

**‘I am here but my soul is in my country’
Poems for Refugee Week, Manchester
EMAS, 2002**

Frankly, when I pick up a book of poems written by children my natural inclination is to hurl it into the corner immediately; it generally saves time. This one is different.

The book, published by the excellent Manchester Ethnic Minority Achievement Service, arose from a poetry competition organised in the city’s schools as part of refugee Week in 2001. 200 pupils aged between 7 and 15 responded and wrote on the theme of being a refugee. As Pinaki Goshal notes in his introduction, ‘The standard of writing was very high and the judges found it difficult to decide which poems should win an award.’

The editors have helpfully organised the book into various sections dealing with different aspects of the refugee experience:

- Leaving
- Being a refugee
- Impressions of Britain
- Memories

And it concludes with a very helpful ‘Background information’ section with 13 useful pages that teachers might refer to if they are doing work on the topic of:

- Who are refugees?
- History of refugees in the UK
- Refugees around the world
- Biographies of famous refugees
- Refugees’ countries of origin
- Refugees in British history 100-1970

The bulk of the book is rightly given over to the poetry, 24 clever, poignant and elegant pieces written in English and some translated by the poets from or into their other languages (including Arabic, Farsi, Ndebele and Urdu).

Here are some extracts:

Feelings of a Refugee

I feel petrified.
I am like a picnic with no
Food.

I feel scared.
I am like a head with
No hair.

I feel shocked.
I am like a pencil in
The wrong pot.

I feel frightened.
I am like a person in the wrong
World.

Leiba Emeche

As you might imagine, this sense of being displaced and lost is a recurrent theme but it’s also a challenge that is met head on, as in the final lines of a longish poem entitled ‘Adjusting to another world’ by Qasim Ali:
Nobody’s perfect
They think they are
But I’ll have to fit in
Because I can
Because I’m worthy
Because I know I’m capable of it
I haven’t come this far for nothing

Not all of the poets are refugees themselves and it is the enormous empathy that shines through the work, sometimes expressed with disarming clarity as in this poem by Abdul J. Choudhury:

Imagine

Imagine having to move to another country
Because of a war
That other people started.
It’s not your fault.
In fact it has nothing
To do with you.

You leave your friends and relatives behind.
You arrive and you don’t know anyone.
And nobody knows you.
You’re alone and scared.
You have to make new friends.
And get used to the place.

You have to learn a totally new language
You go to school
And everyone stares at you like
You’re different.
You feel that you are.
But inside you’re the same
As everyone else.

I’m glad I wasn’t
Put in that situation.
Aren’t you?

The final word goes to the final poem in the anthology - the poem that gave it its title. It needs no further comment from me:

I am here and my soul is in my country
The bright shining light won’t fade from my eyes
As long as my country is on the other side

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I will send my pigeon – I will write my letters
This will not go on for ever
I will return to it – and draw its skies
Above green hills – full of life
With its golden sand and silver water – magic

Like the beauty of Horio in the waters of the east
A dress of flowers for my country
The moon is its jewellery
The rays of its sun bring us together and forever
I am here and my soul is in my country

Fatima Fituri

Frank Monaghan
Staff Tutor in Education, The Open University

The book is available from:
Manchester EMAS
Palmerston St, Ancoats
Manchester, M12 6PE
0161 273 4232
priced £3.50 +p&p