The epic saga of migrants heading for Europe

A cornerstone of Western literature, Homer’s Odyssey recounts Ulysses’ perilous wanderings and the many mythological characters he meets before arriving home to liberate his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. This story is used as a metaphor by journalist Patrick Kingsley in a captivating manner to narrate the saga of Hashem al-Souki, a Syrian refugee who fled his country after being imprisoned, tortured and humiliated by agents of the Assad regime.

Forced to leave Egypt following the military putsch which put an end to the toleration of Syrian refugees staying in the country, our protagonist decided to leave behind his wife and children to risk crossing the Mediterranean, paying smugglers who had become professionals in trafficking human beings. “Traversing these unforgiving waters and the treacherous terrain that would follow was worth the slim chance of securing a safe home for his children in Europe. If he failed, at least he would fail alone,” explains the author, describing, via the account of Mr. al-Souki, the grim reasoning of these refugees who have no other choice in the face of war (Syria), lifetime military service (Eritrea), slavery (Libya) or simply poverty.

The book offers a detailed insight into the world of smugglers and traffickers, replete with risky interviews and exclusive figures on the human trafficking business model in Ajdabiya (Libya), Agadez (Niger) and Izmir (Turkey), and explains how this illegal transportation business continues despite the announced measures to put an stop to it. We also learn why boats are so overcrowded and through which sources (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) exhausted refugees gain their information as they make their way through Europe, first to Italy or Greece, then on foot or by train through France or along the hostile Balkan route, intent on seeking asylum. Germany and Sweden are the preferred destinations, due to a more humane welcome and more efficient procedures for family reunification.

As The Guardian correspondent for migration, Patrick Kingsley is not someone who churns out the classic arguments of European elites who flirt with populism, such as “they can seek asylum in Middle Eastern countries” (which is already the case in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Jordan, the four countries sheltering the vast majority of refugees) or “these are not refugees but economic migrants from Nigeria, Somalia or Eritrea” (according to the UN, 84% of migrants arriving by boat are from the top 10 refugee-producing countries, while few migrants come from Somalia or Nigeria; there are, moreover, very good reasons to flee from such countries as Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq). The author is very critical of the role played by the European Union (and its Frontex agency), of the absence of any European-level refugee policy, and of the non-existence among Member States of the solidarity needed to manage the refugee crisis. Against the backdrop of the bankruptcy of the ruling classes, the author highlights the courageous and voluntary acts of European citizens (such as Austrian farmer Hans, British pensioners Eric and Philippa, and many more) in helping refugees.

Kingsley is no great fan of the distinction made by left-wing liberals between “good” refugees and “bad” economic migrants. Instead, the journalist-cum-author pleads for a return to the original and neutral meaning of the term “migrant”, i.e. a term describing a person’s action and not their intention, which is inevitably subjective. He rightly explains that the reality is much more complex and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make such a distinction: “The story of humanity is essentially the story of human movement. In the near future, people will move even more, particularly if, as some predict, climate change sparks mass migration on an unprecedented scale.”

The New Odyssey, by this present-day Homer, dismantles the current strategy of dehumanising refugees (in the use of figures and statistics and the categorisation of “foreigners”, “slaves”, etc.) in certain xenophobic discourses, and reframes the refugee crisis as a potential new starting point for Europe.

— Mehmet Koksal

The New Odyssey: The Story of Twenty-First Century Refugee Crisis