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The Duality of Deaths in the Sea

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#socialtags



We are all inclined to believe that death is the ultimate equalizer, conditioned by the notion that empathy and love are still the guiding tenets of our societal fabric. However, every now and then the world we live in gives stark reminders that not all deaths are equal — the value assigned intrinsically, sickeningly rather, connected to the socio-economic and political interplay that seems to overpower and govern our conscience, consciousness and existence. It is not humanity that guides us, anymore.

Indeed, the conscience was pricked on June 18, 2023, when the Titan submersible went missing while descending to the North Atlantic seabed, trying to reach the Titanic wreck. After four days of vigorous scouring of the seabed, a multinational search and rescue/salvage operation, it was confirmed that a catastrophic implosion sunk Titan, killing all five on board.

The literal implosion brought about a metaphorical explosion as media — social and traditional — went on a perpetual loop, explaining and mourning this catastrophe. Even as this was being played out, about 500 among the estimated 750 distressed migrants, including around 100 children remain missing in the Mediterranean Sea [1]. They had set out from Tobruk, Libya, on a boat named Adriana, hoping to make it to a 'peaceful' life in Europe. The actual number of migrants travelling on this boat is unknown. Only 104 survived the disaster on June 14, and 82 deaths have been confirmed so far [2]. The missing persons are yet to be presumed dead, though numbers notwithstanding, this happens to be one of the worst sea accidents in the last 10 years.

Two incidents of tragic deaths in the international seas, miles apart both in terms of location and the stark dissimilarity in how the world mourned them, or rather acknowledged them. Loss of life is tragic, period. However, one cannot help but notice the selective mourning, which seems to stem from sociopolitical apathy towards the refugees. The tragic agony in the death of the refugees is normalised and almost in the same breath, the deaths of the affluent reverberated across the world. The contrast is glaring, yet requires quite an effort to garner attention.

In Titan, resourceful adventurers chose to pay a hefty amount to 'enjoy' a unique underwater experience. In Adriana, the passengers embarked on a perilous voyage through one of the most turbulent Mediterranean Sea routes leaving their home countries where they were pushed to the fringes with little hope for life. At least 209 of the victims of the shipwreck are from Pakistan — a country with no

explicit conflict but an abysmal economic condition, in the face of skyrocketing inflation, unemployment, and an IMF loan rejection [3].

The biggest difference between the two tragedies is the lack of 'choice' in the latter.

Refugees are often at the mercy of illegal smugglers. While taking the Mediterranean and Northwest African Sea routes, they usually set off often from Libya or Tunisia towards Italy or Malta. What's ironic is that sea journeys are considered safer than land routes through the Sahara Desert where there is a constant threat of trafficking entrapments. They are literally caught between the harsh desert and the sea, the peril highlighted by the heart-wrenchingly disturbing numbers. Since 2014, approximately 26,000 lives have been lost in the Mediterranean Sea which has become a watery refugee graveyard [4]. In 2021, 3,231 were recorded dead or missing in the Mediterranean and Northwest African Sea routes combined, as per the UNHCR data [5]. In 2022, the Mediterranean Sea route alone recorded close to 2,367 migrant deaths [6].

The situation is exacerbated by the draconian, and at times inhuman, anti-immigration policies, fuelled by the right-wing political parties across Europe. For instance, in February this year, the Italian government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni sanctioned crackdowns against rescue vessels—purportedly to discourage carrying illegal migrants, but technically to castigate the drowning boats to their fates [7]. Similarly, the Illegal Migration Bill introduced by the United Kingdom in March 2023 explicitly mentions non-incentivising the 'dangerous' boat journeys by withdrawing protection for the 'illegal' migrants [8].

However, apathy towards international immigrants is not a preserve of the Western discourse. Closer to home, in India, government policies of late have been hostile towards those seeking refuge from neighbouring countries. In fact, hostility is extended towards those who had moved to the country much before, settled in, and are now staring at an uncertain future. This is fuelled by a predominantly right-wing populist sentiment, which in turn fans the fire further. And, like in the West, the target is the Muslim population, perceived as the 'other'. For instance, the narrative around the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has many complicated implications with one distinct underwritten directive — that it alienates Muslim immigrants.

Of course, the refugee regime in India and the politics surrounding it is much more complex, and need closer scrutiny employing various lenses. However, the plight of the refugees, irrespective of geography, remains precarious.

Refugees are those who are forced to cross international borders due to the dire situations at home. An unbearable 'home' and an unwelcoming 'host' are realities for the refugees fleeing countries in Africa and Asia. In 2022, the world recorded a total number of 35.3 million refugees, hailing majorly from low-income countries facing political or economic upheaval. Data suggests, 52 per cent of these refugees originated from Syria (19%), Ukraine (16%), and Afghanistan (16%) [9]. The Mediterranean and the Northwest African sea routes are particularly used by the Syrians — Syria being the highest refugee generator in 2022. The 2015 image of the face-down dead body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi which drifted ashore after their boats capsized is haunting, reminding us of this reality, albeit in obliviousness.

While Ukrainians fleeing the Russian aggression are generously welcomed as refugees, the Western world turns a blind eye to the plight of the non-white racial 'other'. Let us also not forget the role of the Western world in creating debilitating political and economic situations that are causing the refugee influx from these countries. A prime example of this is how the American disapproval of the Bashar al-Assad regime became one of the biggest factors in creating a hotbed for a geopolitical tussle in Syria. It is similar to how the US-led NATO has abandoned Afghanistan, handing the fate of the country to the hands of the Taliban.

It is believed that the Titan travellers may not have even realised the implosion as it would have happened in milliseconds— much lesser time for the human brain to process the impending death. Contrary to that, these refugees would have died a thousand times before actual death, with their lives flashing in front of them, even as they saw with alarm water drowning their hopes, dreams and kin. In fact, an investigative report by the BBC suggests that the boat might have been inactive for close to seven hours remaining stuck to one spot of the sea before sinking [10].

Grief and death are indeed inevitable parts of a refugee's life. So much so that the normalising is done with not even a symbolic sigh. It is best illustrated by what transpired post the missing of the submersible and the boat. Millions of dollars were spent in joint efforts by the US and the Canadian Coastguards, US Navy, and other governmental and private entities, searching for Titan [11]. Contrarily, within a day of the tragic capsizing, the Greek Coastguard gave up on the search and rescue operations, resigning to the impossibility of finding the rest of the missing persons.

Unlike the curious case of the Titan, the refugee agony is played out over and over again— their bodies are dehumanised, and tragedies normalised. And that has got to do a lot with the amnesic nature of world politics, perpetuating structural inequalities reminiscent of the colonial past. The world, caught in this web, forgets to empathise with the 'ill-fated' and moves on.

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