

Midway to Nowhere: The Refugee Experience in Candide

Mac Robinson

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Mac Robinson

Dr. Sayed

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Midway to Nowhere: The Refugee Experience in *Candide*

Francois-Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name, Voltaire, is considered by many to be a revolutionary thinker who symbolized many themes of the Enlightenment Era. Best known for his novel *Candide*, his writing may be seen as vulgar or genius, but it is certain to provoke a response in the mind of its reader. Tales of war predate written literature itself but until the Enlightenment Era, consisted mainly of heroic or patriotic themes. However, during the Age of Reason, in part thanks to the great philosophers of the eighteenth century like Voltaire, war came to be viewed in a new light. The novel *Candide*, is described by Madeleine Dobie as “the first true metadiscourse on the aims and effects of war” (2009). Voltaire wrote war from a different perspective by reframing war “as violence, suffering and carnage” (Dobie, 2009). While tales of heroes and great battles may be entertaining, in reality, they misrepresent the true nature of war. For every hero of war, there are thousands of innocent victims whose lives will never be the same. Voltaire along with “a number of eighteenth-century thinkers observed that while wars might serve the interests of the aristocratic elite, they inflict suffering and privation on members of lower social order” (Dobie 1852). *Candide* may be most commonly described as a satirical commentary on war, critiquing institutions of power, but perhaps its legacy is that Voltaire “showed war from the perspective of its victims and invited readers to empathize with their suffering” (Dobie 1853). Hundreds of years later, wars continue to rage and while the specifics of battles have changed, the stories of suffering experienced by non-combatants remain very

similar. Since the Era of Enlightenment in which Voltaire wrote, more attention has been given to these innocent victims and the field of Refugee Studies has become part of academia. It can be argued that *Candide* is in fact, a novel that outlines the refugee experience and through the journey of Candide and his companions, Voltaire looks to evoke compassion in the reader for refugees of war.

As quoted by Peter Matorella, “refugees are people uprooted by events so terrible that they must flee to survive” (158). While the original displacement of Candide is not due to war, the reader must keep in mind that *Candide* as a novel is set amongst the backdrop of “the first global war” (Dobie 1851), the Seven Years’ War. By Chapter Two, Candide is conscripted by the Bulgars, better known today as the Prussians, one of the main combatants of the Seven Years’ War. Perhaps, the passage that best exemplifies the typical image of a refugee occurs in Chapter Three as he deserts the army escaping to a nearby village:

Passing by mounds of the dead and dying, he came to a nearby village which had burnt to the ground. It was an Albare village, which the Bulgars had burned, in strict accordance with the laws of war. Here old men, stunned from beatings, watched the last agonies of their butchered wives, who still clutched their infants to their bleeding breasts; there disembowelled girls, who had first satisfied the natural needs of various heroes, breathed their last; others, half-scorched in the flames, begged for their death stroke. Scattered brains and severed limbs littered the ground.... Candide finally made his way out of the war area, carrying a little food in his knapsack. (Voltaire 104)

While readers may find this description graphic and disturbing, Voltaire paints a realistic portrait of war. Drawing attention to the justification of such acts as being done “in strict accordance

with the laws of war” (Voltaire 104) mocks the very idea of war and reminds the reader of the horrors that wars bring. Voltaire is encouraging the reader to feel strongly disturbed as a way to ignite deep empathy towards his character. This disturbing description signifies the start of Candide’s journey as a refugee and unfortunately real-life refugees often begin their journey in equally horrific fashion. When examining the very idea of a refugee, one must be mindful that the refugee is “pushed out...[but] given the choice, he would stay” (Stein 322). Refugees are not leaving to pursue a better life, they are fleeing from the horrors of war, leaving behind everything they know to save their lives.

Stein points out that often “refugees leave their homeland at a moment’s notice” (322) embarking on a journey to safety. Candide begins his journey and faces challenges typical of the refugee experience. Candide moves from place to place, and is constantly considered an outsider. Early in this journey, Candide finds himself relying on the charity of others, begging for handouts to survive. This too is often the case for those fleeing from war. Most refugees “have not failed within their homeland; they are successful, prominent, well-integrated, educated individuals” (Stein 322). The fact that Candide comes from an aristocratic background serves as a reminder to the reader that, refugees are not the poor looking for a handout. Candide’s background also illustrates what those fleeing from war may be giving up. The psychological impact of this change brings its own difficulties. Early in the transitional period refugees “must face up to loss of homeland, identity and former life” (Stein 324). Voltaire captures the essence of this psychological strife through Candide’s constant effort to understand his misfortunes: “he asked about cause and effect, [and] the sufficient reason” (105). Voltaire does not necessarily answer these questions directly, but looks to traditional power structures and war to explain the suffering of Candide and by association, refugees in general. The chaotic journey of Candide

illustrates how the “trauma of flight produces residual psychological states in the refugee that will affect behaviour for years to come (Stein 323). Unfortunately, the struggles of refugees do not end with the experience of the flight itself.

Harrell-Bond and Voutira point out that those fleeing from war remain refugees “unless or until they are 'incorporated' as citizens into their host state” (7). This incorporation is often difficult as “refugees must adapt to radically new social and material conditions” (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 7). Voltaire looks to create understanding and empathy in the reader, again using *Candide* as an example. The reader may find oneself empathizing with *Candide* throughout the novel, as the character portrays many noble qualities. *Candide* seems to always have good intentions and is often the subject of misfortune while in the midst of committing a noble act. One such case occurs as *Candide* looks to save two women from harm. What *Candide* perceives as a threatening situation, is in fact normal to the culture of his land. *Candide*'s travelling partner *Cacambo* points out, “you see how people make mistakes who haven't received a measure of education” (Voltaire 124). While, in this case *Cacambo* may be criticizing the actions of their new society, perhaps Voltaire was looking to show how refugees, uneducated in the norms of their new society, may struggle to adjust. Refugees are displaced through no fault of their own and Voltaire may be suggesting that there needs to be a level of understanding in regards to the adjustment and culture shock that refugees experience. The refugee experience is “one in which the victims are too often treated as the villains” (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 8). The plot of the novel centres around *Candide*'s struggle as he tries to find a new home.

The constant struggle of a refugee trying to find his or her place in the world, is described by Barry Stein as “midway to nowhere between lost homeland and the new society” (329). The loss of homeland is traumatic for refugees and many have “expectations [of their new home],

often romantic and unrealistic, which are different from what...they should expect” (Stein 325). Voltaire illustrates this idea with the arrival of Candide and Cacambo in the utopian country of Eldorado which symbolizes a place where all needs can be met. In Eldorado, the roads are lined with precious stones, food is abundant, and Candide and Cacambo are free from persecution. To a refugee, Eldorado represents an ideal setting yet Candide finds himself unsatisfied. Those observing the flight of a refugee may agree with the King of Eldorado, “when you are pretty comfortable somewhere, you had better stay there” (Voltaire 130). The problem for Candide in this situation is that Eldorado is lacking his love, Miss Cunegonde. The relationship between Candide and Miss Cunegonde is virtually non-existent for most of the novel and instead can be looked at as an ideal held by Candide. Miss Cunegonde represents his one true love; she is constant reminder of the romanticized idea of the life Candide once had. Candide carries this memory with him everywhere he goes and longs for the day that he will be reunited. Even the most utopian country can’t fill the desire he has for his old life, his homeland. This is a common theme with refugees, their longing for the life they fled from; their longing for the idea of their homeland. Unfortunately, when Candide is reunited with Cunegonde, she is far from the idea he has romanticized in his mind, “her skin weathered, her eyes bloodshot, her breasts fallen, her cheeks seamed, her arms red and scaly” (Voltaire 156). This description can serve as a symbol of what many refugees see when they look back at their homeland. The country they once new is no longer; instead it is replaced by a beaten down, war-torn land, that hardly resembles its original state. It is heartbreaking to come to terms with the fact that the dream of a return to the normal they once knew, is no longer possible.

The story of Candide’s journey ends in bitter-sweet fashion. Candide and his partners eventually find their place and settle in to a new normal. Stein points out that refugees typically

achieve stability in their new country, even though the sum of their journey is negative (326). The new group is guided by a long-time resident of their new home. As noted by Stein, “[the refugee’s] need for guidance is greatest at the initial stages of resettlement” (328). The Turk shows Candide and his friends the way to happiness in their new home, “I have only twenty acres... I cultivate them with my children, and the work keeps us from three great evils, boredom, vice and poverty” (Voltaire 159). Candide’s dream of life as it once was fades away and is replaced by a contentedness with what it is. Candide and each of his companions find a role within their new society, free from the world’s evils and amongst friends; the ability to “cultivate their garden” (Voltaire 159).

Perhaps, the message that Voltaire wishes to leave with the reader is that everyone deserves the opportunity to “cultivate their garden” (Voltaire 159). War is neither glorious nor glamorous. All too often, war is glamorized in literature. Historically, the suffering war brings has been largely ignored. Voltaire revolutionized war literature by taking a “humanitarian approach” (Dobie 1853). Through satire and graphic description, we are invited into the world of a refugee. Candide’s experience begins with horrific events that cause the need to flee at a moment’s notice; followed by a chaotic, tumultuous and long journey; the need to adjust to a new world filled with new customs to be learned; the letting go of the life he once knew; and finalized by a bitter-sweet integration into a new society. Voltaire uses a fictional character to illustrate the journey of a refugee in the hope that it will generate compassion in readers as they realize what those displaced by war are going through every day—the refugee experience.

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