We/They Are Displaced:

Children-Refugees in American Literature and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a range of literary representations of children who endure displacement to see how fictional and non-fictional narratives shape the perception of refugees. Modern literature as a kind of cultural production can shed light on both the experiences of displaced children and the ways those experiences are perceived nowadays. Moreover, it can delineate how the author's position and their having/lacking the experience of displacement influences the narrative. The critical optic of this paper seeks to unravel the various dimensions of the cultural representations of a refugee's reality as created by modern American writer Alan Gratz in his novel *Refugee* and Malala Yousafzai in her collection *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World*. Not only will it help to explore the similarities and contrast in emblematizing images but also demonstrate how the position from which we narrate and view the experiences of these children impacts the narratives and cultural representations. The paper touches upon children voicing and/or representing resilience or victimhood as well as everyday reality of navigating displacement, perilous journeys, prolonged liminality, borders, barriers, and bureaucratic hurdles in search for a new home. By examining the similarities and differences of fictional and non-fictional representations of refugee children, this paper attempts to challenge the stereotypical perceptions surrounding refugee experiences in mass culture and highlights the need for cultural sensitivity when engaging with refugee experiences.

Keywords

Children; Literary Representation; Migration Narrative; Positionality; Refugee.

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About 117.3 million people have been forcibly displaced globally, including those fleeing violence, conflict, and persecution, according to UNHCR Global Trends 2023 (posted on 13 June 2024). According to the same data around 40 per cent of them are children who cross borders with their caretakers or unaccompanied. Malala Yousafzai, a human rights activist, describes it as follows in her collection of narratives that amplify refugee voices from around the world, *We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World* (2019):

> Millions of men, women, and children witness wars every day. Their reality is violence, homes destroyed, and innocent lives lost. And the only choice they have for safety is to leave. To 'choose' to be displaced. That is not much of a choice. (ix-x)

While various parts of the world have been suffering from continued armed conflicts, for many, including myself as a Ukrainian and a researcher, wars in Europe seemed to be a barbaric vestige of the past. The recent cascade of wars is not only causing major geopolitical shifts in the world but also induces the people of the Global North to rethink and reevaluate the effects of the war such as conflict, violence, or displacement. Although refugee and border crises are not a new phenomenon and there are multiple dramatic examples of exoduses both in the present and in the past, the ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East might contribute to changing the perspective of how we narrate, visualize, perceive, and research refugeedom. There have been many efforts from all fields of the humanities to rethink and reevaluate multiple refugee crises of the world across centuries through various projects, both scientific and artistic. The number of similar research projects is going to increase, inspired by the current mass exodus due to the outbreak of full-scale war in Europe.

A considerable number of fictional and non-fictional refugee narratives aimed at young readers and adults have emerged around the theme of displaced minors travelling to cross various borders. This paper aims to explore cultural representations of refugee children by comparing various dimensions of the refugee reality as created in the novel *Refugee* (2017) by Alan Gratz and the life narratives collected and published by Malala Yousafzai in the book *We Are Displaced* (2019). This paper begins by addressing the problem of representation that refugees face. It will then examine the fictional representations of refugee children in Gratz's novel to demonstrate how they are shaped and viewed today. It will compare these fictional representations to those found in the non-fictional life narratives of refugee children in the book *We Are Displaced*. This analysis will not only help examine the similarities

and contrast in emblematic images but also demonstrate how the position from which we narrate and view the experiences of these children impacts the narratives and cultural representations of refugees.

The primary concern when discussing refugee representations in culture lies in the agency that refugees, migrants, and particularly undocumented migrants have in controlling their narratives and determining how culture depicts them. While, to a certain extent, immigrants can influence their narratives, enabling their voices to be heard and expressing themselves through their own stories, the dynamics of their agency differs due to the prevailing circumstances of their frequently vulnerable and marginalized status. Even those refugees who are privileged enough not to be marginalized and may exert some measure of influence over their representations can intentionally distance themselves from both the label of "refugee" and the social group itself. Typically, displaced activists and artists with enough influence can attract attention and give a voice to the thousands of people displaced around the world, helping them shape their representations rather than being talked about and represented by those without such experiences. At the same time, academics, media, artists, activists, and administrators, who exert significant influence on cultural representations, often have a lot of control over the narrative construction. It is, however, problematic that divergent and unequal experiences create varying perspectives, which may manifest in different modes of representation and sensitivities to various details. As acknowledged by Tom Vickers,

> [p]rivileged Western academics may find borders 'porous' when they travel to give a lecture or join a protest in another country. However, for the majority of the world's people, this is not the reality they face. Instead, the majority of migrants from oppressed countries encounter a very impermeable and ever-expanding repressive apparatus of border police, reporting regimes, tagging, immigration, prisons, and mass deportation. (15)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) suggests that we should consider whose stories are highlighted and whose stories are marginalized in any portrayal of "the Other." Multiple studies which critique essentialist paradigms of research and knowledge and embrace a positionality approach (Haddad; van Manen; Merriam et al.; Smith), and emphasize the need for researchers to be critical of their own values, beliefs, and stereotypical conceptions, recognizing that these are not ultimate truths. Max van Manen, in his approach to researching lived experiences, suggests that on the one hand, experience exists a priori,

but on the other hand, researchers play a role in shaping and creating it (xi). Therefore, the scholar advocates for adopting an "ego-logical starting point" (van Manen 54), which acknowledges one's own position. This approach not only enables researchers to approach lived experiences as unbiased as possible but also encourages ethical and reflective engagement (van Manen xii). Recent investigations (Haddad; Herd; Vickers; Wilson) have further highlighted the necessity of self-awareness in research, particularly when addressing topics related to refugees. Such studies reveal the critical importance of recognizing the inherent power dynamics that often exist between researchers and the refugee populations they study.

Despite my status as a displaced individual and a refugee, I am personally privileged to be able to continue working in academia. This privilege not only allows me to research refugee narratives, a primary focus of my scholarly pursuit, but also enables me to relate to the experiences of those who have been compelled to flee their countries due to conflicts and warfare. As a researcher, I understand that my perspectives, beliefs, and social context influence my understanding of the world, my research, and the dynamics of my life situations. Argus Morales, in his book *We Are Not Refugees: True Stories of the Displaced*, poses several crucial questions, including "Are you a refugee? Can you be sure you never will be?" (23). Little did I know when I first read the book for my initial research on refugee children that I would be finishing an article on refugee children for submission in a bomb shelter just a week before embarking on a journey with my own children across five international borders to escape the war. What I must admit is that my perspective has evolved significantly due to the transformation of my life experiences. While my own journey as a refugee may not be as harrowing as some, I resonate emotionally with certain aspects that are emblematic of the narratives shared by displaced individuals. This resonance provides me with a deeper sensitivity and a broader perspective from which to engage in research of refugee narratives and representations in culture. However, as Carla Wilson rightly points out, "while it is important to recognize shared experiences, it's equally important to acknowledge the differences" (217). Therefore, in my research, I consider it crucially important to reflect on cultural sensitivity and to understand the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among refugees which are shaped by various factors such as race, class, gender, and other aspects of their life situations. In the chapter that follows I will delve deeper into the problem of the rhetorical construction of refugee children.

Questioning the Representations of Refugee Children

The forced displacement of people is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the term "refugee," although tracing its history to the 16th century, gained

prominence in the latter part of the 20th century and has accelerated notably in the past decade of the 21st century. In the 21st century, the use of the term significantly increased, particularly following various refugee crises in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. However, within the public domain, some scholars, such as Raia Apostolova, argue that the term "refugee" has recently become "a consensual substitute for the discredited notion of 'migrant' in public discourse" (Apostolova, online). This shift not only reflects the liberal inclinations of those who use the term but also serves as a tool of manipulation. Apostolova contends that "refugees seem more deserving of attention from 'us' because their situation is more desperate. They are construed as victims, whereas ordinary migrants are not." What this quote highlights is the fact that while there are certain similarities between the experiences of migrants and refugees, culture constructs these concepts in different ways, emphasizing crucial differences rather than similarities.

Indeed, culture attributes certain meanings, narratives, and discourses to refugeedom to make it perceptible. As Anne Rothe writes, "Unlike natural kinds, like thunderstorms or bacilli, humankinds do not exist independently of the knowledge we create about them" (22). Events, actors, spaces, and structures carry various connotations assigned to them through their cultural representations. Roland Barthes, in his seminal work on representations and mythology, mentions refugees as iconic images with the connotation of a vast, faceless mass of people on the move. These representations have nothing to do with real people but rather are empty symbols created by "the nature of the exotic East" (Barthes 236). That is why, among the dominant cultural representations, we can distinctly see refugees talked about in terms of "waves" that flood the host country. Miriam Wallraven also highlights how refugees must challenge their popular media portrayals, whether as adversaries, victims, or heroes (143).

As marginalized and non-privileged societal categories, refugees are often researched and/or represented through the "objective" and "neutral" gaze, constantly facing the challenges of "western discourses regarding the smallness of the Other" (C. Wilson 217). The general perception of the concept of "refugees" is built on the classical paradigm between "us" and "them," where "us" is the settled population while refugees are often seen either as a threat or a victim. Emma Haddad emphasizes that "refugees are the product of political borders constructing separate states which are creating clear definitions of insiders and outsiders" (297). Janet Wilson, discussing in her research "literary narratives of precarious lives," admits that retelling or reporting refugee histories through the mediation of western writers, editors, or translators always raises concerns about the problematic ethics of speaking for the Other (263) or the potential for representational appropriation, and hence for

misinterpretation, while novelists might often see in the refugee stories "the potential for heightened pathos" (262). Refugees frequently have limitations in their narrative accounts because they have endured difficult survival situations which are often the most discussed. This forces them to omit crucial facts and emotions. Furthermore, even when their testimonies are formally recorded, the complete picture of their circumstances may be missed and occasionally, activists stress their victimhood to counter unfavorable depictions (J. Wilson 265).

Various studies in history and memory highlight the fact that refugees have always been a problematic category, evoking controversial attitudes within the settled population. In his seminal works, *The Whole Empire Walking* and *Making of the Modern Refugee*, Peter Gatrell states that in the past, refugees appeared to be an "unprecedented social problem, defined in terms of liminality and loss, damage and danger" (*A Whole Empire* 197). Not only had they been in danger themselves, deprived of their previous "normal" life, with possessions lost and family ties broken, but they also put the settled population in danger, as refugees were vulnerable to infectious diseases that they might transmit (Gatrell, *A Whole Empire* 197). The refugee image is dominated by the concepts of loss and destitution, and their journey is marked by their utter vulnerability, exhaustion, and desperation. Both historically and in present days, there are not only separate "graphic reports of the desperate plight of refugees on the move" (Gatrell, *A Whole Empire* 51) but also vital statistics of fatalities. Therefore, an image of a refugee has long been constructed on a rigid dichotomy: victim/threat. Such a dichotomy evokes contending responses in societies like sympathy and a desire to help on the one hand and fear on the other.

Moreover, refugees have often been seen as a homogenized group of people with no category of difference (Gatrell, *Making* 50). That might be the reason why they are often represented in culture as a faceless mass of people. However, there is a significant difference between the representations of adult refugees and minors. While adults are quite often seen as depersonalized faceless masses denied emotions, children are "allowed" to express emotions. Such a situation might be deeply rooted in romanticized presumptions about children being more sensitive and capable of perceiving the world more deeply (Kot 40). Furthermore, childhood is viewed by modern societies as a time that must be protected from violence, which is seen as a measure of civilization (Honeck and Marten 3).

Children, as a very particular type of refugee, undoubtedly evoke much stronger responses than adults. They are seen as "ideal victims" worthy of help, which is highlighted by various scholars (Barthes, Hart, Nayar, Rothe). They emphasize: "The child victim communicates not by establishing claims

but simply by being a child" (Nayar). An image of a child or a child refugee may become a rhetorical figure assembled with the help of some unambiguous accessories, which, in Barthes' terms used to explain the semiotic power of a photo depicting a child, "literally blackmails us with moral values" (233). In a similar vein, Hart admits that lately, "children have dominated the imagery of humanitarian response to situations of forced migration. Popular imagination has been ignited by photographs of the young having their basic needs met by relief agencies" (383). Such representations are primarily capable of mobilizing financial and political support (Hart 383). Therefore, at some point, a refugee child becomes a rhetorical tool, a form devoid of personality, history, and agency, and loaded with sentimental values by humanitarianism and popular culture. The trap of such representation is similar to the effect of Holocaust narratives. Anne Rothe describes this phenomenon in her book about *Popular Trauma Culture* (2011), where such images often "serve to transform the pain of others into politically anaesthetizing mass media commodities" (15). In the forthcoming section, I will present an analysis of the selected narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, demonstrating how they portray the intricate experiences of refugee children.

Exploring the Literary Landscape of Refugee Childhood: Alan Gratz's *Refugee* and Malala Yousafzai's *We are Displaced*

Drawing parallels between the past and present, artists and writers often focus on retracing the personal geographies and histories of people whose lives were set into motion by conflict, violence, and shifting borders. So do both the American writer Alan Gratz with his 2017 young adult novel *Refugee* and the global human rights activist Malala Yousafzai with her 2019 book *We Are Displaced*. Both books are attempts to shed light on the destinies of children separated by continents and decades but united by the resembling experience of border crossing, displacement, and violence. The young adult novel *Refugee* by Gratz stands out among other fictional refugee narratives not because it is exceptional, but rather for being the paradigmatic literary representation of a refugee. This novel serves as a model text for the fictional refugee story with all three plot lines typically patterned as "refugee chronicles." It meticulously describes the experiences of three teenagers: Josef Landau, a German Jew who fled Germany in the 1930s on the infamous ship St. Louis; Isabel Fernandez, a Cuban girl who sought to emigrate to the US in 1994 due to conflicts and crises in her country; Mahmoud Bishara, a Syrian child whose family crossed multiple borders and spaces to seek asylum in Germany in 2015 after their home was destroyed by a missile[1]. Not only is this trajectory embodied in the three storylines of the novel, but it also reveals fundamental similarities to other fictional refugee trajectories involving children, such as A *Land of*

Permanent Goodbyes by Atia Abawi or *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles* by Fabio Geda.

It is crucial to compare fictional representations with narratives of children refugees told by themselves as such a comparison may shed light on how close or far apart the representations and the true experiences of displaced children are. To study the contrast between the fictional and non-fictional narratives and representation of children I chose *We are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai. In her book, Yousafzai, a renowned global activist, recounts her personal journey of being uprooted from her native Pakistan and provides the platform for the refugee narratives of various girls she encountered during her visits to refugee camps worldwide. She admits: "I was displaced, and I choose to use the memories of that time in my life to help me connect with the 68.5 million refugees and displaced persons around the world. To see them, to help them, to share their stories" (Malala[2] 196). It is important to note that Malala employs multiple positions in her book which at first presents her own perspective in the section "I am Displaced" and then demonstrates how it resonates with other experiences of displaced girls in the section "We are Displaced." The book, therefore, represents diversity encompassing various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. It intricately portrays the expansive geographical dispersion of young girls, spanning nearly all continents. They cross distances, borders, and continents while seeking refuge from violence, international conflicts, and civil wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Guatemala, Colombia, Myanmar, the Congo, and Uganda. Their journeys lead them towards locations as varied as Egypt, Zambia, Jordan, Bangladesh, the United States, Mexico, Canada, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Amidst this array of distinct experiences and migration routes, a striking semblance emerges within their shared life circumstances. Despite the manifold disparities, common threads intertwine the trajectories of these individuals, binding their destinies inextricably to the refugee experience. This book displays multiple similarities to other non-fictional books about refugees like *Children of War: Voices of Iraqi Refugees* (2009) by Deborah Ellis and others. The next section seeks to uncover the nuances of cultural representations and to explore the extent to which these narratives align with each other or diverge, narrating the complexities of the lived experiences of displaced children.

Narrating Trauma and Choices: Contrasting Representations of Refugee Experience

Literature and culture aim to portray the horrific, profoundly traumatic experiences and significant losses suffered by individuals affected by conflicts and forced displacement, with a particular focus on the portrayal of children enduring the rigors of war and refugee existence. The image of a child as a

"perfect victim" becomes particularly powerful in bearing the connotation of loss and trauma. Therefore, such portrayal emphasizes a high degree of victimization. In fictional narratives, like Gratz's book, featuring children as war refugees, an adversity is typically what occurs just before they begin their perilous trek. Literary depictions of war refugees frequently involve tragedies of people losing their houses, which become obliterated and reduced to ashes by bombs, missiles, or air attacks. Children in these dire circumstances are typically portrayed as confronting horrific losses, encompassing the tragic separation from their parents, siblings, or best friends, casualties of the relentless attacks. Such portrayals resonate notably with fictional narratives, as exemplified by Gratz's novel, where for instance, Mahmood from Syria staying in front of his ruined home realizes that "this kind of thing did happen every day. Just not to them. Until now" ("Mahmoud, Aleppo, Syria – 2015"). As the authors choose to portray the suffering of refugee children, the intensity and variety of the different traumas they frequently describe are sometimes exaggerated to add a dramatic touch to the overarching plot.

While also fearing the dramatic experience of leaving a home and homeland, non-fictional narratives in a markedly more prevalent manner illuminate the reasons and contextual circumstances which led to the displacement. The omnipresence of violence and danger is not always an imminent threat in non-fiction refugee accounts, but rather a looming prospect that parents strive to protect their children from by fleeing. Beyond impending war, which is frequently preceded by warnings and evacuation notifications, non-fictional narratives describe an array of circumstances compelling families to abandon their homes. They include acts of racially motivated, genocidal, or terrorist-related organized or sporadic violence that are accompanied by the fear of death. One of the refugees from Syria to Jordan, Muzoon, sharing her story in Malala's book admits, "I didn't know anything about the camp, but we had no other options. I didn't want to leave my country. It was the only home I'd ever known. But even at thirteen years old, I knew that if I did not leave then, it could be the end of my story" (94). Another narrator, Naila, an internally displaced Iraqi, recounts being trapped in a dangerous circumstance in her homeland controlled by militant groups. She vividly describes the experience of being compelled to take an overnight refuge on the roof and a frantic escape to the mountains where they had to survive among countless numbers of other refugees for many days to avoid danger: "Thousands of people, just like us, were on the run. Some told stories of pretending to be dead, lying among their slaughtered loved ones and family members. We were lucky to be alive and together as a family. And we never went back home" (Yousafzai 105). In some cases, the real-life experiences of refugees prove to be much more dramatic and devastating than what is

depicted in fiction. For example, the tragic experience of 7.2 million people displaced because of the prolonged civil conflict in Colombia is narrated in Maria's story. Driven by a heart-wrenching tragedy—the violent murder of her father concealed by her mother in a bid to protect the children—Maria's family had to escape to a makeshift camp with scarce resources and horrible living conditions. Maria admits: "We all had to leave or risk dying if we stayed. So, we each told a piece of our story in a way that told the whole story of internally displaced people in Colombia. We called it Nobody Can Take Away What We Carry Inside" (117). In another story, Ajida, a refugee from Myanmar to Bangladesh speaks about extreme genocidal violence in her home country. Children fed by jungle leaves, the death threat at home in Myanmar and uncertain prospects across the border in Bangladesh which offered a glimmer of hope narrate the desperate struggle for survival.

However, there are also accounts of children whose families had the means to evacuate. They were provided with resources such as Visa Gold, plane tickets, and the opportunity to permanently leave their countries of residence. The experiences of such refugees are rarely addressed in fictional narratives, as they do not conform to the stereotypical image of a refugee as desperate, dramatic, and miserable. While these families face a spectrum of challenges related to displacement, their experiences are frequently neglected or silenced due to not fitting the typical refugee narrative. Many individuals who were previously well-off in their home countries with resources to evacuate still lost their property, status, and stable income, which makes them equally vulnerable to the challenges faced by refugees. Malala recollects: "We had our IDP cards for food rations, like millions of others. Even formerly wealthy individuals who might have owned fields of grain now stood in line for a bag of flour" (26). A similar situation is exemplified in the story of a Canadian girl, Farah, whose parents came as refugees from Uganda:

> Growing up, I didn't understand how painful it was for my parents to leave Uganda—or how much they had given up. I now know that they had come from wealthy families and had both studied in England, where my sister was born. They moved back to Kampala, where I was born, in 1970. I literally cannot imagine how stressful it must have been to be a young mother, suddenly kicked out of her home under the threat of violence, only to arrive in a country where you hardly knew anyone, nor did you know where you would live or how you would support yourself and your family, or whether you would be welcome, make friends, or find a community. But there was no choice in the matter. (Yousafzai 185-6)

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that many families displaced by war and violence choose not to speak about their circumstances or do not consider themselves refugees:

> It's not that my parents weren't proud of being Ugandan [. . .] I knew that meant you ate matoke, a type of plantain, on Sundays with curry, as well as paya, a stew made from the feet of goats. We never denied that we were Muslim or Africans with Indian heritage [. . .] But the one thing I didn't truly understand until I was at university was how or why we ended up in Canada. My parents never used the word refugee to describe us. (Yousafzai 181)

This reluctance is likely linked to the negative connotations previously mentioned, which are often associated with the term "refugee."

In conclusion, the central theme that manifests itself in all narratives of displacement, whether fictional or non-fictional, is the dire circumstances that pose threats to life in their homeland. These conditions compel individuals to leave, regardless of their previous social or financial status. Staying at home or returning home is no longer a viable option and thus, the choice to be displaced is fundamentally rooted in the absence of viable alternatives. However, the representations which are the most visible in the culture often employ fictional narratives as they reflect a particular stereotypical image marked by victimhood and the harrowing refugee trajectory. The stories not so dramatic and harrowing are often silenced either by refugees themselves trying to distance themselves from the traumatic experience and diminutive status or by the "trauma" culture interested in the stories of extreme pain and loss.

Navigating Notions of Home

One of the key motifs running through refugee narratives is the concept of "home" as a place of belonging. In both fictional and non-fictional narratives, the concept of "home" frequently symbolizes the idea of a lost paradise, bearing romantic overtones that signify a once-ideal and pleasant spatiotemporal reality that has now been lost. Malala opens her book with a moving paragraph in which she reflects,

> [w]hen I close my eyes and think of my childhood, I see pine forests and snowcapped mountains; I hear rushing rivers; I feel the calm earth beneath my feet. I was born in the Swat Valley, once known as the Switzerland of the East. Others have called it paradise, and that is how I think of Swat. It is the backdrop to all my happiest childhood

> memories—running in the streets with my friends; playing on the roof of our house in Mingora, the main city in Swat. (3)

The recurring motif that frequently appears in refugee narratives illustrates the nostalgic yearning for what has been lost or what refugees were forced to leave behind. This picture is frequently regarded as harmonious and even almost utopian. Like the phrase from Malala's book, the spatiality of a home is frequently enmeshed in pristine nature, peace, and calm while temporality is firmly anchored in the idealized past which also manifests itself in the fictional narrative, however in a less intense way.

There is a deep nostalgia for the lost home because of this temporality, which reflects a wish to go back to a simpler, more innocent time that was devoid of the difficulties and complexities of the present. Consequently, there is often a strong focus on the breach between the past and the present. In one such story, Maria, an internally displaced girl from Colombia, says: "She (mother) explained that things were different now. We had to buy our food and needed money to do that, so she went tent to tent asking if people wanted to pay her to wash clothes" (Yousafzai 114-5). The non-fictional narratives demonstrate that while there is sometimes a glimmer of hope for refugees to eventually return home, the possibility of returning to that idealized past remains unattainable, which leaves refugees with a strong sense of loss and induces them to be constantly in search of a new sense of fulfillment and belonging. This is different for the fictional narratives which would be better described by the term "trauma and recovery" plot (Rothe 8). As they lose their home and become displaced, the characters almost instantly set off to look for a new home, seeking not only for safety but also for a new sense of belonging. The new home will then symbolize a happy resolution or the complete recovery, which is not always the case for the actual refugees for whom the sense of belonging is exchanged for a sense of permanent in-betweenness and transition.

Being Displaced: Adventure or Uprootedness

One of the most profound differences between the non-fictional refugee narratives from Malala's book and the fictional refugee narratives like Gratz's novel is their portrayal of displacement itself. While in Gratz's novel, displacement is presented as an adventure, or rather a misadventure, concentrated on the characters overcoming obstacles on their harrowing way to a new home, displacement in non-fictional narratives is the existential feeling of homelessness and insecurity. The emotional impact of being displaced which manifests itself in the feeling "out of place" transcends the geographical location and demonstrates a profound disconnection from the

place of belonging, which is not only about physical displacement but also about the loss of stable ground and a coordinate system.

Malala's book illustrates refugees' nagging feelings of homesickness connected with nostalgia and a sense of loss. The concept of displacement, even if sometimes unknown to the children as a term, is deeply ingrained in them and deeply felt. There are even instances of children refugees who have never experienced home, having been displaced at a very young age or having been born into already displaced families or/and in refugee camps. However, even they report this complex feeling of existential homelessness fed by their parents' reminiscences: "We left when I was four, before many of those memories had a chance to take root" (Yousafzai 112). Children in Malala's book often speak about instances where the options of staying with friends and extended family offer a temporary refuge but even staying with extended family does not take away the feeling of being displaced, as displacement is not only about losing home but also creates a profound uncertainty about the future. Malala herself admits: "It was nice to be with my cousins—I had always loved being in Shangla—but this felt different. Usually, my visits were finite. Now we had no idea how long we'd be staying [. . .] Internally displaced I was in my own country, and with my family, and yet I still felt so out of place" (23). Nevertheless, non-fictional narratives demonstrate that children exhibit a remarkable resilience and modesty when confronting such adverse circumstances.

However, the complexity of feelings created by the experience of displacement is often unrecognized, which Gratz's novel exemplifies by not addressing the complexity of feelings. In her book, Malala states:

> Many people think refugees should feel only two things: gratitude toward the countries that granted them asylum and relief to be safe. I don't think most people understand the tangle of emotions that comes with leaving behind everything you know. They are not only fleeing violence [. . .] but they are escaping their countries, their beloved homes. That seems to get lost in the conversation about refugees and internally displaced people. So much focus is on where they are now—not on what they have lost as a result. (44)

Malala and other protagonists of the stories in her book often challenge the simplistic understanding of their experience and expectations that they should feel exclusively gratitude and relief for being in a safe place. The contributors to Malala's book indeed highlight that they don't miss the war experience, "the sounds of my city under siege: the army helicopters whirring above our home or the bomb blasts that got louder and closer each day" (Yousafzai

48). However, all these stories highlight the emotional turmoil coming from leaving behind everything and sometimes everyone they had. "When I go to a camp, I sit with people and ask them to tell me their stories. That's how this started. Me, listening. And they all have their own lists of sounds and smells and tastes they miss, people they didn't get to say goodbye to. They all have parts of their journey they'll never forget and faces and voices they wish they could remember" (Yousafzai 48).

Fictional and Realistic Promise of a New Home

The refugee narratives portrayed in Gratz's book notably differ from the real refugee accounts from Malala's book regarding the culmination of the trajectory—the arrival at the "promised" new home. The fictitious refugees' hopes are focused on their final destination, which is described in the book as the "heaven" they are eagerly anticipating.[3] As exemplified in this episode from Gratz's book, "Isabel's heart leapt—the US was even more of a paradise than she ever imagined!" ("Isabel, Somewhere on the Caribbean Sea –1994, 3 Days from Home"). Research shows that fictional refugee journeys in young adult literature all lead to a fairytale destination, a place full of comfort opportunities and freedom which is depicted as the logical ending of the refugee experience. The imagery of home in Gratz's novel is an impeccable place where refugees would "live happily ever after" and where all their dreams are going to come true in case they reach them. However, as the comparison with non-fictional narratives demonstrates, this idea is far from being representative. Malala addresses this idea of the new home for refugees that prevails in the culture. She writes: "We assume that once they've found a new home, that's the end of the story. Often, it's the beginning of a new story" (178).

The trauma associated with the loss of a home makes people strive for a new sense of belonging. However, the process of finding and adapting to a new place is often overshadowed by the grieving process, which prevents refugees from feeling at home: "I had lost my home and the world I knew so well. It had been stolen from me by violence and terror" (Yousafzai 193). For those grappling with displacement, the pervasive feeling of in-betweenness, liminality, and transition becomes truly existential. They are suspended between the past, which is no longer attainable, and the present, where they struggle to feel genuine belonging. One refugee girl, Analisa, claims, "Since that first rainy house, I have moved eight times. But I have never felt 'at home' in any other place than the one I keep alive in my head, from when I was a child, before my whole world changed" (Yousafzai 118). Thus, even when the physical journey for refugees is over, there is another quite arduous one where they have to overcome their loss and cultivate a new sense of belonging.

For many displaced people, the idea that the new place is a temporary

solution prevails, so they hold onto the belief that they will return to their original home soon. Even though some refugees are never able to go back, the idea of home remains inextricably intertwined with the home they lost: "So when I dream of home, I dream of mangoes I can pick off the trees. I dream of quiet and grass. I dream of peace. And nobody can take that away from me" (Yousafzai 118). Homesickness as the dominant sentiment manifests in longing for the sounds, landscapes, and cuisine of their homeland—the sole tangible connection to the place they call home. In Gratz's book, we find this idea only once exemplified in the episode when Mahmood's family meets a Palestinian refugee living in Turkey for 40 years, who still believes he will go home to Palestine eventually.

The non-fictional stories demonstrate that the new home not only assumes a striking difference but also can be seen as highly unwelcoming by some refugees. Certain narrators recall the disconcerting experience: "It did feel as if we had landed on the moon—everything looked, smelled, and felt different" (Yousafzai 37). A refugee from Congo, Marie Claire recollects the negative experience of unwelcoming or even hostile attitudes of locals: "People in Zambia did not want us there. They would shout at us in the streets, 'Go back to your country! Why are you here?' Kids would insult me and my siblings at school, even throwing rocks, and shouting, 'You don't belong here!'" (146).

In the unfamiliar space and among strangers, refugees often grapple with a strong sense of displacement. Malala recalls: "Those early days in Birmingham reminded me of being internally displaced in Pakistan—except the faces, the food, and the language here were foreign. We were comfortable; we were being well taken care of—but it had not been our choice to come here, and we missed home" (35). "There was no sense of belonging—she felt like a stranger in a strange land," writes Malala about her mother (35). Another narrator, Marie Claire, states: "We did not belong, but we had nowhere else to go" (Yousafzai 145). Thus, the lack of belonging always naggingly follows refugees, intensifying the traumatic experience of losing their home and pinning them in the liminality between two worlds.

Perilous Journeys and Prolonged Liminality

The quest for a new home is the focal point in Gratz's novel and numerous analogous works centered on the refugee experience. This element represents the most dynamic facet of the refugee trajectory, imbuing novels of this genre, especially the ones with children as protagonists, with the essence of adventure novels. Besides amplifying the dramatic dimension of these narratives, such novels invariably depict the journey as exceptionally arduous, fraught with multiple life-threatening obstacles. Notably, such refugee journeys are always

called perilous. Authors frequently opt for the most formidable paths for their characters seemingly devoid of an alternative. While anthropological fieldwork conducted by Luigi Achilli has shown that

> Syrian refugees had two options to reach Europe: one was legal, through venues such as resettlement programs, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programs, and private sponsorships. The other option was—for the majority of them—the Balkan route: an exhausting and perilous journey that took them across two continents and several countries (i.e. Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia). (7)

The former was by far the safest and quickest route. Yet, "the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU member states remained for the majority of Syrians a chimera" (Achilli 7). Consequently, despite the existence of multiple legal avenues for refugees to cross national borders, such as air travel, cultural narratives about migration predominantly center on martyrdom or ordeal.

Non-fictional refugee narratives highlight the same idea that while the refugee experience in general is never favorable, the journey itself is not always the most harrowing experience depicted in the fictional stories. Two of the stories in Malala's book depict the stories of two refugees from Yemen, who fled to Egypt but ended up in different countries. The protagonist of the first story, Zaynab, had to take the flight while her sister was denied a visa to the USA. Consequently, one sister had to grapple with the devastating choice of opting for a secure life over remaining with her sibling, and the other had no choice but to witness her sister flying away. "I waited for Zaynab's flight to leave [. . .] before I could believe it was true. My big sister was gone. All I had was her oversized and heavy suitcase [. . .] My sister was in the air, flying to a new life, and I was returning to an old one. But different. From that moment on, everything felt so empty: the city, the house, my heart" (71). The weighty suitcase left behind appears to be a poignant real-life metaphor of one sister not being able to take a substantial part of her life with her and the other burdened by the weight of displaced existence in a state of perpetual liminality—a journey shared by many refugees.

However, some of the true stories do describe the journeys as perilous which, apparently, the authors of fictional refugee narratives take as notorious inspiration. A woman from Myanmar, Ajida, with a two-year-old son recalls her journey through the jungle with her child on her shoulders. They could walk only in the nighttime to avoid the danger of being killed. Her husband fell ill along the way as they encountered numerous bodies—Rohingya victims of violence inflicted by extremist Buddhists determined to expel them. She

describes her efforts to shield her son from witnessing the horrors while unfortunately not being able to protect her daughters. In their quest to escape genocide, a family embarks on a nine-day odyssey to cross a river into Bangladesh, emphasizing their vulnerability and inability to swim during the treacherous boat journey which amplifies their fears. She recounts:

> After nine days, we finally made it to the border and crossed a river into Bangladesh. A Bangladeshi man took us on his boat for a fee. The boat was small—it could fit only ten people at a time—and it had no motor, so he had to row. Thankfully, my family stayed together. We were all so scared because none of us could swim. It took four hours to reach the other side. When we arrived in Bangladesh, I fought back tears. We had made it. The threat of the genocide was behind us. It took us three hours to walk to the camp. There were so many Rohingya fleeing that we just followed everyone else. We were a crowd of strangers marching together toward a common unknown destination. But the relief I felt did not erase the fear. I had no idea what to expect in this next phase. (Yousafzai 171)

The protagonist escapes imminent danger and finds refuge in a camp, but the relief is tempered with doubt, symbolizing the shared journey of strangers toward an unknowable future.

The journeys of undocumented migrants crossing the US-Mexican border are among the most harrowing. A Guatemalan migrant, Analisa, recounts such a journey with various dangers endured by illegal migrants as they traverse Mexico *en route* to the US-Mexico border. The treacherous odyssey is marked by encounters with criminals, crocodile-infested territories, delving deep into the dense jungle, and crossing a river filled with hazardous whirlpools on a raft. The narratives also bring to light the poignant stories of unaccompanied minors and pregnant women undertaking perilous journeys. One particularly distressing episode involves numerous individuals, including children and pregnant women, squished into a cattle truck in which they travelled for two days, being subjected to dehumanizing treatment. Tragically, as the witness recalls, a similar truck got flipped, resulting in fatalities among the immigrants. Furthermore, the narrative also depicts tragic accidents involving Guatemalan immigrants traveling by train, which prove fatal for some and deeply traumatizing for the witnesses. The gruesome details of the accident and the subsequent panic and confusion highlight the perilous nature of their migration. Amidst these dire circumstances, the migrant expresses gratitude for the kindness shown by benevolent people encountered along the way. This highlights that despite the generally negative experience of

migration, the journeys are diverse. Besides, while fictional refugee narratives highlight the hostility of the authorities *en route* to safety, some non-fictional narratives share the instance of being rescued by an Italian ship and helped by the Red Cross when they had already said goodbye to life.

Non-fictional refugee narratives frequently shed light on the significance of refugee camps which often become the enduring reality for thousands of displaced individuals. These camps provide a temporary stop to their constant movement while preventing them from completing their journey. The narratives consistently highlight the challenges of coexisting with strangers in overcrowded camps, subjected to harsh living conditions, characterized by a lack of furniture, electricity, scarce water resources, and schooling for children, depriving them of opportunities for a better life and future. Access to education is of paramount significance, offering children not only opportunities but also a semblance of normal life. Many young female refugees face limited access to education, with some even being prevented from studying by their own parents, which can "trap girls in a cycle of poverty and deprivation" (Yousafzai 96). Another poignant aspect of refugee camp life is that it is seen by many refugees as a temporary solution. Thus, they put their life on pause, as they await a return to their homelands and homes. Frequently, refugee camps also appear to be places of detention, where inhabitants are effectively confined. Any attempts to leave may result in arrest and deportation back to the restricted environment. The refugee journey, as the non-fictional narratives demonstrate, is not merely the traveling itself, but a permanent state of transition and liminality. Even when they are not on the move, refugees might not yet be anywhere as they find temporary places to stay for short or long periods. This state of in-betweenness is further exacerbated by their undocumented status, rendering them extra susceptible to violence, criminal exploitation, and discrimination. Although seen as a temporary refuge, the camps transform into protracted liminal spaces where some refugees spend a substantial part of their lives.

Borders: Barriers, Bureaucracy, and Battlegrounds

The border in fictional narratives like Gratz's is portrayed as an aggressive power antagonistic to the struggles of refugees, for whom state borders often pose insurmountable obstacles. The dominant characteristics attached to the border in the novel are uncertainty, hostility, impassibility, and exclusion. The novel explores how refugees frequently experience border crossing as a traumatic and life-threatening ordeal, depicting borders as bureaucratic barriers that appear to be more impenetrable than physical walls. Besides, the text sheds light on dehumanizing treatment refugees often face at borders, illustrating the brutality of border patrol and the systematic injustice of border

bureaucracy. Making the border crossing the focal point and the culmination of the novel, the author suggests that state borders play a key role in refugees' fates.

What differentiates the fictional account from a non-fictional one is the spectrum of experiences that border-crossing encompasses. State borders, as formidable dividers, can demarcate and separate spaces marked by conflict and violence from those offering safety and respite. To refugees in search of safety, crossing such borders signifies the potential relief from constant fear. Thus, a border can represent a glimmer of hope for a new life devoid of violence, rendering a deeply compelling aspiration. As one refugee, Marie Claire, from Congo vividly recounts, "One week before we were scheduled to leave Zambia, we were told that our new home was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania [. . .] the 'refugee capital' of the United States [. . .] I was excited—I was finally going to have papers. A home. A life. A new beginning. It started to feel real" (Yousafzai 148). The girl's story highlights the dual nature of borders. On the one hand, they signify the safe space behind the border, but on the other they can serve as a barrier preventing refugees access to safety as border bureaucracy determines who can legally cross into a safe place and who cannot. Tragically, this bureaucratic disposition can lead to avoidable tragedies as exemplified by the harrowing experience of this refugee from Yemen awaiting a visa to the USA for 14 years during which her mother was killed. In this case, the border emerges not only as a beacon of hope for a better life but also as a place of judgment over life and death. Moreover, this refugee has to leave behind her sister who did not get the visa. The border, in this context, is not merely a physical obstacle but an abstract legal barrier, with tangible consequences and profound emotional implications for those allowed entry into safe spaces and those for whom it is denied.

Non-fictional narratives in Malala's book often omit the description of border-crossing experiences unless those are exceptionally emotional, heart-wrenching, or traumatizing. In one such narrative, upon reaching Bangladesh, relief mingles with uncertainty as the narrator and countless Rohingya refugees navigate their collective journey, symbolizing their shared quest for an unfamiliar future while all of them are carrying heavy burdens of past traumas. Within this context, the border appears to be a pivotal and transformative threshold in their lives.

The harsh and intimidating nature of borders so dramatically highlighted in the fictional narrative by Gratz unfortunately exists as a grim reality with tangible consequences for refugees, especially undocumented immigrants. The account of a Guatemalan migrant, Analisa, in Malala's book also sheds light on the antagonistic dynamics between undocumented immigrants and border officials existing on the US-Mexican border. Caught at

the border, processed and confronted by an officer's accusatory questions, the girl however is granted the opportunity to talk to her brother who is waiting for her in the USA. The episode at the border highlights not the indifference or cruelty of the border guard but rather the lack of mutual understanding as well as understanding of the immigrant's circumstances. While the protagonist admits that even in the most difficult parts of the journey, she had no choice but to go on, the border guard's persistent inquiries "Why do you do this? Do you like to suffer?" (Yousafzai 84) epitomize the concept of positionality. These questions demonstrate that people judge the actions and motivations of other people based on their perspectives and experiences. For Analisa, an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala, the border appears to be a point of no return:

> 'If Immigration comes, just run as fast as you can and hide,' our guide hissed. He had been yelling at us since he picked us up—'Hurry up!' 'Be quiet!' 'Stand still!' Treating us like animals. Then the murmurs started: If Immigration caught you, you would go to jail and then be deported back to your country. If you were not caught, you would likely get lost and never make it to the United States. I began to panic because I had no idea how to get back to Guatemala, either. I started to think I had made a mistake in coming. (Yousafzai 121)

This story poignantly illustrates a tense and dehumanizing side of the border and the vulnerability of illegal immigrants. Reflecting on the desperation of immigrants before crossing the border, this episode stresses the dehumanizing effect the border has on people not only being a physical barrier but also as a demarcation line dividing "us" from "them," where some individuals may be subjected to inhumane treatment.

Resilience or Victimhood: Varied Representations of Children Refugees

Alan Gratz's book *Refugee* demonstrates the resilience of refugee children who face the hardships of conflict and destitution yet grow stronger and more resilient. The young protagonists are required to make painful choices, such as Josef Landau who sacrifices himself to be sent to the concentration camps to both save his little sister Ruthie's life and his mother from choosing between them when forced to do so by a Nazi soldier. The novel also frequently emphasizes the initiative of refugee children, pointing to examples like the instance with Mahmoud showing active resistance by leading the big group of Syrian refugees out of a detention camp in Hungary, or Isabel taking the initiative to convince her family to escape. Children are portrayed as assuming leadership roles and showing determination when adults appear to be

overwhelmed. In these stories, the main characters show courage by speaking up against adults, dealing with perilous situations or assuming responsibility not only for themselves but also their siblings and sometimes even adult family members. Thus, the author portrays refugee children as individuals with outstanding determination and heroism, hardened by the experience of war and displacement.

However, while certain children are presented to be resilient and determined, others who are not the protagonists are portrayed as passive, weak, fragile, and in need of protection from older members of the family. Other youngsters are portrayed as being traumatized, clueless, fully unaware of the situation, and frequently getting lost or separated from their parents. Victimhood is indeed a recurring motive in portraying children and refugees unless they are the protagonists. The fictional narratives use the image of a child to emphasize the traumas of the refugee experience, the atrocities committed during the conflicts, and the hardships of their trajectories.

The non-fictional accounts highlight similar themes, showing that displacement brought on by war, poverty, crime, discrimination, and other factors compels young refugees to mature rapidly. They must grapple with complex concepts and navigate harsh realities. Rarely do these children's voice complaints. Numerous stories illustrate that after experiencing distressing displacement, children develop an appreciation for peace, which is not taken for granted. Malala's account conveys this sentiment: "It never fails to shock me how people take peace for granted. I am grateful for it every day. Not everyone has it" (ix). Hence, despite facing distressing experiences, children-refugees frequently exhibit an unbreakable spirit of survival, reflecting their determination to create a better life for themselves. Moreover, children frequently exhibit higher levels of adaptability and stress resistance than adults. In conclusion, the portrayal of children as refugees in both fictional and non-fictional narratives encompasses a wide range of experiences, from resilience and determination to victimhood and vulnerability. Taken together, these narratives shed light on the complex realities faced by children as refugees and the varied ways in which they react to adversity.

Conclusion

As a distinct category of migrants with a very particular experience, refugees are perceived through a particular lens. The meanings which constitute the concept of a refugee today are not solely contingent upon the direct experience of the refugeedom; rather this concept is significantly influenced by the inward narratives created by refugees and outward narratives about refugees and the responses to those narratives which all overlap. These

multifaceted narratives collectively form the core of cultural representations which disseminate further.

As a marginalized societal group, displaced people frequently encounter fallacies in representations, which is a result of preconceived assumptions recirculated in the culture. While refugee narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, aim at representing and sharing refugee experiences through different historical and spatial contexts, highlighting the unpredictable character of human existence within the geopolitical dynamic paradigm, it should be admitted that a certain cultural sensitivity is still required to critically engage in these stories, taking into consideration the position of the author of such narratives. In my research, I compared the fictional and non-fictional representations of children refugees which demonstrated that both types could effectively capture the sheer uncertainty about the future, and the traumatizing experience of displacement. However, it was also visible that the fictional plot lines encapsulate the stereotypical trajectory recirculated in mass culture, which consists of tragic displacement, harrowing journey, horrific border crossing, and finding a new home, which serves as a metaphor for healing and a possible happy ending. Such a narrative pattern places a greater emphasis on the physical challenges and hazards migrants face when escaping danger and seeking shelter, even though true refugee suffering, particularly the loss of home, bears much more tremendous existential weight. Non-fictional refugee narratives primarily concentrate on the ideas of belonging and non-belonging, emphasizing the idea of a "lost home," uprooting, the difficulty of returning to one's native country, and the challenges faced when adjusting to new places of residence. These stories usually reflect that a refugee's journey is more than just a trip, however horrific its representations were in mass culture; it is primarily a transitional stage that might encompass protracted staying with relatives or years spent in refugee camps. While both fictional and non-fictional narratives show crossing the border as perilous, in some cases, it signifies both physical and emotional survival, unlike fictional stories where the border is often the biggest antagonist preventing refugees from a happy life, non-fictional narratives demonstrate how the experience of crossing the border can be diverse, depends on many factors, and also manifests complex feelings where relief from immediate danger and a glimpse of hope coexist with the lingering fear of the unknown future marked by the weight of past trauma.

Non-fictional refugee experiences are seldom confined to a single act of violence, exodus, or adaptation. Instead, there is a complex reality of displacement marked by various interconnected and intersecting contexts. Non-fictional narratives demonstrate that whatever their social or financial status, anybody can fall victim to such adverse life circumstances as forced

displacement. The trauma of existential uprootedness and the protracted liminal phase of accepting it is what constitutes the core of the refugee experience not quite represented in fictional novels like Gratz's. It is clear, though, that the tendency for this fictional refugee narrative to overdramatize the experiences of child refugees, framing their stories almost exclusively through the lenses of victimization and heroism, may be due to the impact of the young adult genre which seeks to make the plot as dramatic and thus engaging as possible.

Therefore, fictional narratives, novels, and especially those involving the image of a war-induced refugee child, draw their inspiration from the stereotypical images of refugees' lives as utter tragedies, pointing out the most harrowing, heartbreaking, or miserable details and episodes connected to refugeedom and adding to the overall dramatization of the child refugee image. However, such novels do not represent the multiple dilemmas, complex realities, and feelings young refugees face in reality, which are far from heroic misadventures and concentrate on the feeling of existential homelessness and the issues of belonging while at the same time demonstrating the resilience of young refugees who are striving to cope with broken universes and devastated home(lands) long after their border-crossings and exhausting journeys are over.

Notes

[1] Gratz admits that although the three plot lines are inspired by real-life events and the stories of true refugees, they are nevertheless fictional narratives. They aim to be an eye-opening exploration of harsh children's refugee realities. Using an artistic lens, Gratz draws upon the most notorious and culturally discernible spaces, events, and phenomena, reproducing the routes of Jewish refugees before, during and after the St. Louis voyage, Cuban refugees and the Wet Foot, Dry Foot US policy towards them, a refugee camp at the US military base at Guantanamo Bay, and a "lost generation" of Syrian children and millions of Syrians displaced from their homes due to the brutal and vicious war in Syria. The author brings many of the events separated by time together to make his story tighter and more dramatic. This book adds to the way refugees are represented, constructed, and seen in the culture.

[2] Here and further to quote the authors from the book *We are Displaced*, I will employ narrators' first names as this is how they are identified in the book. It is also important to note that some of the names are not real to protect the narrators' privacy.

[3] This paragraph emphasizes the idealized vision of the refugees' final destination as a place of ultimate happiness, fulfillment, and peace—qualities associated with "heaven" that the characters in Gratz's book are eagerly anticipating.

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Biography

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