

What is My Piece of Land? A Study on *Lines We Cross* by Abdul Randel Fatah

Dr. Priya. P
Asst. Professor, Dept of English
Meenakshi College for Women
Chennai 600024
[**priyababu23@gmail.com**](mailto:priyababu23@gmail.com)

Abstract

There cannot be a better title, so aptly placed, *The Lines We Cross* by Abdul Randel Fatah that raises series of inquiries into the minds of every individual say, what is my piece of land called as? If it is mine, then where does the line begin and end? Is this *then* be called as mine forever? Questions of these kinds become the ongoing debates of all time and period. We witness men struggle, bristle and fight against each other in restoring spaces that they think belong to them. Randa Abul Fattah is an award winning author, former attorney and an expert in Islamophobia in Australia. She has authored many a critically acclaimed novels 'Does My Head Look Big', 'Ten Things I Hate About Me', 'Where the Streets Had a Name'. The work 'Lines We Cross' brings out the under currents of how hate and fear create a sense of insecurity which eventually destroys lives of people. The term migration down the years evolve and occupies central stage in today's world. It can be viewed from both subjective and objective angle. Fear of losing one's self in a foreign land involves emotional, psychological and physical trauma, subjective feeling. On the other hand, native settlers view immigrants treading into 'their' personal zone as threat. One cannot deny the oscillation factors present in the minds of second & third generations. Expression of feelings are one and the same, be it internal or global. However the status of refugees who are forcibly evicted from their place is still worse. All of us are aware of the crisis the refugees are undergoing in the present scenario, e.g. the ordeal of Rohingya refugees that harangues the subconscious mind of individuals till date. Their threat is double edged. They are 'wiped' out individuals, deprived of homes and other essentials.

There cannot be a better title, so aptly placed, *The Lines We Cross* by Abdul Randel Fatah that raises series of inquiries into the minds of every individuals: what is my piece of land called as? If it is mine, then where do the lines begin and end? Is this *then* be called as mine forever? Questions of these kinds become the ongoing debates of all time and period. We witness men struggle, bristle and fight against each other in restoring spaces that they think belong to them.

Randa Abul Fattah is an award winning author, former attorney and an expert in Islamophobia in Australia. She has authored many a critically acclaimed novels ‘Does My Head Look Big’ ‘Ten Things I Hate About Me’, ‘Where the Streets Had a Name’. The work ‘Lines We Cross’ brings out the undercurrents of how hate and fear create a sense of insecurity which eventually destroys lives of people.

This book gave me a gentle reminder of Robert Frost’s *The Mending Wall*, The Lines, inextricably and so powerfully penetrating on the so called ‘belongingness’ and territory factors. Do we or don’t we require borders????

I personally feel, the poem highlights more on the self-centric nature of people in general. It is not ‘I’ but ‘we’ as central message of the poem. This reinstates the words of British Anthropologist Robert Dunbar on ‘social brain hypothesis’ theory in 1948. According to this theory, the human brain is evolved primarily to meet out the challenges of living in a complete society. He further defines it as social intelligence hypothesis where in which he states, “... the human brain evolved to master language, politics, trade, cooperation and other complex social skills that are crucial for survival and reproduction in a social environment” (The Hindu May 17th, 2018)

This made me understand that individuals prefer to secure a ‘part’ or ‘place’ for himself in the society, part of any thing that he considers close to his /her heart. It can be a place, person or position of prominence. He wanted to be known in terms of nationality and position where people would identify him immediately. When situation turns lopsided, he crashes into a man of no identity. All of a sudden, he/she feels confined into a closed area. Deep in his heart there is always an urge that desperately looks for assimilation to society belongs to. In this regard the innate fear of getting rejected and refusal of acquaintance to the new place makes him a confused individual. He debates within, self-versus society whether to stick on to the ‘root’ he belongs to or adopt to the new environment and culture he stepped into. A bundle of contradictory issues on self and the culture take place, the so called ‘self’ desperately tries to connect to the ‘new’ place without losing his affinity to ‘roots’.

The term migration down the years evolve and occupies central stage in today’s world. It can be viewed from both subjective and objective angle. Fear of losing one’s self in a foreign land involves emotional, psychological and physical trauma, subjective. On the other hand, native settlers view immigrants treading into ‘their’ personal zone as threat, objective. One cannot deny the oscillation factors present in the minds of second & third generation. Expression of feelings are one and the same, be it internal or global. However the status of refugees who are forcibly evicted from their place is still worse. All of us are aware of the crisis the refugees are undergoing in the present scenario e.g. the ordeal of Rohingya refugees that harangues the subconscious mind

of individuals till date. Their threat is double edged. They are ‘wiped’ out individuals deprived of home and other essentials.

It is at this point I would like to discuss Fatah’s “*When Lines are drawn we all chose sides.*” The story completely unravels the pathetic conditions of the refugees and the status of immigrants in a foreign land.

Mina the protagonist is a Muslim refugee, an Afghanistan girl from south Sydney who joins the Victorian College on scholarship. Michael studies there. His family has settled quite a long time ago. His father runs an anti-immigration group. They rail against the tide of refugees for the fear of losing their job and settlements. Michael at first believes in his parents’ ideologies but slowly undergoes a transformation within. A situation arises where Michael has to choose sides. Either he should stick to the ‘border’ fixed by his parents as the ‘right’ option or he should cross their assumed ideologies and learn to move beyond.

Michael makes the choice of crossing the borders there by the author clearly indicates that love, tolerance and acceptance towards one another can remain as the one and only solvent of all problems persisting in the world. By the end of the day, all of us crave for love, sharing and caring, respecting spacing of each other. The differences need not be glorified any more. Instead a balance can be sought without losing one’s self in order to give way for many a healthy generation to stay happy together.

The very first line powerfully brings out the kind of indifference shown towards the refugees. Alan, Khan’s friend holding a flag ‘Turn back the boats’ (1)

Michael’s father Khan holds a sign board ‘Start calling a spade a spade: Islam=terror (2) “Stop the Boats!” “No to Queen Jumpers!” “Islam is Fascism” (5)

Irony being when Alan was called to confirm a TV show and assigned a task to highlight the trail of a boat person in four weeks, Iraq to Indonesia and to Australia. Alan feels for the first time that he as an immigrant has been given a position of importance .The lines ‘May be people are starting to realize we’re onto something important here (10) highlights the dream and desire of every immigrant who wanted themselves to be acknowledged as citizens of new land which had become their home land now. The Pulse of thriving for a stable identity, a state of lost belongingness is inevitably witnessed.

Mrs. Robinson, the principal of Victorian College offers Mina a seat, a college prominent for producing ‘global citizens’ (24). She further encourages Mina to appear in the front cover of their school quarterly magazine, sure enough for the reader to understand the idea behind. Besides, ‘It would be a wonderful opportunity to show case Victoria Collee’s commitment to diversity and

multi culturalism (26) Jane, her new friend comments in a lighter vain. ‘she escaped Saddam Hussein’s Taliban regime’ (29)’Mina’s from Afghanistan (29) echoes the powerful shade of ethnicity and racial disparities. However being light or intense, the dormant reality of differences in the society and culture remains predominant. In between the two powerful forces, the self is shadowed completely. The person undergoes a culture shock. He undergoes the dilemma of protecting his self and preserving the culture he belongs to. In the course of time he tries to assimilate himself to the nuances of society.

Michael who can be considered as the third generation bluntly follows his father’s ideology in the beginning. ‘Look ,it’s not ideal, what they’re going through .But Australia has the right to protect its borders’(ibid)’he frowns, ‘I didn’t say that, I meant, if you come by boat, you’ve jumped the queue’(35) Mina replies, ‘They’re no queues’, ‘I would know, I came here by boat’(35)redefines a keen yet stubborn emphasis of withholding one’s identity. Further the discussion in Mr. Morella’s class reiterates this. Michael casually speaks ‘Like Islam claims to be about peace but all we hear about is violence’ (33)

One cannot fail to notice the funny side of how the human brain slowly becomes conducive to institutionalizing elements. The boarded immigrant in due course feels that the inhibited place as his and feels new entries, refugees as his threat. He thinks the refugees as ‘Islamaphobic’. He treats refugees as mere ‘economic refugees. He thrives to show his loyalty to the place he is settled. His every reaction brings out the inundated fear of not losing his identity. Followed by, a fight in a club where a guy yells at Mason, Michael’s friend, ‘can’t handle an aboriginal guy with a white chick, huh?’ you dumb racist fuck! (53) Later the entire incident goes viral on you tube with the tag line, Reverse Racism, ‘They call us racist? Look what this Aboriginal guy did to Mason and his friends’ (54) show cases the deep hatred that exist between the aborigines and the natives.

Consequently, a trivial fight ensues that boomerangs further. A saying ‘mole is made to mountain’ fits into the frame work of the story where we witness the plight of every immigrant against the natives who are keen in preserving their ‘Aussie values’. Michael and Terrance undergo in rescuing Mason. The incident though being trifle is flashed no minute in media and you tube. The reporter questions Mason, Terrance’s brother to brief. Mason explains that the first punch was blown by a fellow who looked least aboriginal, probably not even an aboriginal. “They claim it sometimes so that they can get benefits and stuff” (61). The reporter further interviews a guy who belongs to an organization that preserve ‘Aussie Values’. ‘There is no excuse for alcohol –induced violence... But what this footage clearly shows are the double standards in our community. It’s reverse racism’ (61-62).

The given lines powerfully portray people madness toward clamoring factors, land and *Aussie* values. They are not deprived lots. On the other they are privileged lots. They thrive to ‘stamp themselves as ‘privileged lots’ indeed gives them a secured feel. The author’s voice is seen

in the protagonist Mina, ‘Being an indigenous Australian has nothing to do with skin color’ (64) She tells Michael, ‘You might want to pick up a history book some time. I mean, I’m just a boat person from Afghanistan and even I figured that out’ (64). The lines emit frustrations at every level. The dilemma of refugees is clearly mirrored by the author. Both the refugees and immigrants exhibit a similar thrive to identify themselves. At the same time, one cannot miss the frustrations and resulting agonizing moments existing between the two.

Since the customs and culture vary, the difference always sails as ‘cloak’ that cannot be discarded at the same time can manage without.

Down the years human beings seemed to be tamed in such a way that they wanted to stay in the form of a close-knit circle. They seek a kind of kinship, adoptability and forbearance factors amidst the dissipation factors caste, colour, community, culture and creed elements. These indifferences exist as a common factor, e.g., between man and woman and vice versa. One should realize at this juncture that no one is perfectly made. But a common platform can be sought when individuals learn to put up with each other pluses and minuses. As long as one remains nostalgic towards past, memories keep haunting for good or for better.

It is my humble opinion that human beings should consider their memories being short or long for better outcomes. So that chances of painful memories become less and less. The ways of society is so much that things keep replacing one over the other. There is a short relief which again does not stay longer since it is supplemented by the other and yet another one.

Michael’s dad considers immigrants as ‘terrorists’ hiding among boat people’ (81) and demands Muslims to stop their silence on radicals. He sees immigrant as a serious threat to Australia. He feels more no of immigrants would deploy the job opportunities for the homeland people.

Death shall take place at any time to any person. When Nahan convinces his mom on his father’s travel to Iraq’... We should be more worried about people falling off lands and dying than being killed in a terrorist act’(90)

I guess the author philosophically says, Death can claim any body’s life without even a slight intimation. If this is the case, why would individuals struggle to push themselves all to their limits?

A question sure enough to raise in everyone’s mind for which there are no definite answers. The voice of the protagonist is none other than Mina who aptly presents the ways of the world (146) ‘Everybody’s pruned and shaped somehow, Ignore. But not everybody has to fight to stop

from being torn out of the ground' Mina sees no logic in people with preconceived notions. Michael who all along voiced his parents' opinions begins to see the dormant reality "How can my parents be right, be good, if it means people like Mina end up getting here?(151) He secretly wishes people's lives to remain peaceful like 'black and white'(151) His dad's explanation on Aussie values makes no sense to him anymore. He feels his father's words as objectionable 'Refugees take jobs from Australia. They cost a lot in welfare, they compete for our resources, and then they bring over their families, so the situation is exacerbated. We have unemployment crises in this country and accepting more refugees will make it worse' (161-162). His mom's words, 'culture and compatibility is an issue too' (162) remain in convincing. His dad adds, we're an Anglo nation based on Indo-Christian values. People are free to practice their culture and religion so long as it doesn't undermine the fundamental identity of their country (ibid) His mom continues educating Michael, 'Ultimately this is about protecting one core identity from which anything else stems' (162) The lines effectively sums up the intensity of people in preserving their core i.e. Aussie values family' (163) The lacuna is clearly felt between the two say in terms of reinstating their position of dominance.

On the other the 'New Voice' is seen in Michael's, a voice necessary for welcoming change in the current scenario

The term 'Cultural Compatibility' can be worked out in different quotients, say in terms of adoptability, acceptability and accountability. i.e. respecting one's spacing without absolving one's for peaceful living. Democracy means free will. It can be made to work as long as the individuals doesn't prevent or provoke each other. Respect for ones' spacing has to be the call of the day. 'War is evil' It consumes lives like the fire flies to the lamp.

We are witnessing so many dreadful happenings say Talibans and Terrorists, Psycho killers, murderers who kill in the name of honour killings or sudden break outs and extinguishing people's lives appear to be a *roller coaster* ride. This day to day fight either big or small brings disturbance and insecurity threats into the minds of gullible people. Mina's dreams' Tonight is the first time in a long time that have a night –mare about my father ..." House after house, pointed gun after pointed gun, I don't stop. I don't scream. I just keep on moving' (173) breaks the final straw in Michael. He realizes his father's hypnotizing talk on multiculturalism and assimilation as superficial talks. Deep down the system a clean fixation into maintaining Indo-Christian values cannot be overruled. His mother's flowering speech on 'asparagus' meaning adding spices in order to enhance the flavor to soup. Otherwise, the soup remains as a bland one only. Her words indicate the favored and creamy lots as 'immigrants' and the dormant ones as 'refugees', the shelter seekers.

The kind of egalitarian vision employed by the author is seen when Michael along with his brother Nathan accidentally enters the mosque and says, ‘God is available for everyone here too’(201) At the same time the affinity towards mother land is seen in Baba’s words’ A peaceful Afghanistan I can return to ,of course’, ‘When I die I want to be buried here’(204)

Situation at home gets tense. Michael father worries about Asians buying real estates and turning Australia into their own Islamic state. Following the word of Andrew ‘If we can get enough grassroots resistance, we might be able to wake people out of their multiculturalism coma’ (214)Nathan’s rational statement ,’You can induce a coma but you can’t wake somebody from one’(215)is a direct hit against people with fixed mind set otherwise called as sadomasochism. Every incident camouflages and Mina’s words aptly reflects this, ‘The program ran, talk radio picked over the scrap like vulture over a carcass, and then everybody shifted their hysterical what –is- Australia-coming –to? Panic to the next target” (216)

Michael dad’s speech on war, ‘There are wars all over the word. More and more refugees. There has to be a limit, or we’ll be flooded...yep...’ (223) Followed by response from people about ‘Australia’s international legal obligations? But your dad would change his mind of he actually had to stay back with those refuges in Iraq hey? (224) aids Michaels’ transformation complete’. His words ‘But something shifted in me. This must be what living on a gray feels like’ (224)

Controversy breeds controversy. Mary, Jeremy and Margaret visits Afghan’s restaurant which is run by Baba. A scene over the halal sends sensory rocket all over. Her dad’s words surmount further. ‘I think Mina there is something the majority wants us to do in order to be fully accepted. But they never tell us what it is.’ (339) This line unleashes the quenching anxiety that can’t be alleviated any further. The three immigrants working in Baba’s restaurant are picked up and sent to Villawood paralyzes Michael. The final straw breaks when the whole incident is flashed by media. Michael storms at the reporter. He says, ‘legally we have to help people. Instead we lock them up, we abuse them. Then we bring in laws so that we can jail people who report the abuse. I don’t get how we can let that happen in democracy (355) He vents up saying ‘sorry Dad’ But Aussie values is all about being angry, defensive and paranoid. You said that bad things happen when good people remain silent. So I am speaking up. I am against your organization and everything it stands for (355)

Thus, his transformation is complete. Thus, the author clearly emphasizes the need to open up, to broaden one’s thinking. One cannot delude on oneself rights to live. Mina’s mom breaks the iron curtain. Her words, ‘We refugees are different from immigrant, Mina. The ‘immigrants’ heart is caught between the two, wanting to stay or return to their homeland. The uncertainty never stops. Every decision is shadowed by their missing components of life. The lines ‘... and when they

return to their birth place, they wanted to come back here. And when they came back here, they wonder if they would have stayed. But us? We have been robbed of those choice. I cannot return to my homeland as outsider and a guest. I am the guest who brings a gift of food to their host. Except what I think more and more is that they do not eat the food, they eat us here.' (360-361)

The author's objective is at last realized when the reader sees Mina's stubbornness as a refugee melts and gives way to appreciate and see things in common day light. Michael's says, 'There is a lot of ugliness in the sky. But there's plenty of beauty here too.' (375) This shows the commonality which is always possible. The transformation is seen in Michael, the third generation who begins to understand the difficulty of the other side. Towards the conclusion Mina's poetry slam is befitting. The lines are impregnated with meanings that are defined and redefined on wanting of commonality of understanding. To cite a few

'.....That change is good
But with discovering it is good
That questioning is good
But with trust it is better
That resisting is good
But sometimes those you resist do not matter
And the standing up is good
But studying up alongside others is better.

(388-389)

The final message of 'caring and sharing mutually and top of everything' 'Never give up on anybody '(389) need not be explained anymore least to be understood. There is for sure an optimistic note given to readers to believe in oneself and stay optimistic throughout.

The act of subjugation, control one over the other, is purely the psychic desire that lies in the deep layers of every human being. Rightly Tara Altenrando in *The Possible* brings out this secret wistful thinking in people. The lines, 'We've learned, may be for the first time, or may be, for some of us, again ,that we all really, really wish we could control the physical world - whether it is cancer's cell or other drives on the road-in ways that we have to accept we simply can't'. (289) The lines decipher the 'in born thrive' in controlling which is nothing new since the evolution of human beings. But there is again a keen positive note that collectively aims for togetherness and peaceful living.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Abdel Fattah, Randa. *The Lines We Cross*. Scholastic Press, New York. 2017
Altebrando, Tara. *The Possible*. Bloomsbury Group. U.S.A. 2017.