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Youth Matters: Shedding Light on Displacement in Syrian Girls' Memoirs

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Abstract

In the face of war and political crisis, fleeing a country seems to be the best choice to get on with life. Among many refugee memoirs, so far young adult refugee texts have received little attention. This article analyses two young Syrian girls' memoirs by Nujeen Mustafa and Yusra Mardini to investigate their experience of displacement. I argue that both *Nujeen* and *Butterfly* are prime specimens of young displacement memoir phenomena which act as a venue for identity negotiation. This point has much to do with their navigating the tensions between personal and collective selves to disclose their trauma and demonstrate re-appropriation after being exposed to discrimination and stigma. This article also highlights the premise that as accomplished representatives, the Syrian girls' memoirs may affirm or influence readers' perspectives toward the authors and their embodied cultural values.

Keywords: displacement; Syrian girls' memoirs; refugee studies

Introduction

With the rather long list of Syrian memoirs written by refugees—such as Aeham Ahmad's *The Pianist from Syria* (2019) and Marwa Al-Sabouni's *The Battle for Home* (2017), among others—the memoirists (whether female or male) are adults, and their revelations have more to do with Syrian politics and war attacks than those of displacement. None of the life stories narrates the perspective of a girl life-narrator who has undergone traumatic displacement. While refugee studies have begun to flourish, in general, there is a marked lack of narrative analysis of those written by young adult memoirists (Brien 2015, 2). On the other hand, there has been growing appreciation of some refugee youth toward the emerging trend of refugee life writing (Hope 2008, 295) since it captures the discrepancy between 'the subjects of unique stories' and 'the objects of immigration policies, of media coverage and public scandal' (Brant, Heinrich, and Soeting 2017, 625-626). This discussion is even more substantial since in the case of Syrian refugee crisis, '78 percent of the refugees are women and children', and among them, '25 percent are women and girls' (UNFPA 2013, 1). Also, as another justification for this investigation, displaced young people who flee their countries are still put under suspicion, perceived as 'encroaching on sovereign assets', and have their memberships subjected to 'contestation by politicians, the media, civil servants and activists' (Boyden and Hart 2007,

237). Nujeen Mustafa and Christina Lamb's *Nujeen: One Girl's Incredible Journey from War-Torn Syria in a Wheelchair* (2016) and Yusra Mardini and Josie Le Blond's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian, My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph* (2018) tell disturbing accounts of refugee displacement. By referring to Anne Frank's personal story of lost girlhood and its powerful impact on many similar youth trauma narratives, Sidonie Smith states that in human rights narratives, the 'I' of a victimised girl is aimed to magnify empathy (2006, 139). More recently, Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti have studied the effects of using the 'child's eye perspective' in young people's life writing of trauma and noted that the narratives serve as 'a poetics for representing trauma' and 'an aesthetic for writing about resistance' (2016, 26). Correspondingly, I strive to show how the emotional labour of narrating the 'I' in these two memoirs can disclose the hardships which the individual self is distressed, and how the memoirists endure painful displacement and gain some values that may help their self-reconstruction.

The process of simultaneously reading these two memoirs has drawn my attention toward the stages by which displacement acts as the site of identity negotiation for many Syrian refugees. My investigation will highlight how the two authors lost an individual self while taking the permanent separation from home and how they recovered their sense of self through becoming advocates for refugees in their new country. As soon as they claim agency by producing life writings, they manage to come to accept an identity that is 'a mix of the personal with the contextual' (Adams 1999, 8). I wish to validate that the memoirists' multifaceted identity transformation, as demonstrated in their narrative testimonies and recognised by the observing and testifying activists, is both an individual and a collective existence.

In investigating the two life stories, I derive from Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, which brings to light the processes by which the advocates 'solicit and package stories to attract readership' (2004, 27). The memoirists' strategy of using emotional accounts in relation to in-betweenness and refugee policies forges their stories, that Schaffer and Smith call as 'the frames they impose on stories' are deliberately aimed to 'capture the interest, empathy, and political responsiveness of readers elsewhere, in ways they have learned will "sell" to publishers and audiences' (27). Two noteworthy points in reading Syrian refugee girls' memoirs as displacement narratives are their encounter with journalists and their reliance on UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the United Nations Refugee Agency, which both help boost their popularity and help the girls become ambassadors who garner international attention. Being involved in advocacy, the UNHCR consistently

upholds it as a way to ‘transform policies and services that affect displaced and stateless people’ (2016). In exploring narratives of displacement, historical accounts as well as the emotional discourses and those of humanitarianism become a theoretical lens on the restless journey of self-development by which victimised individuals claim agency to improve themselves.

Refugeeism as Displacement: Loss of Self

Nujeen Mustafa, a fourteen-year-old Syrian Kurdish refugee with cerebral palsy, and Yusra Mardini, a seventeen-year-old Syrian swimming athlete, decided to leave Syria in 2015 following the civil war, and each crossed the sea and the European borders with an elder sister and some relatives who helped safeguard their journey. Although both Nujeen and Yusra now live happily in Germany with their families, I argue that they will never forget how traumatic the war was, which forced them to move from city to city inside Syria and eventually became refugees who had to wander among EU countries. As Nujeen puts it, the calculated attacks and bombings by Assad’s regime in Syria were occurring all the time that her family had to move a lot and grow used to it, making her realise that she ‘couldn’t remember normal any more’ (2016, 79). The ‘intensive aerial and artillery bombardments’ befalling Nujeen’s hometown are actually war tactics that serve ‘the dual purpose of terrorizing supporters of the rebels and binding Assad’s forces to the regime’ (Jenkins 2013, 7). More than 250,000 lives were lost because of the ongoing civil war, and over 12 million were displaced (UN 2015), with over 10,000 people and children inside Syria making up for the rapidly increasing number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Populations) from 2013 and forward (Doocy et al. 2015, 1). Displacement is understood as a ‘survival strategy’ for the ‘endangered and deprived populations’, but recently forced displacement is also used as a war strategy imposed by both the Government and rebel forces as ‘a tool for demographic change to create geographic areas with more homogenous populations’ (Doocy et al. 2015, 1). Because of this, millions of Syrian refugees have tried to seek refuge in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and EU countries, drawing international attention on the national humanitarian crisis (HRW 2015). This, however, has had a traumatic effect on the psyche of the Syrian refugee adolescents, who had to have: (1) pre-migration risk factors such as ‘organized violence and the loss of family members’, (2) peri-migration risk factors like ‘disruption of schooling, lack of security, and material poverty’, and (3) post-migration risk factors consisting of ‘stigmatization, language barriers, acculturation difficulties, frequent relocations, low socio-economic status, as well as

insecurity regarding residence permissions' (Buchmüller et al. 2018, 2). In consonance with these, the historical and geographic ways of framing displacement factors—with dichotomies such as 'voluntary'/'forced', '(im)migrant'/'refugee', and 'economic'/'political'—have determined how states and agents have reacted to refugees and displaced people (Gonzales 2013; Holmes 2013; Yarris and Castañeda 2015).

Memoirist Nujeen purposefully uses the accusatory tone of an eye witness, which is a characteristic of testimonial narratives (Couser 2012, 41), to highlight the displacement of moving from place to place that she has had to endure. She describes the dilemma and the tense emotional upheavals during the complex situation, 'Every day we heard of more and more acquaintances who had left. Shiar and Farhad kept calling, urging my parents to flee' (2016, 69), 'In those days people were always coming to our house, refugees like us fleeing Aleppo or other cities. They came and drank tea and crunched pistachios and each told the story of their own migration, how they ran away ... After they left I cried and my mum asked why. "It's like everyone has opened their own channel and is broadcasting migrant news," I said' (85). This, in a sense, signifies a 'permanent' change that marks a psychological trauma and a loss of self at adolescence, indicating that the civil war has robbed something out of Nujeen's life as a young woman since there was no getting away from it. The 'I' stands for the victim's perception, looking back on memories that are both personal and collective, for the experience of being displaced and losing one's sense of self influenced all refugees. Thus, Nujeen's memories serve as a prototype that embodies a larger act of cultural and historical recollections (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 9).

As Nujeen shows readers her initial recollection of migrating, the 'architectures of memory' (2004, 9) allow her to 'follow invisible tracks' that reconnect her to her country of origin (119). The repetition of verbs like 'flee' and 'left' in Nujeen's narrative is essential because it informs the dangerous and life-threatening conditions of war where, as she recounts, ordinary people 'will just be numbers' (2016, 60) and they have 'no idea what might happen' (82). In Yusra's denouncing voice, this constant danger of being caught in a war puts everyone's life at stake: 'I hurry home to find Mum waiting for me with news of more mortar or rocket attacks ... but deep down we both know I'm no longer safe anywhere in the city. I could just as easily be killed in the pool as outside on the street or at home in my bed' (2018, 63). The ceaseless war left Syrian individuals no choice but to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, for they believed that it was the only choice to have a future again: 'An end to the war seems unthinkable. Anything could happen to me on the way. Or to them, left behind in

Damascus. We sit and try not to cry, but the tears are never far away' (2018, 69), 'None of it seems real' (71). The occupied position of a vulnerable girl is portrayed here as an unprotected subject that is prone to bombing attacks and random death.

Nujeen's memories of displacement mostly consist of accusatory statements, such as: 'We decided to leave because life had stopped in Gaziantep' (2012, 6), 'The year 2015 was when I became a fact, a statistic, a number' (12), and 'It was like we were a lost tribe being pushed from border to border' (197). Equivalently, Yusra's displacement story bears similar trademarks; her tone grows full of accusations towards the discriminative treatment her group received in Lebanon: 'The humiliation starts as soon as we leave Syrian airspace. As we wait in Beirut for our transfer to Istanbul, there is nowhere to eat or sit down. We sit on the floor while the Lebanese give us dirty looks. They look at us like we have no money, no clothes, no home. They make us feel like the scum of the Arab world' (2018, 75). However, despite all the deaths and brutal attacks from the Assad's regime and Daesh as well as the boat drowning possibilities, Nujeen recalls feeling amazed and optimistic when she and her relatives were crossing the sea by boat, as if they were on an adventure: 'Yet sitting in my wheelchair, higher than everyone else, I thought of myself like Poseidon, God of the Sea, in his chariot ... I laughed every time we were hit by another wave even though we were drenched through,' (2016, 145-146). These imaginations were filled with Nujeen's picturesque fantasies of 'the Nereides, the daughters of Poseidon, riding the horse fish, tossing their long hair and laughing in the wind' (146)—such positive and optimistic traits of a young refugee who could transform her misfortunes into such wondrous imaginations. Later, Nujeen also got the chance to make use of her English skills to speak to a Spanish photo-journalist as both the representative and translator for her group, to whom she announces her wishes from Europe: "I expect freedom like a normal person" (2016, 150). Although Nujeen's sea crossing experience was enjoyable since she often received 'disability benefits' (with people carrying her and her wheelchair), most of her journey afterwards was fraught with difficulties: arriving in a 'filthy' and ill-stricken Lesbos refugee camp (154), becoming saddened when other fellow refugees were drowned on the same day, being exposed to a fight between Afghan and Iraqi refugees because the Greeks made a fast-paced process only for Syrians, being rejected when trying to book hotels, as well as being denied entry to EU countries. Reflecting on her forced migration, Nujeen later admits, 'for the first time I realized we were in the middle of a big tragedy ... Now I saw that there was a lot of grief' (178), 'No longer could I pretend I was on some sort of holiday trip across Europe—now I knew I was truly a refugee' (201). UNHCR's senior mental health officer Peter Ventevogel asserts that 'loss and grief are central issues for most refugees',

and that they may suffer from ‘deceased family members’, as well as ‘emotional, relational, or material losses’ which are imbued by everyday pressures of constant adversity ‘due to forced migration and lack of basic needs’ (Abou-Saleh and Hughes 2015, 871). In support of this statement, two-thirds of Syrian refugees who had severe mental traumas had been ‘experiencing onsets before, and exacerbations during, the war’ (Jefee-Bahloul et al. 2015, 1531). In her displacement memoir, Nujeen claims that the psychological impacts of displacement have permanently changed her life and her identity.

Part of the Syrian refugees’ forced migration includes having a lot of uncertainties and reliance on the policies of the countries that accommodate them. During Nujeen and her sister’s stay at a Greek refugee camp, a problem with the Syrians’ paperwork made everything ‘slowed’ (158), but when the police decided to do something, they were given permission to move on: ‘It said Greek authorities wouldn’t exercise their right to arrest us and was valid for three weeks. The piece of paper felt like one of Willy Wonka’s golden tickets’ (159). For Syrians, after being deprived of their homeland, protection, and legal rights, such permission papers or even asylum applications were like special treats that could secure their future in their new country. As Nujeen explains: ‘All migrants know about the Dublin regulation, which says a person should request refugee status in the first EU country they arrive in. Once you’ve touched the inkpad with your fingers and pressed them on paper, you are trapped in that country as it means you have registered a claim there, even unwittingly, and must stay there until authorities of that country either approve the asylum request or send you home’ (122-123). From the perspective of the witnessing ‘I’, Nujeen reveals that such negative possibilities beget fear and concern among many refugees, as well as contributing more to their psychological burden of being displaced.

Yusra, on the other hand, had to endure more perilous and ‘fragmented journeys’ (Collyer 2010, 273) of displacement compared to Nujeen’s since she was older and able-bodied. While Nujeen received a lot of helping hands from her family and fellow refugees in her journey due to her disabilities and young age, Yusra—with some of her relatives—even had to jump into the sea and tread the water for over three hours to prevent their overloaded boat from sinking: ‘I focus on what we can do. We can stay in the water, make the boat lighter, lift it higher above the waves. We can support the boat from the outside, spin it round to face the swell head on, prevent it from capsizing’ (2018, 107). In this case, she points out another typical trait of the refugee displacement journey: dangerous risk-taking.

Forced migration studies have elucidated how the decision-making and risk-taking dynamics *en route* turned refugees to be pro-active agents who refused to be passively subjected to macro-level policies (Triandafyllidou 2017, 1). Among its various challenges, the role of smuggling has been the highlight of the refugee migration for its impact on determining the fate of millions of refugees. For Syrians, smuggling activities were robust on the Balkan Route from 2014 to 2016 since most benefitted from smugglers for their resourcefulness, guidance, and aid while governments issued highly oppositional anti-smuggler policies that failed to help them (Mandić 2017, 28). The pillar of smuggler-counteracting policies was a ‘state-centric’ approach, and it proved to be more problematic rather than problem-solving (Grech and Wohlfeld 2015, 322) as it was ‘ending the right of asylum in Europe’ (Morrison and Crosland 2000, 1). These statements imply that refugees are generally more trusting toward the immediate benefits of smuggling than those of governments’ policies—that they perceived to be prejudicial and detrimental to their complex situations. As a matter of fact, Patricia Hynes has noted that within refugee studies, ‘trust is a central theme’ (2009, 98), and the mistrust of refugees in political processes and the authorities involved are a part of the large-scale experience of the ‘asylum cycle’ (Koser 1997, 591) or ‘refugee experience’ (Baker 1990, 64).

As soon as Yusra and her relatives were prepared to flee to Europe, they called the smuggler ‘to say five of us want seats on the bus to Izmir and places on a boat to Greece’ (2018, 80) and were told to bring their own life jackets. Yusra describes how the smugglers gave them strict instructions to avoid any interference from local Turkish authorities: ‘Big Man appears at the top of the aisle. “Ok everyone, phones off,” he says over the chugging engine. “From now on, no calls, no messages, no internet, no GPS. I’ll come and check they’re all off. And keep the curtains closed”’ (83). Indeed, the local police checked on their camp the next day, inciting fear among Yusra and her fellow refugees: ‘The helicopter is directly above us ... The loudspeakers erupt again, this time in Arabic. “Come out, we know you’re there.” I look at Sara and wonder whether we should run’ (94). Starting from that moment, Yusra’s moderate tone becomes more critical and emotional whenever she receives a discriminatory treatment given her status as a refugee: “I just want to buy a bottle of water,” I call over to the men in English ... “No,” he calls and flicks his hand as if he’s shooing away a stray cat. “No water.” I turn back towards the beach feeling like I’ve been punched in the stomach. The hurt turns to anger ... What human refuses to sell water to a girl who just washed up in front of their restaurant?’ (120), ‘One after another, the hoteliers refuse to serve customers with Syrian

passports. It hurts ... We have money. Isn't it good enough for them?' (140). For Nujeen, it was her encounter with deceiving smugglers that changed her perspective, 'I don't like to believe that people are evil by nature, but when I met people like the people smugglers I wasn't sure I was right. They were taking the money of people who had already lost almost everything and were leaving them begging ... I don't like to judge someone, but what kind of man sends someone to die and makes money from it?' (135-136). Similar to Nujeen's case, Yusra and her group had to stop several times to register and get some temporary residence permit or transit paper as part of the rules made by the officials, or else they will be turned back by the police at the borders (139).

In the next sequence, Yusra's narrating 'I' changes to be mournful to accentuate the distressing impacts of her displacement hardships. This is a narrative shift that is strategically aimed to get sympathy from readers. When quietly reflecting on her displacement, Yusra resorts to lamentation when unearthing her helplessness of their uncertain journey: 'We've been on the road nearly three weeks. How much longer will it take?' (162). Yusra's strategy on narrative perspectives suggests that the autobiographical 'I' is perceived by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson as 'heteroglossia'—the 'fragmentation in the multiple voices'—that changes from 'the voice of innocence and wonder' belonging to a child to 'the voice of suffering and victimization' of the displaced wanderer (2001, 60). Yusra's switching 'I' acts as a calculated aim, resulting in a complex autobiographical 'I' that informs discriminatory treatment while also eliciting sympathy from readers. Yusra recalls that the most traumatic part of remembering her journey is the obscurity of their fate and situation while being detained in official custody, not knowing whether they would be released or transported back to Turkey. After she finally managed to board the train to Austria with the others, a prejudiced local passenger called the police to report them as terrorists, thus making them arrested and locked up in a jail. At this point, Yusra sustains her narrative by shedding light on the unpredictability of the setbacks she endured at a personal level, stressing on her frustration and hopelessness of the situation by expressing her pessimistic outlook on their future: 'That blonde girl. Why couldn't she have just left us alone? They fingerprinted us. Does that mean it's all over? Will they send us back to Turkey, to Syria? Even if we get to Germany, will they send us back here to Hungary? ... But we aren't sure. That's all we have to go on. Rumours and half-understood laws' (180). This first-person testimonial of the forced displacement that young refugees are arbitrarily put in detention to be fingerprinted or denied asylum in some European countries is an example of what Katerina Rozakou describes as 'irregular' bureaucratic practices that often involve 'nonrecording practices' and 'improvised ways' of dealing with refugee migration (2017, 37).

Detention of asylum seekers has always been a controversial topic in Europe, since governments claim to use it to ‘control the movement’ of refugees while according to UNHCR Guidelines, ‘Freedom from detention is a fundamental human right’ (Wilkinson 1999). This implies that, as an ‘essential element of statecraft’ instead of the ‘failure of the state’, EU governments used ‘bureaucratic indifference and hostility’ as a means to safeguard their cultural and social patterns of identities (Rozakou 2017, 38-39). The detention of asylum seekers and refugees in countries such as the US, UK, France, Germany, and Italy reveals what Michael Welch and Liza Schuster identify as ‘an expanding culture of control’ that is much based on the ‘*criminology of the other*’ (2005, 331). This culture of control highlights ‘the consequences of crime rather than its causes’ and as a result, it characterises lawbreakers and asylum seekers/refugees as ‘menacing strangers’ who will endanger both the safety of individuals and the whole society (334). In Nujeen’s words, she and her sister were still arrested and loaded into a police van ‘even though when we said we were from Syria’, and during interrogation, the police asked ‘how we got through the border and about the whole journey from Syria through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia etc.’ and insisted that ‘we would be fingerprinted’ in Slovenia (192). Meanwhile, in Yusra’s case, she and her group were arrested, but they did not have to endure lengthy interrogations presumably because a pair of journalists was accompanying them closely and ‘snapping photos’ (177). Yusra and her relatives were told to empty their bags, hand over their phones and shoelaces, register their names and be fingerprinted before being locked up in a stable and given foul, rubbery-processed chicken sandwiches “‘that a dog wouldn’t eat’” (181). Thus, I argue that these humiliating and dehumanising treatments of refugees served as proofs that reflect the officials and the high elites’ strong beliefs that the arrival of refugees as the new inhabitants of their countries would harm many aspects existing within the structure of the entire society.

Based on the accounts of these young memoirists, their displacement may leave marks on their psyche and change their identities, but it is also an opportunity to train themselves to be more resourceful. Nujeen has strikingly put much emphasis on the use of a ‘smartphone’ in order ‘to be on Facebook and Whatsapp’ to keep herself up to date and to receive advice from her brother who was already living in Germany, as well as knowing ‘a bit of English’ to help her journey succeed and talk fluently to journalists (111). Nujeen’s sister used ‘Google coordinates’ to determine their departure point before crossing the sea (141), and her uncle spent two days ‘studying YouTube videos’ to learn how to drive the rubber boat, which he succeeded doing (145). Accordingly, Yusra also used social media to keep in touch with her

family and friends and spoke fluent English, thus making her conversant with some journalists she encountered along the way. She and her relatives even went further by downloading ‘a tracking app ... that sends out a GPS location even when the phone is off’ (69) and buying ‘local SIM cards’ to inform their families in Syria of their whereabouts (81). *En route*, Yusra and her group constantly used their phones to contact smugglers, exchange news, track routes, take selfies, and keep in touch with a few journalists who interviewed her. There has been a growing scholarly attention for migrants’ use of smartphones and social media ‘prior to and during migration’ since both are ‘indispensable’ for Syrian refugees; they need to keep in touch with families and friends back home, to ask for advice from relatives who were already living in Europe, to contact friends and people along the way, and to access ‘the latest and most relevant information’ so they can track and improvise routes (Dekker et al. 2018, 1-2).

In addition, both young girls also mention that they have become skilful in choosing the best devices as well as hiding and protecting their belongings from getting wet or seized by the authorities. Before the boat crossing, Nujeen and her group bought ‘good’ life jackets that ‘cost 50 euros’, negotiated for a ‘motorised yacht’ for Nujeen’s wheelchair, and ‘a pack of party balloons ... to protect the all-precious phone’ based on the advice of local people (133). Likewise, Yusra and her relatives bought large backpacks, ‘dark green’ life jackets that were “‘made for soldiers’”, ‘a packet of resealable freezer bags’ for their phones, money, and passports (80). Taking extra precautions, Yusra’s sister had an idea of putting those ‘sealable plastic bags’ with their money and passports in the safest place they could think of: ‘inside our bras’ (81). When they got arrested by the Hungarian police due to false accusations from a female train passenger, this particular trick saved the group from getting their passports confiscated during interrogation: ‘Just then, a phone rings ... Sara takes advantage of the distraction. She holds her backpack up to her front and begins fiddling with something around her neck. Then she coughs loudly. Majed raises his arms above his shoulders as if he’s stretching. Sara lowers her head down to her backpack and lifts her hand to her ear ... She’s holding up the packet with the passports. Majed takes it and slips it into his pocket. We’re in luck. No one has noticed’ (177).

In most cases of international bureaucracy, the passport is a part of ‘complex’ policies that determines ‘the national population’ and ‘protect its borders’ (Salter 2013, 72). People use the passport as ‘an entrance to this border security’ since it functions as ‘the primary document of national identification’ that links people to foreign policy that classifies them as ‘safe or

dangerous, desirable or undesirable according to national, social, and political narratives’ (72). Due to the tense political climate and ‘European refugee crisis’ during that critical period, migrants like Nujeen and Yusra had to be really careful and strategical in anticipating the possibilities of ‘irregular’ bureaucracies (e.g. authorities confiscating their passports for no obvious reasons) (Rozakou 2017, 37) that might threaten their chances of moving to Germany and obtaining a new future. Thus, being resourceful, which in this case means having ‘resilience and survival skills’—particularly for women refugees—is crucial in protecting their long-term mental health and helping them deal with the upcoming challenges during the resettlement process (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011, 39). Nevertheless, for these Syrian girl memoirists, their displacement was still a forced migration in search of safety and stability, and they would have to endure the possibilities of conflicts and incidents occurring along the way due to their stigma as refugees.

Displacement as Stigma: Challenging the Stereotypes

The word ‘refugee’ has been one of the most dominant labels within the fields of ‘humanitarian concern, national and international public policy and social differentiation’, and it comprises ‘uprooted people’ who have been forced to flee or displaced within their countries of origin due to violent factors (Zetter 1988, 1). The label also implies a shift in the existing economic, social and cultural structure and mechanisms within their new countries, which often leads to ‘pathological’ relations between ‘refugees and their hosts’ (1). First, the displacement experience of refugees is often closely linked to ‘trauma before leaving’ due to war, disaster, or political persecution (Baranik, Hurst, and Eby 2018, 116) and ‘anticipatory stress’ regarding uncertainties of securing jobs and adapting to a new life (Porter and Haslam 2003, 602). These experiences are common among Muslim Arab refugees such as the Syrians, for they represent the most rapidly-growing refugee population, and compared to other religious groups, they are often deemed to be the least trustworthy in countries like America, thus making them most susceptible to attacks and stereotyping (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006, 212).

In Nujeen’s experience of her first months resettling in Germany, she and her female relatives had to stay at their new home where ‘the people upstairs don’t like us. They are a middle-aged German couple with a grown-up son and as soon as we moved in they complained to Social Services: why do we have refugees downstairs? Once Nahda’s children were playing and the woman came out screaming like a baddie from a movie and called the police’ (234). Correspondingly, Yusra’s narrating ‘I’ incorporates her feeling of being dehumanised

regarding her status as a displaced refugee, ‘to be reduced to that one word, tried to explain what that word means to those forced to wear it as their name. Refugee. An empty shell, barely even human’ (245). In support of Yusra’s claim, the role of media in dehumanising refugees is indeed shown through creating perceptions that these displaced people are incapable of experiencing ‘complex, secondary emotions’ (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013, 522) like ‘human sensitivities as well as moral sensibilities’ (Schwartz and Struch 1989, 155), thus leading the host society to deem refugees as barbarians/enemies that are ‘less worthy of humane treatment’ (2013, 523).

This negative stereotyping was somehow reinforced by the media when during the 2016 New Year’s Eve celebrations, a series of ‘coordinated’ sexual assaults and robberies by large groups of men ‘of Arab and north African origin’ occurred in Cologne city centre (Connelly, *The Guardian*, 2016). With hundreds of German women became victims of sexual violence and mugging, soon many people from the right-wing populist movements like the ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West’ or more popularly known as Pegida, protested that Germany should get rid of refugees by combining the fear of ‘Islamisation’ with ‘general criticism of Germany’s political class and the mainstream media’ (Dostal 2015, 523). Following the incident, Nujeen described that ‘it didn’t take long for a lynch mob to descend on the area and attack migrants’, as well as ‘there were more arson attacks on shelters, and the Central Council for Muslims, which is the main Muslim group in Germany, got so many abusive calls that it was forced to disconnect its phone lines’ (249).

Devoid of ‘access to international or state assistance’ and ‘access to work’, as well as being denied permanent integration in their new host countries, many displaced Syrians were prone to quickly lose their savings and be lured into criminal activities like ‘armed gangs’ (Betts and Collier 2015, 85). Indeed, this circuit only confirms all the negative portrayals constituting the stigma of refugees: first, they epitomise ‘danger’ and second, as traumatised victims of violence, they might one day become perpetrators of violence to compensate for their pain and anger (Varvin 2017, 360). Unfortunately, this might reinforce the negative stereotypes of refugees as dangerous people who need to be kept at bay. In Nujeen’s case, she even dares to strongly express her opinions about being forced to be a displaced person: ‘I hate the word refugee more than any word in the English language. In German it is *Flüchtling*, which is just as harsh. What it really means is a second-class citizen with a number scrawled on your hand or printed on a wristband, who everyone wishes would somehow go away’ (12). Nujeen’s

narrating 'I' incorporates her annoyance of being assigned to that particular label and collective categorisation despite her unwillingness to do so. Her strategy of using the combination of both first and second voices is aimed to make readers feel her exasperation. This tactic might ensure to elicit an 'appropriate response' from readers, which Gillian Whitlock identifies as 'empathic witnessing' (2007, 77).

Another side of bearing the refugee stigma is its connotations of 'humanitarian designation', indicating people who are living in 'poverty and deprivation' and extremely dependent on the state (Zetter 1988, 1). Their identification may bring about 'international protection', 'resettlement', and 'access to government benefits'; but on the other hand, it is also 'a reminder of past suffering and a stigma' (Ludwig 2013, 6). Compared to 'common people', refugees are regarded as 'an anomaly requiring specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions' (Malkki 1995, 8). While massive support and aid has been given to refugees, this particular label connotation has made them remain 'fragile' under such associated burdens (1988, 1). As Yusra asserts, 'I'm grateful that people here in Germany are so generous, that they treat us like human beings, want to help us. But it's hard not to feel bad about having to accept donations from others. Lots of us, me included, never wanted to take anything from anyone' (198). Still related to this particular issue, Yusra also recounts one long dilemmatic episode when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) appointed her to join the new Refugee Olympic Team, a team of refugee athletes, and swim at the 2016 Summer Olympics: 'I'm thrilled, but also a little bit appalled ... Suddenly it hits me. If I compete it will be because I'm a refugee. "Ok, yes, I admit it, I'm a refugee," I say, holding my hands up. "But refugee isn't my team, is it? That word doesn't define me, does it? I'm Syrian. I'm a swimmer. I'm not starting for a refugee team. It's so... well, it's a little bit insulting'" (221). Yusra's narrating 'I' exposes her guilt and shame of being associated with a vulnerable and marginalised group who has to accept charity to keep on living and being recognised. However, in Yusra's case, her dwelling in shame only caught her in emotional dilemma; as Gillian Whitlock claims, 'mobilizing shame' for refugees and asylum seekers only results in a 'poor investment' by which their trauma can stay 'trapped' as 'unclaimed experience' (2007, 79). After receiving advice from her parents and German coach, Yusra finally agreed to join the Refugee Olympic Team and do the press conference as 'a start, a platform' for making her voice known to the world (241). This is a momentous step by which Thomas Keenan identifies as 'becoming shameless' (2004, 438). This 'public embrace of shamelessness' is thus regarded as 'a shift in the public life of ethics and the emotions' which secures the affective, empathic and intersubjective responses from the public (Whitlock 2007, 79). As Nujeen delivered her defiant

message to Samantha Power, the American Ambassador to the United Nations, when they met

in Berlin in 2016, ““We are just people who are dying every day for the chance to brush their teeth in the morning and go to school.” I also said to her, “Everyone wants to speak to me because I am smiling—is it so rare to find a smiling refugee? Am I like an alien?”” (260-261).

Additionally, Nujeen also tried to counter the negative stigma of displaced refugees and the Europeans’ reluctance and insecurity of accepting them: ‘Yes, I know we are expensive. Looking after migrants in 2015 cost German taxpayers more than \$23 billion, according to the Economic Research Institute in Munich. But give us a chance and we can contribute. If you don’t want to let refugees in for humanitarian reasons, what about the benefit we bring to the economy?’, and ‘Germany for example has the world’s lowest birth rate and its population has been shrinking for years ... To keep its industry going so it can remain Europe’s largest economy it needs our foreign labour’ (265). By analysing the autobiographical works of these two female authors as representatives of the Syrian refugee crisis, they have shown that the framing of the displaced people reflects plenty of anxieties of cultural, ethnic and religious difference in Europe that result in the sorting of people into ‘undeserving trespassers versus those who deserve rights and care from the state’ (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, 13). This was proven by both the mistreatments and support the Syrian refugees received in Germany, with the country having oppositional ‘tendencies toward both xenophobia and *Willkommenskultur* (culture of welcome)’ (13).

Re/claiming Agency: Writing as an Act of Reappropriation

The two writers of these displacement memoirs have consistently presented their life writings as personal accounts that speak for a collective existence and reflections on the self ‘in process and in history’ (Whitlock 2007, 133). Through the act of capturing and revisiting their journey of displacement, each of the young women has grown into a ‘newly empowered collective subjectivity’ (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 17), embodying the ‘triumph over misfortune’ nature of young adult narratives (Brien 2015, 8). Hence, nearing the end of her memoir, Yusra recounts her opportunity to swim at the Olympics, travel, and be invited to give her speech at international leader events: ‘My message has been the same throughout: a refugee is a human being like any other’ (278). Her memoir, originally published in 2018 in UK, was written ‘to spread the truth about refugees to the world’ (284). Towards the end of her book, Yusra’s voice has ceased to be self-pitying and taken up more authority as she strives to inspire people and call for social justice for all Syrian refugees, embracing the witnessing role to ‘collective struggles’ against state

violence and human rights abuses (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 15). As she was invited to speak at the United Nations General Assembly's Leader Summit on Refugees, had the chance to meet world-famous leaders such as US President Barack Obama, Pope Francis, and Queen Rania of Jordan, and delivered her speech at the DAVOS World Economic Forum in 2017, Yusra was persistent in wanting to represent her people and switch the world's attitude towards refugees: "I want to help change people's perception of what a refugee is, for everyone to understand that it is not a choice to flee from your home, and that refugees are normal people who can achieve great things if given this opportunity" (278).

In the process of becoming a prominent advocate for Syrian refugees, Yusra has come to accept the importance of her voice and the urgency of the political situation, thus she was willing to put aside her swimming ambitions to concentrate on being an activist. Yusra later received the honour of being appointed the youngest Goodwill Ambassador in April 2017 and continued to send her message across the world by doing media interviews, taking field visits to have a series of 'high level meetings' with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Governor of Tokyo, and other officials in Japan in 2017, to encounter refugees in Sicily in 2018, and use her social media platforms to inspire people to 'rebuild lives' and 'positively contribute to host communities' (UNHCR 2017, "Yusra"). What began as a helpless and traumatic displacement provides her with, to such a degree, plenty opportunities to redefine her status, reflect on her situation and choices, and adapt herself to the dominant culture, and gain sympathy from the public, and eventually influence the decisions of asylum policy-makers in her host country. Thus, she defiantly declares, 'Nothing can break me now. Whatever happens, I'll get up. I'll swim on. I'll survive. I'll emerge from the chrysalis as a butterfly' (281). Her strategy of playing up emotions while revisiting her painful displacement journey is part of a self-development process that encourages readers to empathise with the adversity that she had to endure as a persecuted young woman.

Nujeen has also become an ambassador for young refugees, having used media outlets and delivered speeches at prominent conferences like the UNHCR 'Age, Gender and Diversity' event at Le Palais Des Nations in Geneva, at *TEDx* events both in the UK and Iraq, and at the 2017 Nansen Refugee Award (UNHCR 2017, "Nujeen"). Her memoir, published in 2016 in London, was written by the help of Christina Lamb, an award-winning British journalist and author who specialises in covering war and violence in the Middle East and Africa as well as helping co-authored Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai's critically acclaimed

memoir, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013). In April 2019, Nujeen talked to UN diplomats regarding her condition as a young disabled refugee with cerebral palsy and a wheelchair to move around, claiming that disabled refugees like her are ‘invisible in conflicts’, and that most of the time in Syria these people have to be kept out of sight for their association with ‘shame, discrimination and physical barriers ... someone who is pitied’ (VOA 2019). This latest activity indicates that her current role in public is that of the advocate who raises awareness towards a more ‘vulnerable’ and often forgotten group among refugees: the ones with disabilities. Since the beginning of the book, Nujeen has been consistent in presenting her narrative from an individual (‘This is mine’ (12)), to collective autobiographical ‘I’ (‘we all have stories’ (12)) and has been extending this to her public persona and messages as well. Moreover, Nujeen has unfailingly stressed the core of her egalitarian messages in her memoir: ‘we are not numbers’ (12), ‘When you get to know us you will see we are not that different’ (266), and ‘I hope you see I am not just a number—none of us are’ (268). Given her consistent assertiveness and strong self-awareness throughout the narrative, Nujeen’s voice has incorporated the ‘straight’ and ‘authoritative’ attitude by which Jill Ker Conway suggests belonging to women who have ‘developed her own sense of agency’ and can preserve it ‘despite nagging cultural doubts’ (1999, 88).

Their changing identities—from Syrian youth, Syrian refugees, Syrian resettled refugees, students, UNHCR ambassadors, memoirists to advocate for refugees—reflect the uncertainty of the current geopolitical situation, with the government and its authorities involved keep reworking their migrant policies, which significantly determine the future of both young women, their families, their refugee counterparts. By writing down the details of their displacement journeys, Nujeen and Yusra are able to reclaim their voice and agency, as well as presenting their own circumstances, challenging stereotypical perspectives of refugees as disadvantaged, ‘passive victim[s]’ and ‘voiceless agent[s]’ who need ‘charitable sympathy’ (MacDonald 2015, 410). The key here is that Nujeen’s and Yusra’s life writings signify their own politics of refusal to be incorporated into the conventional political narratives of migration. By producing life writings, both young women managed to expose ‘the continuing and evolving forms of the colonial gaze that permeates the discourse of forced migration’ (Brant, Heinrich, and Soeting 627). While they grieve for losing their country, culture, and material possessions, there is emotional currency consisting of shame, anger, and defiance against the existing stigma and mistreatment placed on refugees. I argue that the act of writing their displacement struggles and processes has articulated an act of re-appropriation against

dominant stereotyping. Both Nujeen and Yusra have displayed how displacement can be transformed as a way of being relentless and persistent in changing the world's perspective, and eventually, the course of their own and their people's destiny.

Disclosure statement

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