



## Breaking Through Barriers: An Analysis of Border Imperialism in 'Harbor'

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### Abstract

Border imperialism refers to the practices and policies of powerful actors, such as states, that create and enforce borders. These policies often result in the exclusion and exploitation of marginalized communities and are seen as an extension of colonialism, perpetuating the power dynamics established during that era. The consequences of border imperialism are particularly difficult for refugees fleeing conflict and persecution, as countries have tightened their borders and imposed strict immigration policies. The militarization of borders and the use of security forces has made it dangerous for refugees to attempt to cross borders, leading to detention, deportation, and even injury or death. The novel "Harbor" by Lorraine Adams can be seen as a critique of border imperialism through its portrayal of the struggles faced by Algerian stowaways in America. It highlights the negative effects of border imperialism, such as the need for individuals to enter foreign countries illegally and become undocumented migrants, even though they are legal citizens of their home countries.

**Keywords:** *Border Imperialism, Refugees, Stowaways, Colonialism*

### Introduction

Border imperialism is a term used to describe the ways in which imperial powers, particularly in the context of globalization, use borders and border policies to maintain and expand their power and control over marginalized populations. This concept asserts that borders are not just physical barriers, but also social, economic, and political ones that are used to perpetuate inequality and domination. Border imperialism can manifest in policies such as immigration restrictions, the militarization of borders, and the exploitation of labour and resources in border regions. The concept of border imperialism was introduced by South Asian activist and lawyer, Harsh Walia in her book, *Undoing Border Imperialism* which provides a



comprehensive analysis of the connections between borders, migration, and imperialism. Walia provides the concept of "border imperialism" as a way of understanding the struggles faced by migrants in the global political economy. She argues that borders represent a regime of practices, institutions, discourses, and systems that serve to entrench and re-entrench controls against migrants, who are displaced as a result of the violence of capitalism and empire, and subsequently forced into precarious labour as a result of state illegalization and systemic social hierarchies. (18)

In the current world of neo-liberal globalisation, Walia in her analysis of migration management reminds us of the legacies of colonialism, the power of capitalism, and how it serves as the foundation for the proliferation of neoliberal policies that deepen inequality in our localities across the globe. Walia shows how a restrictionist immigration policy built on racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and imperialist power produces immobility. Walia explains how managing migration and borders is a process of constructing national identities, with the border acting as a tool for population control to create and maintain a hierarchy of race. Walia investigates how the objectives of "imperialist expansion, Indigenous elimination, and anti-Black enslavement" intersect with the US-Mexico border. (Walia 2021, p. 21).

Levi Gahman and Elise Hjalmarson examine the relationship between border imperialism, racial capitalism, and geographies of deracination in the contemporary world. The authors argue that the increasing militarization of borders, and the displacement of people through forced migration and other forms of violence, are rooted in historical and ongoing processes of racial capitalism. They argue that border imperialism is intimately linked to the history of colonialism and imperialism and continues to shape contemporary geopolitics. The authors then turn to the concept of racial capitalism, which refers to the ways in which capitalism and racism are intertwined. They argue that racial capitalism has historically relied on the exploitation of racialized and colonized peoples and that this exploitation continues in the present day through processes of economic globalization and neoliberalism. Longo highlights the potential for new forms of imperialism to emerge in the context of changing borders and sovereignty. Longo asserts that the changing nature of borders and sovereignty in the post-9/11 world has led to the emergence of a new type of border that is thicker and more bi-



national than in the past. This new "zonal" border raises the possibility of a new form of imperialism that operates through borders rather than through direct territorial control.

## **Impact of Border Imperialism on Refugees**

Border imperialism has significant impacts on refugees particularly from Syria, Afghanistan, and other postcolonial states. Most of these refugees are fleeing conflict and persecution, and as a result, they are often forced to cross borders or seek asylum in neighbouring countries. However, border imperialism has made it increasingly difficult for these refugees to find safe haven, as countries such as the United States and many European nations have tightened their borders and imposed strict immigration policies forcing them to cross borders illegally. The militarization of borders and the use of border security forces have made it more dangerous for refugees to attempt to cross borders. This has led to many refugees being detained or deported, and in some cases, even killed or injured. Fitzgerald and Kinnvall discuss the plight of refugees, highlighting how they are trapped in a dichotomy of being both inside and outside society. These refugees are victims of an international system that brings them into existence but fails to take responsibility for them. Kinnvall argues that Fortress Europe's immigration policies reinforce this inside/outside dynamic, leading to the legitimization of racial and cultural differences and the exclusion of certain groups, reminiscent of colonial practices. The current migrant crisis in Europe coincides with a racial crisis, resulting in the implementation of security measures and border regimes that aim to increase mobility for some while restricting it for others (as cited in Odwyer, 1-2).

Furthermore, border imperialism has contributed to the exploitation of refugees. For example, refugees who are able to make it to Europe find themselves in precarious working conditions, being paid low wages and subjected to poor working conditions. In some cases, refugees are even used as a source of cheap labour by companies seeking to take advantage of their vulnerable/illegal status. Border Imperialism prevents refugees from accessing safe and legal pathways to migration. As a result, refugees are forced to rely on smugglers or other informal channels to cross borders, which can expose them to exploitation and abuse. When refugees travel illegally and are unable to access legal and safe pathways to migration, they may be forced to take whatever work is available to them. This can include low-skilled and low-paid jobs in the informal economy, such as cleaning, construction, or agriculture.



These jobs may be dirty or dangerous, and refugees may lack the necessary protective equipment or training to work safely. Additionally, since they lack legal status, they may be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by employers, who may threaten to report them to immigration authorities if they speak out or demand better treatment. Moreover, refugees who work in the informal economy may face difficulties in obtaining fair wages, benefits, or legal protections, as they often lack formal contracts or other forms of legal documentation. This can exacerbate their economic marginalization and make it difficult for them to support themselves and their families.

The novel 'Harbor' by Lorraine Adams highlights the consequences of border imperialism in a very tactful manner. The novel highlights the ways in which immigration policies can create barriers to mobility and force people into precarious and dangerous situations. The story revolves around the lives of Algerian refugees who stow away on oil tankers to escape their war-torn country and attempt to find refuge in the United States. The novel explores the experiences of these refugees and sheds light on the challenges they face during their journey and their struggles in America being illegal immigrants.

Aziz Arkoun the protagonist of Harbor attempts three times to flee the Algerian civil war as a stowaway on an oil tanker. He fails on his earlier attempts in which he is caught and thrown out of the tanker. In his third attempt, he succeeds to reach Boston but after spending 52 days in the heat and darkness of the tanker. He jumps into the waters of Boston harbour almost deadly burnt and bruised and on top of that, he travels illegally at the risk of getting caught by police. He also hides his real identity of being illegal and that too an Arab. He is given the fake identity of an American citizen in order to get medical treatment in a hospital. The novel sheds light on how being a law-abiding, gentle and honest person, Aziz always lives in dread due to his illegal status in the country.

Apart from Aziz, the novel highlights the experiences of other immigrants from Algeria who are also stowaways and lead dreadful life for being illegal. For example, one of Aziz's accomplices from Algeria is caught by a strange man who seems to be a secret agent and terrorises Gazi for being a stowaway in America.



This man, who was obviously some kind of secret police, could kill him, because Ghazi, asylum application or not, was an illegal, a nonperson (155).

The novel illustrates the ways in which border imperialism creates a system of exclusion and violence that targets migrants, particularly those who are undocumented or have uncertain legal status. In the novel Aziz and his fellow Algerians who are trying hard to survive and provide economic assistance to their families waiting for aid in the crumbled state of Algeria are under surveillance for being Arabs. The fact that Aziz comes under the notice of the FBI and is arrested along with his friends highlights the impact of border imperialism. It shifts our attention to Harsh Walia's "Undoing Border Imperialism" in which she describes the criminalization of migration and the way in which migrants are constructed as illegals and aliens, particularly those who are undocumented or asylum seekers arriving irregularly. The state has to allege some kind of criminal or illegal act in order to justify their incarceration, and migrants are cast as illegals and criminals who are committing an act of assault on the state. Migrant detention centres are part of the expanding prison system, and migrants become prisoners of passage, stereotyped by politicians, media, and within popular consciousness as floods of people from "over there" who are "disease-ridden," "fraudulent," or "security threats." (pp.22-24).

Therefore, border imperialism serves as a mechanism for imperial powers to maintain dominance over marginalized populations by using borders as social, economic, and political barriers. It perpetuates inequality and control through immigration restrictions, border militarization, and the exploitation of labour and resources. This system has severe consequences for refugees, who face increased dangers, limited access to safe pathways, and exploitation. The novel "Harbor" highlights the harsh realities faced by refugees as they resort to illegal means to escape conflict, encountering exclusion, violence, and surveillance. Border imperialism criminalizes migrants, casting them as threats and justifying their incarceration. It is crucial to recognize and challenge the oppressive nature of border imperialism to create a more equitable and just world.



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