



Liminality, Resilience and Refugeehood in Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath*

Sibel İzmir¹



¹Asst. Prof. Dr. Sibel İzmir, Atılım University,
School of Arts and Sciences, English Language
and Literature, Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID: S.I. 0000-000-7821-6328

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:

Sibel İzmir,
Atılım University, School of Arts and Sciences,
English Language and Literature, Ankara, Türkiye
E-mail/E-posta: sibelizmir@atilim.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

The dystopian play *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) written by Scottish playwright Zinnie Harris not only echoes a bleak future, but also visualises a subversive narrative in which Europe goes through an economic collapse, and Europeans become refugees, trying to immigrate to African countries on boats. Dana, the protagonist who is an expert in customer relations with a university degree and ambitious career plans, and her sister Jasmine are seen getting on a boat and trying to reach Alexandria, Egypt just like many other Europeans. It is not coincidental that Dana's and her sister's lives turn topsy-turvy after Dana's having a sexual intercourse with a man working for the United Nations named Jarron who claims that he is a demon. Due to a couple of catastrophic events orchestrated by the demon, both women get drowned at the end like a majority of refugees in recent years. In this study, the experiences of Dana and Jasmine throughout the play and their resilience will be explored within the framework of the concept of "liminality" with a special focus on the meaning and (im) possibility of going beyond liminality. The article contends that Zinnie Harris in her play critically revisits the refugee problem in order to unsettle Europeans and European politics and to demonstrate how refugees are made the victims of personal/political expediency by ironically putting the audience/readers in a liminal situation.

Keywords: Liminality, Refugeehood, Resilience, Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*



Written by Zinnie Harris in 2015, directed by Vicky Featherstone and staged at the Royal Court Theatre the same year, *How to Hold Your Breath* portrays a dystopian future in which Europe is in the midst of an economic collapse, and many Europeans are forced to become refugees, attempting to make their way by boat to African countries. Still being topical in terms of its subject matter, the play strikingly subverts narratives of refugeehood by problematizing such concepts as the politics of refugeehood, the United Nations and its strategies in border crossing, class, gender and identity issues and the meaning of borders and borderlands.

When it comes to refugees and refugeehood, the first thing that comes to mind is borders and borderlands. One can say that borders and borderlands are everywhere. They are ubiquitous. As the American poet Robert Frost illustrates it in his spectacular poem “Mending Wall” (1914), people have been taught to believe that “*Good fences make good neighbors.*”¹ From the very moment one is born into this world, s/he lives between, among and through borders drawn geopolitically, ideologically, abstractly and concretely. It would not be a hyperbole to say that the way human beings construct and live their lives is defined and regulated by the politics of lines and borders. In this respect, fields of study such as anthropology and theatre are of interest in the study of borders and immigration questioning whether good fences really make good neighbours or not.

Anthropology as a scientific field which studies, in very simple terms, “*humankind, including human origins, institutions, beliefs, and social and cultural forms*”², is one of the areas which has been interested in theatre studies due to the ritualistic origins of theatre. Just like theatre scholars who utilise anthropology in their examinations, anthropologists produced works which focus on the links between rituals and theatre. The British anthropologist Victor Turner is one of such scholars. His re-interpretation and assessment of Arnold van Gennep’s concepts of “rites of passage” and “liminality” are of paramount importance particularly when such concepts as borders, borderlands, volunteer or forced border crossing are concerned. In this study, the concept of “liminality” will act as a tool for criticism in the analysis of Zinnie Harris’s play *How to Hold Your Breath* with a particular focus on the meaning and (im)possibility of crossing borders. The article contends that Harris in her play, through a deconstructive way, critically revisits the refugee problem in order to unsettle Europeans and European politics and shows them that border crossers are doomed to become the victims of personal/political expediency and thus remain in limbo by ironically, playfully and subliminally putting the audience/readers in a liminal situation.

Victor Turner (1920-1983) bases his theory of liminality on Arnold van Gennep’s (1873-1957) concept of “rites of passage”. A Dutch-German ethnographer, Gennep in his seminal

1 Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” Accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall>.

2 Mike Morris, *Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 11.

work entitled *The Rites of Passage (Rites de Passage/1909)* makes an exclusive analysis of ceremonies. According to Genep, when ceremonies in a person's life are examined, it is seen that they are a sort of life crises, a rite of passage. He puts forth that when the activities related with such ceremonies were examined taking their order and content into consideration, three major phases are to be found: separation, transition and incorporation. He names this pattern as “*rites of passage*’, which are observed during change of place, social position and age, as he puts “*from one age to another and from one occupation to another [. . .] from group to group and from one social situation to the next.*”³ Genep, in his assessment of rites, concludes that the analysis of any life-crisis ceremony contains the pattern of separation, transition and incorporation which are labelled as preliminal rites, liminal rites and postliminal rites although these subcategories may vary from one society to another.⁴ He particularly emphasizes the significance of transitions in any culture and names the middle stage in a rite of passage a “*liminal period.*”⁵

As a matter of fact, it was Victor Turner who paved the way for the deployment of Genep's ideas on liminality. In *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner further develops Genep's analyses on the rites of passage. Turner explains what Genep has put forth and focusses on the ambiguity during the liminal period: “*During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.*”⁶ After contemplating on Genep's classifications, Turner forms his own ideas on liminality. Considering the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae as ambiguous, he points out that “*liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial [...]. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.*”⁷ Obviously, Turner describes liminal entities as being in a state between established positions defined by law, custom, convention, and ceremony. Since liminal entities exist outside of defined positions or societal norms, often being compared to transitional states such as death, the womb, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, the wilderness, and eclipses., they exist in a space between what is defined and what is not.

As it is crystal clear, liminal subjects are in the margins. Turner exemplifies this by the initiation or puberty rites of neophytes who might be represented as having nothing since as liminal beings “*they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or*

3 Arnold van Genep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 3.

4 Genep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.

5 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 11.

6 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94-95.

7 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

role, position in a kinship system –in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.”⁸ In this respect, it is seen that liminal beings, who lack any distinguishing features that would indicate their rank or position, are supposed to obey their superiors and accept punishment without complaint.

What is of utmost importance in the study of Turner is that he also noticed similarities between modern societies and Ndembu rituals. As it is elaborated by Bjørn Thomassen, Turner “repeatedly identified parallels with non-tribal or ‘modern’ societies, clearly sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had relevance far beyond the specific ethnographic context [...] Turner realized that ‘liminality’ served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences.”⁹ Although Turner suggested that in modern consumerist societies, liminal experiences are, as it were, replaced by “liminoid” ones and they are most of the time optional without a “resolution of personal crisis or a change of status”¹⁰, still many scholars and researchers use the term to talk about “betwixt and between” situations since the term can be applied to both space and time as put forth by Thomassen: “Single moments, longer periods, or even whole epochs can be liminal. Liminal places can be specific thresholds; they can also be more extended areas, like ‘borderlands’ or, arguably, whole countries, places in important in-between positions between larger civilizations.”¹¹ Thus, liminality can refer to single moments or longer periods that are in an in-between or transitional state. Liminal places can be defined as specific thresholds or larger areas, such as borderlands or entire countries, that occupy critical in-between positions.

Composed of twenty scenes most of which take place at borderlands, Zinnie Harris’s apocalyptic play *How to Hold Your Breath* not only echoes a Mephistophelian bleak future, but also visualises a subversive narrative in which Europe goes through an economic collapse and Europeans become refugees, trying to immigrate to African countries on boats. The play received mixed criticisms. Michael Billington, a famous theatre critic writing for *The Guardian*, holds the view that the play shows “once-comfortable capitalists put into the position of refugees”¹² and criticizes it for “illustrating a thesis rather than exploring a conflict.”¹³ Dominic Cavendish, another notable critic writing for *The Telegraph* finds the play “perturbing”¹⁴ since

8 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

9 Bjørn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 14.

10 Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” 15.

11 Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” 16.

12 Michael Billington, “How to Hold Your Breath Review,” *The Guardian*, February 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/11/how-to-hold-your-breath-review-maxine-peake-royal-court-theatre>.

13 Billington, “How to Hold Your Breath Review.”

14 Dominic Cavendish, “How to Hold Your Breath, Royal Court, Review,” *The Telegraph*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/11403321/How-to-hold-your-breath-Royal-Court-review-perturbing.html>.

it “operates on multiple levels”¹⁵, yet he also criticizes the play for being “a little schematic.”¹⁶ As Cavendish points out:

*Dana’s perturbing odyssey – in which she winds up penniless (or rather Euro-less), resorts to prostitution and finally joins a crammed vessel of migrants trying to reach Alexandria – has a satirical streak. Imagining Europeans as refugees is an exaggerated doomsday scenario that could be read as the product of Dana’s mental disintegration and the sort of collective hysteria that privileges Western panic over real Third World tragedies.*¹⁷

Whether the play is hyperbolic or not, it is for sure that Zinnie Harris very successfully makes her audiences feel the ambiguity, unpredictability and precariousness of life and economic structures which may change all of a sudden. The unprecedented and sudden collapse of Europe in the play emerges because of Jarron, the devil in the guise of a man who is ironically working for the United Nations, an international organization founded in 1945 and is currently composed of 193 Member States. As it is known, the UN was formed right after the Second World War, a time when people were desperately in need of peace. Headquartered in New York, the UN claims that it is maintaining “international peace and security, promoting development and giving humanitarian assistance to those in need.”¹⁸ Although it helped many people in need, the UN has also been the target of harsh criticisms. Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN secretary general said that the United Nations “was created not to lead mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell”¹⁹, indeed it saved millions of lives, yet it has been criticized for its “numbing bureaucracy, its institutional cover-ups of corruption and the undemocratic politics of its security council.”²⁰ As Chris McGreal asserts, the UN “goes to war in the name of peace but has been a bystander through genocide.”²¹ Such criticisms are relevant for *How to Hold Your Breath* since Harris openly satirizes the UN and its politics by creating Jarron who is the demon in disguise. It is Jarron who “seemingly orchestrates the social and economic collapse of Europe”²² to bring the end of Dana. In this respect, the UN acts as an agent who first brings the end of just two women and soon the whole of Europe. Furthermore, people become refugees not because of war among countries, but between Dana and Jarron since the devil (thus all economic systems) sees love as a commercial transaction. He says to Dana: “You must want something. There is always something. A new phone or another dress [...] I don’t want this to be left messy, like either of us have any reason to even think about last night ever

15 Cavendish, “How to Hold Your Breath, Royal Court, Review.”

16 Cavendish, “How to Hold Your Breath, Royal Court, Review.”

17 Cavendish, “How to Hold Your Breath, Royal Court, Review.”

18 “History of the United Nations,” accessed August 18, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un>.

19 Dag Hammarskjöld, “Dealing with Crimes Against Humanity,” in Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, accessed August 18, 2022, <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/publication/dealing-crimes-humanity/>.

20 Chris McGreal, “A world of problems: The United Nations at 70,” *The Guardian*, September 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/what-has-the-un-achieved-united-nations>.

21 McGreal, “A world of problems: The United Nations at 70.”

22 Dominic Cavendish, “How to Hold Your Breath, Royal Court, Review.”

again.”²³ In a way, he/the demon/the UN wants to clear off his conscience, and metaphorically speaking, this could be interpreted as the portrayal of the UN which helps refugees in order to clean off its conscience as well. In addition to the “*reversal of current political realities*”²⁴, the play explicitly criticizes the UN as an international organization for considering humanitarian assistance as a commercial transaction. Thus, the UN becomes an emblem of a demon which feeds itself on survivors and sees each of them as transactions. Any transaction certainly relies on a mutual agreement, yet in this play, it is implied that people are doomed to get dependent on the UN – it is what has been created for and imposed upon them; first chaos is created, and then the UN enters the stage to help. In the middle of such chaos stand borders and borderlands. Decker and Winchock indicate that a border is “*the oppositional line drawn between good and evil, true and false, white and black, male and female, dominant and subordinate: the hierarchical binary pairs constructed and upheld by Western society.*”²⁵ Thus, the study of borders concentrates on the hierarchical power structures that create lines and criticizes those powerful structures which are strengthened by the lines they have themselves created.²⁶ In *How to Hold Your Breath*, the portrayal of the UN represented by a demon echoes a similar critique.

As it is clear, although the journey of Dana and Jasmine initially begins as a voluntary one, it soon turns out to be forced immigration. The two women, who are self-confident and educated Europeans living in Berlin, find themselves as refugees trying to survive, which is reminiscent of the Syrian refugees and their situation in recent decades. At this point, what borders signify should be clarified. As Jessica Elbert Decker and Dylan Winchock point out in *Borderlands and Liminal Subjects. Transgressing the Limits in Philosophy and Literature*, borders are not natural phenomena as they cannot be found in nature. They are to be found as an outcome of the imposition of human beings and such an imposition is purposeful. Therefore, “*a border, then may be better understood as being more than a line: it is a physical limit. [...] We delimit with borders those things which we identify as part of our self from those things that we have rejected as ‘outside’.*”²⁷ A border is not only a physical limit, but also a political and ideological one full of hierarchical binaries. When borderlands are concerned, it can be said that they are not “*[f]ixed in place, but rather exist as the unstable space between places, or the shifting stream of marginalized narratives beneath the surface of the dominant organizational maps, striving to be heard over the din of an overarching ideological system.*”²⁸ In this respect, what Decker and Winchock argue about borderlands relies on the concept of liminality just

23 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 24-25.

24 William C. Boles, “Review of *How to Hold Your Breath* by Zinnie Harris and *Game* by Mike Barlett” *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 1 (2016): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2016.0015>.

25 Jessica Elbert Decker and Dylan Winchock, “Introduction,” in *Borderlands and Liminal Subjects Transgressing the Limits in Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Jessica Elbert Decker and Dylan Winchock (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67813-9>.

26 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 2.

27 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 1.

28 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 3.

like the approach of many other researchers who have utilised the same concept due to its practicality and applicability in many fields of study ranging from psychology, (postmodern and postcolonial) literary studies to international relations, immigration studies in social and political theory.

How to Hold Your Breath opens in Europe, Berlin, and soon the setting shifts to an imaginary place called Hartenharten, which is treated like a borderland. Several other surreal and fictional spaces are mentioned until the two sisters find themselves on the boat to reach Alexandria in Egypt. Reminiscent of a morality play, it starts with Dana Edwards, the protagonist, directly speaking to the audience explaining how she is living in the margins with the implication that she is actually a symbol representing the human condition:

*I am eyes closed, head bent in every gathering. I am knees bowed, chest to the floor. I am flower by the wall, grass in the shade. [...] I am soil. I am earth. I am less than earth. I am poor. I'm so poor my skin is my clothes. I am uncovered. Ashamed. The land can't feed me. I am the end. The dead. The carcass by the roadside. I am the abyss into which people dread to fall.*²⁹

As the play unfolds, we understand that Dana has met a man named Jarron in a bar followed by sexual intercourse on the same night. Just after the day breaks, Jarron offers Dana to pay extra for the continuation of having sex which shocks Dana. He accuses Dana of coming to him in the bar by “wearing practically nothing, underwear”³⁰, which starts a series of disputes between the two. Although Dana expresses that “sex that you pay for is toxic”³¹, Jarron hardly understands her, and he feels like being tricked by her: “I organise people for a living. I write reports, I travel miles and miles, people don't do this to me. I don't get caught like this.”³² Without doubt, Harris is concerned about holding a mirror up to the politics of the UN, and from time to time, she concentrates on the subordination of women more. As Elaine Aston discusses: “Harris's drama aspires to a women-centred telling of pan-European economic and migratory crisis, of a debt-ridden and dehumanised Europe”³³. Therefore, it is remarkable to note that Jarron, as a representative of the UN, is portrayed as a man despising and intimidating women in an exaggerated manner using a patriarchal discourse. Harris explicitly criticizes the UN for its patriarchal structure and negligence in fostering women's rights in addition to its political expediency.

Dana's refusal of Jarron's money and the demon's attempts to pay the money through various disguises seem like a depiction of a “larger economic crisis when two companies or

29 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 13.

30 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 18.

31 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 20.

32 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 22-23.

33 Elaine Aston, “Moving Women Centre Stage: Structures of Feminist-Tragic Feeling,” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no.2 (2017): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2017-0027>.

governments are unable to reconcile their financial accounts.”³⁴ With surrealist overtones in the play, Jarron tries to prove that he is the demon: “*I thought you would notice my semen is black, my face twisting, my nails ridged, in short it didn’t occur to me you would do anything other than hold me in contempt. I am unloveable, the unloved [...] I am a devil, I told you, a demon [...] People cross the road to get out of my way, I am a nightmare [...]*.”³⁵ In his self-description, it is interesting to note that Jarron sees himself just like Shakespeare’s unforgettable villain Richard III who confesses that dogs bark at him when he stands next to them. However, Dana is no Lady Anne, and it is impossible to manipulate her. Jarron leaves her promising that she will be begging to be paid by him within two weeks as he is a demon, a god³⁶. Although neither Dana nor the audience/readers are likely to believe this demonic story at the beginning, when Jasmine shows her sister the hickey under her bra during her change of clothes, Dana asks a question: “*What if he has done something to me?*”³⁷ Though this question is asked in a light-hearted way, it implies to us the possibility that Dana has already started to feel like she is at the threshold, in an in-between situation to believe or not to believe Jarron or demons and the God/gods. The audience/readers also try to understand the validity of Jarron’s claim of being a demon and thus feel just like Dana.

Scene Five shows us that Dana has started to enter a liminal phase as she now decides to research demons questioning whether Jarron might be the devil himself or not. She, therefore, goes to a library and consults a librarian. She asks about the representations of demons in literature. The Librarian’s comments on demons are noteworthy: “*in literature someone who classed himself as a demon wouldn’t like to have a debt. He will work really hard to make sure he doesn’t owe anyone anything. That is the basis of selling your soul. Devil or demon, they are the original transactional creature.*”³⁸ Although the Librarian tries to help Dana with various self-help books beginning with “how to...” such as “How to Live with No Money”, “How to Get to Sleep in a Room that is Now Too Hot”, “How to Survive an Economic Disaster”, or “How to Stay Alive during Prostitution”³⁹ which all foreshadow the predicaments Dana and Jasmine are about to experience, he actually acts like the Devil’s Advocate and joins Dana in her trip to Alexandria. Not surprisingly, the Librarian’s recommendation of a book entitled “How to Hold Your Breath for a Very Long Time” mirrors the content and end of the play referring to the boat journey and drowning of the two sisters.

Asking the help of a librarian for giving her advice on some books that include the representations of demons in literature, the play soon shifts to a nightmarish scene for Dana

34 Boles, “Review of *How to Hold Your Breath* by Zinnie Harris and *Game* by Mike Barlett,” 105.

35 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 23.

36 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 25.

37 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 34.

38 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 45.

39 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 105-129.

where she meets Jarron who offers to pay her 45 Euros and to be released by her: “*Please take the money and release me*”⁴⁰; she is expected to take the money for her “*unlocking services*”⁴¹, an offer which is again rejected. It is soon revealed that Jarron has appeared not physically, but in the mind of Dana as Jasmine warns Dana about her self-talk while sleeping. The devil is determined to carry out his plan, as Dana has been asked to make a presentation for an international position in Alexandria after succeeding in her job interview. From now on, the play accelerates in speed, and more tricks would come in disguise to trap Dana into taking 45 Euros. Before setting off for Alexandria, the first offer comes from the Librarian who informs Dana that the library had fined her in the past and that they overcharged her and that they had to give her 45 Euros back as a rebate. Surely, Dana does not take the bait as she says she has never been to the library before, and she is now convinced that the Librarian is the demon/Jarron himself. She goes out of control and rips the shirt of the Librarian to see if he has the scar on his body (which she has seen on Jarron’s body). Currently, she does not act like a true liminal subject as she is very self-confident and not hesitant at all. Nevertheless, as soon as she realizes that the Librarian is not actually Jarron in disguise, she begins exhibiting characteristics of a liminal being. She does not feel the same as the old Dana with her firm beliefs and values, and is unable to fully comprehend and absorb the things she has been experiencing. Her faith/fairness in God is shattered as she is somehow forced to negotiate with the demon.

As the play proceeds, the way liminality comes to the fore reminds us of the fact that “*liminality is very essentially a spatial concept.*”⁴² As discussed by Thomassen: “*Van Genneep clearly saw territorial border zones or border lines, thresholds or portals, as structurally identical with the intermediate period of a ritual passage: spatial and geographical progression correlates with the ritual marking of a cultural passage*”⁴³, which is very similar to what Dana and Jasmine experience. When they start their journey from Berlin to Alexandria without knowing that they are going to be tested again and again by the demon, they are portrayed as very strong, self-confident and resilient European women. However, Dana (unlike Jasmine) has already started to behave like a liminal subject when she is trying to understand Jarron and his demonic features. Despite her affirmation of Jasmine’s rhetorical question “*you know there is no such thing as a demon, right?*”⁴⁴, she cannot suppress her doubts: “*but if there was such a thing, it would be just like him to change his appearance and become other people.*”⁴⁵ As Thomassen puts forth: “*Whenever previously existing borders or limits are lifted away or dissolve into fundamental doubt, the liminal presents itself with a challenge: how to cope with*

40 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 49.

41 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 50.

42 Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 91.

43 Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 91.

44 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 70.

45 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 70.

this uncertainty? Who can lead us out of here? How so? What is my own role in this chaos?"⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, Dana's suspicions will be justified due to ever-growing serious predicaments while they are "trying to get to Athens then across to Alexandria."⁴⁷ The first serious crisis appears on the train when the inspector informs them that there is a problem with their credit card, and their bank has refused the payment of the tickets. They are told either to pay in cash or get off the train. The price they have to pay is 45 Euros, again the same price Jarron has offered to pay Dana. The train inspector, or Jarron in disguise as Dana believes, offers them to buy a-two-for-one ticket which costs 45 Euros meaning that one ticket costing 45 Euros would be complimentary. She is almost sure that the offer has been made by the demon: "we aren't taking his made-up offer / I know what this is."⁴⁸ Since they have 41 Euros in cash, they have to get off the train in a place called Hartenharten. Things get even more weird and precarious in Hartenharten; Dana is surprised to encounter the Librarian who informs her that he works there on the weekends. Bringing her the books she has wanted and informing her that all the banks have shut by recommending a book entitled "How to Find a Bank when They Have All Shut", he asserts that it is an internal economic collapse which has happened before as well.

Although Dana has been acting like a liminal subject unlike Jasmine, the liminal phase of both sisters becomes explicit in Hartenharten where they are deprived of anything at the hotel room. As the (German) name of this imaginary place suggests, living conditions in Hartenharten are extremely hard and harsh, which contributes to the liminal mood the sisters are in. It is freezing cold, and neither the heater nor the kettle works. At the beginning, Jasmine, still in the full grip of her European identity, says "What we need is an embassy. We're Europeans. We'll go to the embassy tomorrow and tell them what has happened, OK?"⁴⁹ and "Because we live in Europe, because nothing really bad happens. We both have jobs, the worst of this is, is a bit of an inconvenience [...] but really in the grand scheme of life, not so bad."⁵⁰ However, Dana and her sister soon realize that Europe has financially collapsed. From this point on, their lives turn topsy-turvy. Dana is visited in her vision by the demon who insists on taking the money in a threatening manner:

*I am a demon, I don't have any morals, any boundaries. I can go sideways I can go up I can go down. I can punish your great granddaughter for this, or your aged ancestor. it's all a bit silly isn't it, for a principle. For pride?
for your ego, for putting yourself first.
you can name your price, if crisp bank notes aren't your thing two return tickets to Alexandria.*⁵¹

46 Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 2.

47 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 74.

48 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 75.

49 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 88.

50 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 92.

51 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 98.

Although the demon says to Dana that he is a version in her head because she is imagining him, his eating the last remaining chocolates and bread belonging to the sisters will serve as proof that he has not been just a vision. Not only Dana, but also audience members/readers are situated at the threshold due to the indeterminacy and uncanniness of the experience. Precarity in the play continues to multiply pushing Dana and the audience/readers into a liminal status. The cold hotel room all of a sudden turns into an extremely hot place where “*Dana is too hot in her bed*”⁵² while “*the Librarian is giving her books*”⁵³ and “*he is fanning himself*.”⁵⁴ Equally surprising is the reason why the Librarian is at the hotel room with Dana; a question Dana does not bother to ask any more.

In spite of all the deprivations Dana and Jasmine have been experiencing at the hotel, they have tried to remain strong; nothing has devastated them as much as Jasmine’s start of bleeding, threatening the life of her/the baby and making her desperate: “*so much of it [blood] Dana, there was so much of it / then of course as more and more came it got hotter / only a tiny person, how could there be so much?*”⁵⁵ This affects Dana very dramatically, and in Scene Fifteen, she gives up resisting the demon:

*No NO NO NO NO. Alright. Alright, you win.
Hands up. You are bigger than me. I got the message.
You win. I’ll take your money, I’ll do whatever. Don’t do this to Jasmine and her baby. This has nothing to do with Jasmine.
oi, where are you. Come back. I said I’ll take your money.
it was just sex. Lust. Nothing happened.
the devil can’t be tamed by love. You stay all powerful.
give me your fucking money.
where are you? where are you?*⁵⁶

All the efforts of Dana to find a doctor and save the baby have been futile. Dana is now pushed to the margins, and although she calls the devil to take his money, she does not give up her hope to save Jasmine. She does her utmost to persuade the woman on the phone (when she calls for an ambulance) that she would be able to pay in cash although she is completely penniless: “*of course I want the ambulance. We have money in a bank. We have money. Lots of money. Fucking hell, demon, I’ll take the money, please someone. Please someone just help my sister. Please, please please. PLEASE.*”⁵⁷

It is now too late to make a deal with the devil. After losing the baby, the two sisters are seen by the roadside in tatters. Upon losing everything and selling even her mobile phone for

52 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 104.

53 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 104.

54 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 104.

55 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 108.

56 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 109-110.

57 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 114.

Jasmine's treatment, Dana accepts that they "have hit rock bottom"⁵⁸ and thinks that "whatever happens now, it can't be as bad."⁵⁹ Worse things are yet to come. The Librarian notifies Dana that it just seems impossible to get to Alexandria for her presentation as "the borders are shut. Istanbul has shut its borders one way, Alexandria the other."⁶⁰ Even worse is that due to blood loss, Jasmine is anaemic, and she is definitely in need of iron. In this chaotic and dystopian environment, people have started to beg on the streets, families make their children beg and even sell them. All these things are happening in Europe, of which Dana was proud to be a citizen only a couple of days ago. The question the Librarian asks Dana is noteworthy and telling as it indicates how not only Dana, but all other people have been put in a liminal status: "look around you. / do you recognize a single thing any more?"⁶¹ According to Dana, this place which was Europe until yesterday is hell now: looters, beggars, people knifing one another, and no police care as they are not paid anymore. Dana as a liminal subject tries to remember the old days, ironically a very recent past, when people used to care: "people did use to care, didn't they? We didn't just imagine it."⁶² Actually, it is implied that people have a caring and loving attitude to one another as long as their basic needs are met. Now, there is no petrol in the pumps, and people have started to use bicycles not out of nature-friendliness, but they have no other option.

Jasmine, who was portrayed as the more logical sister at the beginning and did not show the features of liminality as much as Dana, completely changes and enters the liminal phase upon losing her baby. Frequently forgetting the fact that she has lost her baby, she is traumatized, in despair and does not want to go anywhere: "I don't even want to go to the border. I am happy here, in the dust / can't I just lie down here and forget about it all."⁶³ It is clear that she does not have the strength to move her finger due to her anaemia and depression.

Dana, in order to find money to hospitalize her sister, after handing over Jasmine to the Librarian's protection, is engaged in prostitution with a man in the park. She wants 45 Euros for having this sexual intercourse but has to consent to 10 Euros as a result of the bargain made by the man. During the brutal and rape-like sex, once again Dana and the audience/readers are made to feel liminality as the space becomes a surrealist one: Dana unexpectedly begins to start her presentation for the job interview, most probably in the form of a vision or she may be speaking with the interviewers on the phone. Since she is an expert in customer relations, the content of her presentation implies that customer experiences and economic structures are governed by capital-centred emotions, just like prostitution in the capitalistic world order.

58 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 117.

59 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 117.

60 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 119.

61 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 122.

62 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 123.

63 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 127.

After a few exchanges of words with the interviewers who ask Dana whether she would be able to reach Alexandria, we see Dana and the punter coming to the end of the brutal sex scene. Dana is “*bruised and broken*”⁶⁴ just to save her sister. But, she is going to be hurt even more. Soon after having sex, she meets two women in the park, Marta and Clara, the former being a famous anchor-woman and the latter a lawyer, both of whom practice prostitution now. They say that the place which Dana knows to be an ordinary park is now an open-air brothel; even former primary school teachers are there, and the spot Dana has used belongs to them. Clara takes Dana’s money, the money for which she has prostituted herself to a horrible man in order to save her sister’s life. Marta joins Clara, and the two women attack her. Although Dana succeeds to take her money back at first as a resilient liminal woman, the savage women retake the money and kick her. Her prostitution brings her no money, but traumatic memories. As mentioned before, liminality is the “*in-between or marginal state, in which an individual resides before becoming integrated into his or her new position in society.*”⁶⁵ In other words, it is a temporary situation in which both the individual and society have a mutual interaction: On the one hand, the individual is transformed to enter and adapt to a new phase; on the other hand, it shows us the “*ability of society to have mastery over that which is outside of its limits – or at least the ability to reinforce the exclusion of the other as an opposing binary to the cultural dominant.*”⁶⁶ Thus, the liminal subject finds himself at the threshold: S/he is neither in his previous identity nor has s/he integrated himself into the new situation and therefore feeling marginalized. There is no doubt that liminality might become something positive for the dominant where the marginal subject becomes passive and is transformed.⁶⁷ Until now, Dana has been fighting with the devil in order not to give in. The park scene with the punter and women indicates that it is hardly possible for Dana to transgress the newly-established norms. She is destined to remain at the threshold. Despite this, those in the margins might get united and form *communitas*, a term coined by Turner to describe “*a sense of heightened togetherness which people might feel with one another once the superficial clothing of age, status, occupation, gender and other differences had been removed.*”⁶⁸ Dana and Jasmine try to find the *communitas* not in their new environment, but in one another. In the play, we do not see them get integrated into the social order as there is hardly one and they remain in the margins.

Scene Nineteen is where Harris most effectively depicts the pitiful and brutal situation of refugees who have no choice, but to board a boat while being “*jammed in like sardines.*”⁶⁹ On the boat, in addition to Dana and Jasmine, there are hundreds of other passengers (over three hundred according to Jasmine). The scene is full of political references made especially by

64 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 138.

65 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 4.

66 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 4.

67 Decker and Winchock, “Introduction,” 4.

68 Nigel Rapport, *Social and Cultural Anthropology The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 267.

69 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 143.

Jasmine. She naively thinks that politicians would get aid from especially African countries which were provided help by European countries before. However, Dana, who functions as the mouthpiece of Harris from time to time, points out that European countries helped African countries very little. When Jasmine says that Europe can get aid now from all those countries that they “used to give aid to. African countries”, Dana replies: “we gave a bit to, we didn’t give very much.”⁷⁰ This is a direct criticism of the political strategies the UN holds in its distribution of help and donation across the world.

Although Dana and Jasmine become stripped off their European identity and act like liminal subjects since they are now neither Europeans nor do they belong to the dystopian place they are trapped in, they express their nostalgia for “a clean bed with clean sheets”, “a house with a back yard, maybe a swing”, “fresh water out of a tap, bread just like at home” and “shoes that do not make [their] feet bleed”⁷¹. They experience nostalgia and homesickness after losing the “luxuries” of their affluent lives, which is indicative of their liminal identities. They cannot help feeling nostalgia for their lives in Berlin; yet they cannot get used to the current life conditions full of nothing but deprivations. Jasmine asks questions that reflect the naivety of her character and gets realistic answers from Dana:

Jasmine: we won’t ever be going back home, will we?

Dana: I don’t think there is anything left for us there.

Beat.

*Jasmine: I don’t like the idea of not existing.
of being a person but not a person. Like the baby*

Dana: the baby –

*Jasmine: is dead I know, whereas we –
we’ll just be illegal. I understand.*⁷²

The idea of not existing, being a person on the one hand and not being a person on the other hand and being illegal precisely mirror how Jasmine is captivated by the feeling of liminality. Dana is no different although she pretends to be more assertive in mood. To no one’s surprise, the Librarian appears on the boat with books to give, such as “Rough Crossings for the Weak in Spirit”, “How to Spot Danger and Do Something about It” and more strikingly and just before getting drowned “How to Hold Your Breath for a Very Long Time”⁷³. In a vision-like, surreal moment, Dana, in the course of getting drowned, sees the interviewers who warn her against the fact that she might have got drowned as she seems to be still and being pulled. This scene reminds us of narratives of survivors who go into a coma and tell about what they saw as they were on the verge of dying⁷⁴.

70 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 144.

71 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 147.

72 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 148.

73 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 149-150.

74 For similar stories and narratives, see Randi Kaye and Chelsea J. Carter, “Stories of life, death and faith: ‘To Heaven and Back,’” November 29, 2013, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/29/us/to-heaven-and-back/index.html>.

As a matter of fact, both Dana and Jasmine cannot survive the boat journey and die. Once again, Scene Twenty puts the audience/readers into a liminal status when the demon, dressed in a uniform of the UN, is seen carrying Dana who has died of “*drowning and hypothermic shock*”⁷⁵ since “*she held her breath for too long.*”⁷⁶ The doctor examines Dana without showing any indications of empathy, and his statements reaffirm the prejudice towards refugees: “*well, if you will be stupid enough to cross on a boat like that / they bring it on themselves.*”⁷⁷ She is the ninety-third victim getting drowned, and the Doctor is complaining since he is sick of refugees and the problems they bring. As Aston argues in her article: “*The episodic turns from one crisis to another – the lack of funds, the miscarriage, and fatal sea crossing – structure a cumulative sense of suffering, a “tragic sensibility” of what could be averted and yet cannot be avoided when there is no alternative to the anti-democratic system that produces the economic and social emergency.*”⁷⁸ The complaints of the doctor seem to reverberate about what happens when there is no viable alternative to the anti-democratic system that creates the economic and social crises which could be prevented, but cannot be avoided. Neither doctors nor refugees are exempt from this vicious circle created by neo-liberal economies disguised as the demon.

The play ends with an ironical plot twist putting the audience in a liminal situation for the last time: Jarron decides to animate Dana in spite of the Librarian’s attempts at dissuading him. This reminds us of the nature of liminality which is marked by uncertainty. As Thomassen indicates: “*In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. [...] Liminality opens the door to a world of contingency where events and meanings – indeed ‘reality’ itself – can be moulded and carried in different directions.*”⁷⁹ The Librarian says that Dana has already suffered too much, and she would not be able to bear life without her sister and with such traumatising memories. Jarron, however, decides to erase her memory saying that “*you can forget anything*”⁸⁰, just like the attitude of capitalist organizations and countries which are successful at erasing people’s memories of suffering. Indeed, the very last lines of the play show Dana in smart clothes, fully restored and ready for her presentation. The reanimation of Dana might have indicated an optimistic ending; yet, since her memory is erased and her identity is now gone, it is not plausible to talk about a happy ending and signs of optimism for the future.

As resistant liminal subjects, Dana and Jasmine could not survive the atrocities of living in the margins and borderlands. The situation in which Dana and Jasmine are together with other members of the society can be well likened to what Thomassen argues on liminality:

Liminality is [...] a paradoxical state, both at the individual and the societal level. At the

75 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 153.

76 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 153.

77 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 153.

78 Elaine Aston, “Moving Women Centre Stage: Structures of Feminist-Tragic Feeling”, 305.

79 Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, 7.

80 Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath*, 158.

level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity, while at the level of society it involves the suspension of the structure of social order. However, whether in case of rituals or crises, the aim is to return to conditions of stability and normality. This happens by forging a new identity in the individual case, reflecting a shift of one's position within the social order; while in the case of society new common bonds are formed through the cathartic experience of communitas (Turner 1969).⁸¹

What Thomassen highlights here is the fact that the concept of liminality involves a contradictory state of both destroying individual identity and suspending societal structure. Whether through rituals or crises, the goal is to eventually return to stability and normality by forming new identities and common bonds. In the play, the erased memory/identity of Dana and the death of Jasmine signal that identity (of Dana and Jasmine) and social order (in Europe) are irrevocably gone. The ending of the play signifies that forging a new identity and new social bonds to regain the conditions of normality are inconceivable since the dystopian and chaotic world in the play has been devised by a demon representing the UN. Harris seems to have chosen the UN symbolising the demon not to target the UN singularly as an organization, but as a metaphor for all political organizations and parties who claim such endeavours. Thus, the whole play becomes a metaphor for the liminal situation refugees, and immigrants are all trapped in due to the corruption in the political system(s). Harris takes a critical look at the refugee problem by almost inflicting pain on European citizens and reversing the European political picture. Showing how refugees can become victims of personal/political expediency within a cruel system devoid of humane values puts the audience/reader in a liminal situation as it is hardly possible to transform such liminality into positive and constructive normality. Good fences, borders and borderlands do not always make good neighbours as reflected by the speaker in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" who expresses her/his concern about demarcations: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,/And to whom I was like to give offense."⁸² Having a similar responsive tone regarding contemporary border politics, *How to Hold Your Breath* brilliantly and vividly achieves to portray the refugee crisis in order to perturb Europeans and European politics.

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81 Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, 92.

82 Robert Frost, "Mending Wall."

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