is paid to the theme of personal grief and loss in the life of Isabel, as presented in Alan Gratz's *Refugee* novel. For example, the death of Iván and Isabel's fear of losing her loved ones represent major moments of psychological trauma in the life of a refugee, which give an insight into the psychological effects of loss and grief among refugee children. Thus, the focus of the study is death, sacrifice, and grief in the life of Isabel, a refugee child.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes Trauma Theory and Refugee Studies to analyze the emotional pain that the main character, Isabel, experiences in the novel **Refugee** by Alan Gratz. Trauma Theory can be used to analyze the effects of Iván's death on the main character, as well as the fear of losing her loved ones that permeates the entire novel. Refugee Studies can be utilized to contextualize the experience of displacement, not just as physical displacement, but as emotional displacement as well. This research utilizes qualitative research, as the researcher will analyze the scenes that are related to death, sacrifice, and fear.

Loss of a Friend: The Pain of Sudden Separation

Isabel's loss of Iván is one of the most devastating and transformative experiences in her life, symbolizing the cost of displacement and the sacrifices that come with the search for freedom. Iván is not just a fellow refugee, but Isabel's closest friend and emotional support. Isabel and Iván have shared experiences, hopes, and fears, all of which are a result of their shared experiences and coming of age. Their friendship is a symbol of innocence, hope, and security in a chaotic world. Isabel's relationship with Iván is a testament to her love and attachment to him, as seen through her memories: "He was Iván. Her Iván. He was her friend. And he was dead" (Gratz 273). This shows that Isabel is shocked and cannot comprehend the death of her friend.

Moreover, the death of Iván occurs during the perilous sea voyage, and the character meets his fatal injuries. The sudden loss of Iván disrupts the emotional balance of Isabel. She realizes the reality of death at a young age. Isabel finds it difficult to understand how a person can be alive for an instant and then gone forever. The author describes her grief through imagery: "The loss of him ached like a part of Isabel was suddenly missing, like her heart had been ripped out of her chest and all that was left was a giant, gaping hole" (Gratz 225). This metaphor describes the depth of her emotional pain and how the death of Iván leaves an emotional scar.

Moreover, the grief that Isabel experiences become overwhelming, to the point that she loses the will to live. Her grief makes her feel empty inside, and she wants to remain connected to him even after death. Her grief can be seen when "She wished she was dead too. She wished she was dead so they would put her into the water with Ivan" (Gratz 226). This shows the level of trauma that the children experience, and the

displacement makes them suffer psychologically, which is beyond the child's mental capacity.

Iván's death also symbolizes the destruction of Isabel's childhood innocence. Before this moment, Isabel still held hope and belief in a better future. However, witnessing Iván's death forces her to understand the true cost of freedom. Refugee journeys are not only about reaching safety but also about enduring loss, fear, and sacrifice. Iván becomes one of the many victims of forced migration, representing countless refugees who die in search of a better life. Through Iván's death, Isabel learns that displacement involves not only leaving behind one's homeland but also losing loved ones who give life meaning. His death represents the emotional trauma experienced by refugee children and highlights the human cost of political and social conflict. Ultimately, Iván's loss transforms Isabel from an innocent child into a survivor who carries grief, memory, and resilience within her.

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Fear of Losing Family: Isabel's Anxiety for Her Mother

Isabel's fear of losing her mother is a clear example of the psychological trauma faced by refugee children. Throughout her perilous sea journey from Cuba to the United States, Isabel is always worried about her family's safety, especially her pregnant mother. Her condition makes her more susceptible to danger. On the overcrowded raft in the sea, the storms, lack of food and water, and the danger of being caught by the authorities make the situation worse. For Isabel, death seems immediate and inevitable. Her fear is heightened when she realizes that her family can be separated and she can lose her mother forever. "Her family was supposed to be together... if her mother went back to Cuba and her father went on to the United States, which one was she supposed to go with?" (Gratz 176-177).

This is a moment where her emotions are on panic, and she is not sure how she is going to cope with the loss of her mother's presence and security. Isabel's mother is a symbol of security, stability, and inner strength. The possibility of losing her is a source of anxiety for Isabel. Moreover, Isabel is emotionally exhausted after going through a lot of traumas on the way, such as the deaths and sufferings she witnessed. Isabel's state of mind is portrayed at this particular moment where "She had nothing left to give" (Gratz 260). This quote shows Isabel's state of mind; she is emotionally drained. Isabel is no longer the carefree girl she was; she is forced to grow up too quickly and face the fears of a grown-up. Her state of anxiety shows that refugee children do not only suffer from physical threats; they also suffer emotionally from the fear of losing their loved ones.

Death and Sacrifice: The Emotional Cost of Survival

Death and sacrifice help us understand the true emotional cost of survival through Isabel's refugee journey. Isabel's refugee journey is not only a physical movement towards freedom but also a painful experience filled with loss and trauma. The saddest turning point comes when Iván dies during the perilous refugee journey at sea. Death and sacrifice symbolize the sacrifices refugees have to undergo during their fight for survival. For Isabel, this is a heart-wrenching experience because Iván is not only a refugee but also her closest friend and companion. She finds it difficult to cope with the sudden loss: "He was Ivan. Her Iván. He was her friend. And he was dead" (Gratz 273). The repetition of the name shows her shock and deep grief. However, the loss also shows that other people will survive. Yet, the loss is also closely linked with grief and emotional pain. Isabel is also shown to believe that the loss of Iván is a loss of a part of her own life. As the narrator puts it, "The loss of him aches like a part of Isabel was suddenly missing, like her heart had been ripped out of her chest" (Gratz 225). This metaphor shows how the loss does not bring any relief with the concept of survival; rather, it brings more pain and emptiness. Yet, Isabel is shown to still be carrying the loss of Iván even after she reaches America. She does this through her music.

Iván's sacrifice helps her understand that freedom entails irreversible loss. Through the tragedy of the refugees, the novel also portrays the message that refugees can flee political persecution and physical danger, but they cannot flee the emotional wounds of death and sacrifice. Although Isabel survives, her survival is influenced by the wounds of death, memory, and emotion. Thus, the novel portrays the message that survival is not a triumph but a painful process that entails a heavy emotional and psychological price.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of Isabel, as depicted in **Refugee** by Alan Gratz, clearly portrays the theme that the loss suffered by the refugees can never be regained. This is evident when the loved ones die on the sea journey, and the loss becomes a permanent scar on the life of the refugee. Freedom, whether physical or political, can never replace what has been lost. In the story, the fear of the refugee, Isabel, is not only the fear of the sea and political persecution, but the fear of losing the people she loves. In the entire journey, the main character lives with the fear of what will become of her if her loved ones die on the journey. This fear makes her more responsible and speeds up her growth. However, the story of Isabel depicts the theme that despite the fact that the refugees can find political refuge, the scars of grief, fear, and loss can never fade.

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