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*Inside Out & Back Again*

End of Unit 2 Assessment

Literary Analysis Essay

 A refugee can be any person who has left their home because they are afraid for their safety if they stay. Once refugees leave home, they have to find asylum in another country until they can resettle into a new home. When refugees flee, their lives twist and turn inside out because of all the changes they go through and everything they leave behind or lose. This is very challenging for many people to go through; as soon as refugees resettle, their lives start to turn back again when they move past the changes and their host community works with them as peers and equals. In the novel *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, Ha and her family are living in the middle of the Vietnam war. Ha is 10 years old and likes to push boundaries while being three steps behind her mother at all times. Ha doesn’t know what to think about her situation; she is hopeful that the war will end or at least move away from her home, but she is not naive and understands the dangers that come with living in a country divided by war. When it becomes too much to handle Mother decides that their family must flee to America and find asylum there. Ha and her brothers have to deal with the sadness and emptiness that many refugees face. Ha goes through the process that most other people who flee their homes go through: she had to deal with her life changing until it was inside out when leaving, then she got to experience it shifting back again while finding a new home.

 Refugees’ lives turn inside out when having to deal with the loss of family and trying to adapt to a new culture; these challenges lead to the longing of being back in their home country. Refugees come from a country at war, this means that many families have had to deal with the loss of loved ones. In the text “Refugee children in Canada,”it was said that “Some have lost many family members and many have lost everything that was familiar to them” (Fantino and Colak 10). Losing everything you have ever known would turn your life inside out especially when you don’t have any family to lean against. When refugees lose family members, they start to feel that their lives have no meaning any more. In the “Children at War” text, Amela said, “Before the war I really enjoyed life. But after I found out about my father’s death, everything seemed so useless I couldn’t see any future for myself” (Brice 26). Learning that you have lost someone who you loved would change your life dramatically because you no longer have the connections and safety you had when that person was still alive. In the novel “Inside Out and Back Again,” Ha was living without her father for most of her life. She had always thought that he would come back; this changed when she found out he had been killed. In the book Mother said, “Your father is/ truly gone” (Lai 250). This changed Ha’s life: before she had always had a father that had been captured, now she knows she doesn’t have someone to protect their family the way a father is supposed to. Once Ha learned that her father had died, she had to take some time to adjust to the news; during this time Ha felt her life was being flipped around, turned inside out. There are other things though that will turn a refugee’s life inside out, including needing to adapt to a new culture.

 Refugees come from a place where everyone’s culture is the same as theirs. This changes when refugees have to resettle into a new country that has a different culture. It would be hard adjusting to having two cultures, but that is not what is always thought, “Perhaps the greatest threat the these children is not the stress of belonging to two cultures but the stress of belonging to none” (Fantino and Colak 9). Once refugees are in a new country, they have to adapt to the change. This would be challenging especially if you could no longer adhere to your culture or adopt the culture of the new country. It would be really hard to fit in. In the novel, when Ha goes to school she is in that place where she doesn’t really have a culture to follow. This makes it hard for her to fit in, not to mention she is the only Vietnamese person in her school: “I am the only/ straight black hair/ on olive skin” (Lai 142). Ha does not really know where she fits in to her new society. She is so confused that she can’t even find anywhere to eat lunch: “On one side.../ light skin./ The other side,/ dark skin.../ as if it never occurred/ to them/ that someone medium would show up” (Lai 143). This is an example of not belonging in the new society that you may resettle into as a refugee. If you have lost your family and you don’t fit in anywhere you would feel a longing to be back in your home country where everything makes sense.

 Refugees that resettle have to adapt. This can be very hard for some people. In the novel Ha wrote: “No one would believe me/ but at times/ I would choose/ wartime in Saigon/ over/ peacetime in Alabama” (Lai 195). Ha is feeling alone because she does not know about anything in America and she is really lost like the rest of her family. Ha may also feel that she has lost the part of herself that was loyal to the country and stayed there to watch the war. Ha is not alone in feeling this way. Amela in “Children of War” stated, “Sometimes I wish I’d stayed there, watching the war, rather than being here, safe, but without friends” (Brice 26). This is the same feeling of not wanting to let go of your home and everything you once knew. It can be really frustrating learning to become part of a new culture. As Ha was learning English, she was annoyed at all of the rules and referred back to when she was in Vietnam and how the language there worked. Ha wrote: “*A an* and *the*/ do not exist in Vietnamese/ and we understand/ each other just fine” (Lai 167). Learning a new language can be challenging, but once refugees start accepting the changes that they have gone through their lives start turning back again.

When refugees learn to accept the change in their lives and the host community acknowledges them as equals, their lives start to turn back again. Refugees have to accept change and let go of things that they once had in order to move on. Many refugees will mourn their losses and then move on with their lives. “Refugee Children in Canada” said exactly that: “It is not only natural that refugee children, along with their families, go through a process of mourning those losses” (Fantino and Colak 10). The mourning process is a time of grieving then moving past the loss of something or someone special. When Ha moved to Alabama she mourned the loss of her home and everything she left, but when she started getting replacements she made do with what she had. She wrote, on multiple occasions, “Not the same,/ but not bad/ at all” (Lai 234). Ha was letting go of her possessions but also bringing her culture into the mix; this was her way of moving on. Ha’s family celebrated Tet, a traditional Vietnamese holiday, while they were in Alabama. During this celebration, Ha’s mother predicted something that would start to put their lives back again. She said, “Our lives/ will twist and twist/ intermingling the old with the new/ until it doesn’t matter/ which is which” (Lai 257). Letting go of some of the old traditions and adding in some new ones would make a refugee’s life feel like it was on track more or less. Learning to move on will really help a refugee start to fit in and have a more normal life, but when the people in the host community start accepting refugees, it will make them feel so much more included in society.

 Once members of the host community start treating refugees as equals, then everyone will become equal. In “Children of War,” Amela explained how the people in America treated her as a peer instead of someone who needed extra help in simple matters. When she came to America she noticed something about the people here: “Here, people don’t judge you...” (Brice 26). No one treated her differently because she is Muslim or Bosnian. She also saw that people want to help even if they don’t understand: “Some people here don’t even know where Bosnia is, but they’re really nice and try to help” (Brice 26). Amela’s host country excepted her which made it easier and faster for her life to turn back again. In Ha’s case, she was not excepted as quickly into her host community. One girl named Pam (Ha says Pem) helped Ha to fit in better by treating her as an equal. In the novel Ha wrote, “ Pem shrugs./ *I can’t wear pants/ or cut my hair/ or wear skirts above my calves;/ what do I care what you wear?”* (Lai 244). Pam said this all to Ha, treating her like she would treat anyone else. Many factors play into how fast your life turns back when you are a refugee. Accepting change and being treated as an equal are two of the main ones in my opinion.

People all around the world have had to leave their homes for fear of persecution. These refugees face challenges when both fleeing and finding home. Ha and her family experienced this firsthand when they fled Vietnam in search for asylum in Alabama. This experience turned everything they knew on its head therefore twisting their lives inside out. Once they started to let go of everything they had lost and became more accepted, their lives started to turn back again, just as the title of the novel states. There are many challenges when living in a country at war, but there are many to come when you decide to become a refugee.

Works Cited

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Ana Marie Fantino and Alice Colak, “Refugee Children in Canada”

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