DISPLACED VOICES: RE-IMAGING THE SELF IN SELECT SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

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DECLARATION

I, Sree Lakshmi K, hereby declare that the thesis titled "Displaced Voices: Re-Imaging the Self in Select Syrian Refugee Women Autobiographies" is a bonafide research carried out by me under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Praseedha G., and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or any other similar title or recognition.

Place: Palakkad

Sree Lakshmi K

Date: 20-1-2026

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled "Displaced Voices: Re-Imaging the Self in Select Syrian Refugee Women Autobiographies" submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is a work of bonafide research carried out by Sree Lakshmi K under my supervision and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or any other similar title or recognition.

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I express my deepest gratitude to the Syrian refugee women whose lived experiences and personal narratives form the foundation of this study. Their resilience, courage, and steadfast commitment to reclaiming agency in the face of displacement have inspired this research and continue to serve as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of storytelling.

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This thesis stands as a testament to the collective efforts, guidance, and support of all those who have contributed, whether through intellectual, emotional, or practical means, and I dedicate it to each of them with the deepest gratitude and respect. As Alfred Lord Tennyson beautifully stated, "I am a part of all that I have met." This work, in its essence, carries the influence and contributions of everyone who has been a part of this academic expedition.

Dedicated to,

My Achan and Amma,

The wind beneath my wings,

This is for you

With love beyond words,

With gratitude beyond measure.

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ABSTRACT

DISPLACED VOICES: RE-IMAGING THE SELF IN SELECT SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

This thesis examines selected autobiographical narratives by Syrian refugee women to explore how life writing functions as a site of identity reconstruction, narrative activism, and resistance in the context of war, displacement, and exile. Situating itself at the intersection of life-writing studies and refugee studies, the research analyses four memoirs authored by women from diverse social and professional backgrounds, including childhood activism, disability advocacy, sports, and literary witnessing. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that these narratives move beyond mere documentation of suffering and strategically reconfigure the refugee subjects as agentive, visible, and politically engaged.

The theoretical framework draws primarily on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's concepts of autobiographical subjectivity and identity construction, which illuminate how selfhood is consciously shaped through genre, voice, and narrative positioning. This framework is further enriched by E. F. Kunz's Kinetic Model of Refugee Movement and Vamik D. Volkan's theory of refugee trauma, enabling a nuanced understanding of displacement as both a structural and psychological experience. Together, these approaches reveal how trauma, mobility, and memory influence narrative form and self-representation.

The thesis identifies significant generic diversity across the texts, including the autobiographical manifesto, human rights narrative, jockography, and *testimonio*, demonstrating how genre choice itself becomes a narrative strategy. By foregrounding lived experience, collective witnessing, and public engagement, the memoirs perform narrative activism and resist reductive humanitarian representations of refugee women as passive victims. Ultimately, the study argues that Syrian refugee women's autobiographies constitute a powerful literary intervention that transforms personal narratives into acts of cultural

resistance, global advocacy, and self-authorship, thereby making a substantive contribution to contemporary refugee literature and women's life-writing.

KEYWORDS: Autobiographical Manifesto, *Testimonio*, Jockography, Human Rights Discourse, Identity, Narrative Activism, Resistance

Preface

The stories of displaced individuals are often told by others—by journalists, policymakers, and humanitarian organisations—leaving refugees themselves at the margins of their own narratives. This thesis seeks to re-centre the voices of Syrian refugee women who, through autobiographical writing, reclaim agency and redefine their identities beyond victimhood. By examining the memoirs of Bana Alabed, Samar Yazbek, Yusra Mardini, and Nujeen Mustafa, this study explores how life writing serves as a powerful medium for testimony, advocacy, and resistance.

My interest in this subject stems from a deep engagement with the intersections of literature, migration, and human rights. As the Syrian conflict continues to shape global discussions on forced displacement, the personal narratives of refugee women provide crucial insights into the lived realities of exile, resilience, and identity reconstruction. This research is not merely an academic exercise; it is a response to the ethical imperative of acknowledging and amplifying the voices of those who have experienced displacement firsthand.

Throughout this journey, I have been fortunate to engage with the works of scholars who have shaped the field of life writing and refugee studies. The theoretical frameworks of Sidonie Smith, John Beverley, James W. Pipkin, and Schaffer and Smith have provided a lens to analyse these memoirs, revealing how personal storytelling intersects with political and humanitarian discourses. The narratives explored in this thesis challenge stereotypical representations of refugees, demonstrating that displaced women are not just subjects of crisis but active participants in shaping historical memory and global advocacy.

This thesis is ultimately a testament to the power of storytelling. The memoirs analysed here are not just records of survival; they are acts of defiance, bearing witness to injustice while demanding a more just and empathetic world. I hope that this study contributes to ongoing conversations about refugee narratives, representation, and the role of life writing in shaping collective memory. Above all, it stands as a recognition of the resilience, agency, and dignity of Syrian refugee women who continue to rewrite their own histories.

Sree Lakshmi K

Sree Lakshmi v

സംഗ്രഹം

കുടിയിറക്കപ്പെട്ട ശബ്ദങ്ങൾ : തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത സിറിയൻ അഭയാർത്ഥി സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ആത്മകഥകളിലെ സ്വത്വ പുനർ-ചിത്രീകരണം

സിറിയൻ അഭയാർത്ഥി സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ആത്മകഥാപരമായ വിവരണങ്ങളെ ഈ പ്രബന്ധം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു, അവരുടെ ഓർമ്മക്കുറിപ്പുകൾ പ്രതിരോധം, സാക്ഷ്യം, സ്വത്വ പുനർനിർമ്മാണം എന്നിവയുടെ രൂപങ്ങളായി എങ്ങനെ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് പര്യവേക്ഷണം ചെയ്യുന്നു. അഭയാർത്ഥി ശബ്ദങ്ങൾ പലപ്പോഴും ബാഹ്യ വിവരണങ്ങളാൽ അരികുവൽക്കരിക്കപ്പെടുകയോ മധ്യസ്ഥത വഹിക്കപ്പെടുകയോ ചെയ്യുന്ന ഒരു യുഗത്തിൽ, ജീവിത എഴുത്തിലൂടെ സിറിയൻ സ്ത്രീകൾ എങ്ങനെ ഏജൻസിയെ വീണ്ടെടുക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് ഈ പഠനം എടുത്തുകാണിക്കുന്നു. ബന അലബേദിന്റെ *ഡിയർ വേൾഡ്*, സമർ യാസ്ബെക്കിന്റെ *ദി ക്രോസിംഗ്*, യുസ്ര മർദിനിയുടെ *ബട്ടർഫ്ലൈ*, നുജീൻ മുസ്തഫയുടെ *ദി ഗേൾ ഫ്രം അലപ്പോ* എന്നിവയിൽ ശ്രദ്ധ കേന്ദ്രീകരിച്ചുകൊണ്ട്, ഈ ഓർമ്മക്കുറിപ്പുകൾ പരമ്പരാഗത ആത്മകഥയെ എങ്ങനെ മറികടക്കുന്നുവെന്നും, സ്ഥാനചലനം, യുദ്ധം, അതിജീവനം എന്നിവയെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള പ്രബലമായ വ്യവഹാരങ്ങളെ വെല്ലുവിളിക്കുന്ന രാഷ്ട്രീയമായി പ്രാധാന്യമുള്ള ഇടപെടലുകളായി പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്നും പ്രബന്ധം തെളിയിക്കുന്നു.

സിഡോണി സ്മിത്തിന്റെ ആത്മകഥാപരമായ മാനിഫെസ്റ്റോയെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള ആശയം, ജോൺ ബെവർലിയുടെ സാക്ഷ്യപത്രം, ജെയിംസ് ഡബ്ല്യു. പിഫ്ലിന്റെ ജോക്കോഗ്രാഫി, ഷാഫർ ആൻഡ് സ്മിത്തിന്റെ മനുഷ്യാവകാശ വിവരണം എന്നിവയുമായി ഇടപഴകുന്ന ജീവിതരചനയിലും അഭയാർത്ഥി പഠനങ്ങളിലും പ്രധാന ആശയങ്ങളെ സൈദ്ധാന്തിക ചട്ടക്കൂട് വരയ്ക്കുന്നു. ഓരോ ഓർമ്മക്കുറിപ്പും ഈ ലെൻസുകളിലൂടെ വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നതിലൂടെ, എഴുത്തുകാർ അവരുടെ വ്യക്തിഗത യാത്രകൾ രേഖപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിന് മാത്രമല്ല, വിശാലമായ സാമൂഹിക, രാഷ്ട്രീയ മാറ്റത്തിനായി വാദിക്കുന്നതിനും വ്യക്തിപരമായ സാക്ഷ്യങ്ങൾ എങ്ങനെ തന്ത്രപരമായി ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് വെളിപ്പെടുത്തുന്നു.

ഡിയർ വേൾഡ് ആത്മകഥാപരമായ മാനിഫെസ്റ്റോയെ ഉദാഹരണമായി അവതരിപ്പിക്കുന്നു, സിറിയൻ സംഘർഷത്തിന് ആഗോള ഉത്തരവാദിത്തം ആവശ്യപ്പെടുന്നതിനും മുതിർന്നവരെ കേന്ദ്രീകരിച്ചുള്ള അഭയാർത്ഥി വിവരണങ്ങളെ തടസ്സപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിനും ഒരു കുട്ടിയുടെ കാഴ്ചപ്പാട് ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നു. *ദി ക്രോസിംഗ്* സാക്ഷ്യപത്രവുമായി യോജിക്കുന്നു, യുദ്ധത്തിന് സാക്ഷ്യം വഹിക്കാൻ ഒന്നിലധികം ശബ്ദങ്ങൾ വർദ്ധിപ്പിക്കുകയും സിറിയൻ പ്രതിരോധത്തിൽ ഒരു പങ്കാളിയും നിരീക്ഷകനുമായി യാസ്ബെക്കിനെ സ്ഥാനപ്പെടുത്തുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു. *ബട്ടർഫ്ലൈ* ജോക്കോഗ്രാഫി പുനർനിർവചിക്കുന്നു, മാർഡിനിയുടെ അഭയാർത്ഥി യാത്രയെ അവളുടെ കായിക നേട്ടങ്ങളുമായി ഇഴചേർക്കുന്നു, സ്പോർട്സ് ഒരു അതിജീവന തന്ത്രമായും വാദത്തിനുള്ള ഒരു വേദിയായും

എങ്ങനെ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് കാണിക്കുന്നു. *ദി ഗേൾ ഫ്രം അലപ്പോ* ഒരു മനുഷ്യാവകാശ വിവരണമായി പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നു, കഴിവുള്ളവരും വിദേശീയ വിദ്വേഷികളുമായ സ്റ്റീരിയോടൈപ്പുകളെ വെല്ലുവിളിക്കുകയും, കുടിയിറക്കപ്പെട്ടവരും വികലാംഗരുമായ വ്യക്തികളുടെ പ്രതിരോധശേഷിയും ഏജൻസിയും ഊന്നിപ്പറയുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു.

ഈ വിശകലനത്തിലൂടെ, സിറിയൻ അഭയാർത്ഥി സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ഓർമ്മക്കുറിപ്പുകൾ നിഷ്ക്രിയ ഇരത്വത്തെ ചെറുക്കുകയും പകരം ചരിത്ര സ്മരണയെ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിൽ അവരുടെ രചയിതാക്കളെ സജീവ ഏജന്റുമാരായി സ്ഥാപിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നുവെന്ന് തീസിസ് വാദിക്കുന്നു. അവരുടെ ജീവിതരചന അഭയാർത്ഥി അനുഭവത്തെ മാനുഷികമാക്കുക മാത്രമല്ല, വായനക്കാർ, നയരൂപകർത്താക്കൾ, മാനുഷിക സംഘടനകൾ എന്നിവരുടെ ധാർമ്മിക ഇടപെടലും ആവശ്യപ്പെടുന്നു. കുടിയിറക്കപ്പെട്ട വ്യക്തികൾക്ക് അവരുടെ ആഖ്യാനങ്ങൾ വീണ്ടെടുക്കുന്നതിനുള്ള ശക്തമായ ഒരു മാധ്യമമായി ആത്മകഥ എങ്ങനെ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് കാണിച്ചുകൊണ്ട് ജീവിതരചന, അഭയാർത്ഥി പഠനങ്ങൾ, മനുഷ്യാവകാശ സാഹിത്യം എന്നീ മേഖലകളിലേക്ക് ഈ പഠനം സംഭാവന നൽകുന്നു. ആത്യന്തികമായി, ഡിജിറ്റൽ കഥപറച്ചിൽ, അന്തർദേശീയ ആക്ടിവിസം എന്നിവയാൽ നിർബന്ധിത കുടിയേറ്റം കൂടുതലായി രൂപപ്പെടുന്ന ഒരു യുഗത്തിൽ ഓർമ്മക്കുറിപ്പുകളുടെ പരിണമിക്കുന്ന പങ്കിനെ ഈ പ്രബന്ധം അടിവരയിടുന്നു.

ലിംഗഭേദം, പ്രായം, വൈകല്യം, കായിക ഐഡന്റിറ്റി എന്നിവ അഭയാർത്ഥി സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ജീവിതാനുഭവങ്ങളെ എങ്ങനെ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നു എന്നതിനെ പരിഗണിക്കുമ്പോൾ, അതിന്റെ ഇന്റർസെക്ഷണൽ സമീപനത്തിന് ഈ പ്രബന്ധം പ്രധാനമാണ്. അഭയാർത്ഥി വ്യവഹാരങ്ങളിൽ പലപ്പോഴും നിഴലിക്കുന്ന ശബ്ദങ്ങളെ കേന്ദ്രീകരിച്ചുകൊണ്ട്, നിർബന്ധിത കുടിയേറ്റത്തെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള ആഗോള ധാരണകളെ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിൽ വ്യക്തിഗത വിവരണങ്ങളുടെ പങ്കിനെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള പണ്ഡിത സംഭാഷണങ്ങൾ ഇത് വികസിപ്പിക്കുന്നു. കഷ്ടപ്പാടുകളുടെ ഒരു ഡോക്യുമെന്റേഷൻ എന്നതിലുപരി, ഐഡന്റിറ്റി, ഏജൻസി, രാഷ്ട്രീയ പ്രതിരോധം എന്നിവയുടെ ഒരു സ്ഥിരീകരണമായി അഭയാർത്ഥി ജീവിതരചനയിൽ ഏർപ്പെടുന്നതിൽ വായനക്കാരുടെയും ഗവേഷകരുടെയും ധാർമ്മിക ഉത്തരവാദിത്തങ്ങളെയും ഇത് എടുത്തുകാണിക്കുന്നു.

Chapter I

Introduction

"no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark

you only run for the border

when you see the whole city running as well" (Shire 1-4)

So begins the poem "Conversations about Home" by Warsan Shire, the British-Somali poet, that veraciously captures the experience of the refugee in the modern world. Shire escaped Somalia for Europe following the internal strife in her country that violently disrupted people's lives and safety. The "run for the border" does not stop there. The exodus of refugees is never-ending, as they do not find a permanent home. They remain as ciphers or one among the masses with no identity other than a number or code given at the refugee camps. Before delving into serious discussions on the issues of refugees, it is the prerogative of this study to define what is and what a refugee is not.

Refugee – Definition and Typology

On a literal level, the word 'refugee' refers to someone who is in search of or "is a recipient of refuge" (Maley 38). The roots of the word can be ascribed to the Latin word *fugere,* meaning 'to flee' and *refugium,* meaning to take refuge in a place. The term was first used in English to denote the French Huguenots or protestants who fled their native country, fearing religious persecution. The modern sense of the word has complex undertones attached. More than an action, it points to a state or subject position. Alexander Betts, in his essay "Forced Migration and Global Politics," interprets 'refugee' as a concept that "exists as a manifestation of both the breakdown

of the state-citizen and citizen-territory relationship upon which the sovereign state is premised" (44). The popular understanding of the concept of a refugee is influenced by the "images contained in mass media" (Maley 38). Refugees are portrayed as a group of homeless nomads who stroll through places unknown to them, waiting for the mercy of their new master, the host country, for survival. The images of refugees as destitute take away the sense of concomitancy in public to coexist with them and create apprehensions about the refugees' merit or entitlement to receive empathy. Therefore, it is crucial to lay out the right definition of the term, assigning the accurate attributions that stand close to the true nature of the refugees.

The UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, provides an official definition for the term 'refugee' in connection with the 1951 Refugee Convention as follows, a refugee is someone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality." Added to it, they are "unable" or "unwilling" to return to their country, fearing negative repercussions (qtd.in Maley 21). The persecution mentioned in the definition must involve "systematic and discriminatory conduct" that causes "serious harm to the person" (22). William Maley in "What is a Refugee" (2016) observes that this definition of refugee is narrow and incomplete, as it misses details. The title of refugee is conferred upon the displaced only when the host country grants them the status, until which they remain as asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Thus, a person cannot claim to be a refugee officially unless he/she is authorised to do so.

It is inevitable to differentiate refugees from other similar categories of people to establish their distinctiveness. UNHCR recognizes other categories like an "internally displaced person or IDP," who is "displaced within their country of

nationality and has not crossed the international borders," "a stateless person," "who is not a citizen of any country…due to technical or administrative decisions or oversights" and "an asylum seeker," "who had to flee their country and has sought sanctuary in a foreign country" (UNHCR USA). Refugees are also confused with migrants and exiles. Migrants and refugees differ in their reasons to leave their home countries; when the former take a voluntary action, the latter is forced to take an involuntary flight. In the case of the exiles, though the reason to flee may be similar to that of the refugees, the acceptance and accumulation in the host country differ. Refugee is a legal status, while exile is a temporary or permanent status and can refer simply to the state of uprooting, alienation or detachment.

Sociologically, refugees are part of the involuntary migrant group based on the push-pull factors (Richmond 1). Involuntary migrants or refugees are forced to leave a place where they were comfortably living before the unrest that forced them to cross the borders. Compared to the voluntary migrants, refugees have more losses than gains as they struggle to survive without finance, resources and social support.

The Refugee Crisis

In psychologically approaching the refugee issue, one could see that refugeefication is a major cause of mental trauma among the displaced. The attitude of the host countries is often hostile because of several reasons, the major one being the threat to their group identity. Vamik D. Volkan, the famous American psychiatrist, observes that this fear of the newcomer arises, as the members of the group believe that there will be cracks in their cultural arrangement if they intermingle with people of a foreign culture. Thus, to preserve their culture, which shapes their identity, they distance themselves from the foreigners and in some cases look down upon them as threats or enemies.

Even after settling down in a new country of their choice, the refugees are haunted by the memories of the home they lost and transmit this pain to the next generation, who carry it as a burden. This leads to problems in their identity formation, personality development and other mental issues. Volkan calls the people who belong to the subsequent generations, repositories of the trauma of their ancestors.

Refugee Writing in General

The themes of displacement and forced migration have been part of the literary articulations from antiquity. The Roman poet Virgil composed an epic, the *Aeneid,* in Latin narrating the journey of Aeneas, a Trojan War hero who seeks refuge in Italy. Homer's *Odyssey* similarly features a wandering hero who is in exile. Even the Bible is filled with stories of flight, displacement, separation and migration. "The Book of Exodus" contains stories of the Israelites fleeing persecution in Egypt. The theme of exile and displacement can be seen in Shakespeare's plays as well. In *The Tempest* and *Othello,* there is a subtle treatment of the concepts of otherness and the internal sense of alienation. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the works of writers like Dante Alighieri and Victor Hugo explored themes of loss, dislocation and uprootment through the lives of the outcasts.

However, the discourses by refugees in the contemporary sense of the term emerged in the twentieth century. It is a modern cultural phenomenon - a product of the two world wars that resulted in the deracination of millions. It embodies diverse refugee experiences, including the complexities and commonalities of being a refugee. Writers like "Simone Weil, W.H. Auden, Samuel Beckett and George Orwell" responded to the "conditions of modern refugees" (Bakara 290) using different literary genres. Auden's poem "Refugee Blues" speaks of the plight of

German Jews who escaped Nazi persecution and sought asylum in Europe. It conveys the state of abandonment and isolation that the refugees face as they were dispossessed of a familiar world. Writers like Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov, who were refugees, could draw an authentic picture of the unsettled and unstable state of men caught in cultural and intellectual dislocation.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, texts were written that explored the psychological trauma of disorientation and the pain of loss of the second-generation refugees. They were burdened with the trauma of their ancestors, who transmitted it through the oral stories that were later attached to their identity. The American cartoonist Art Spiegelman created a graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, serialised from 1980 to 1991, that narrated the holocaust experiences of the writer's father. The work contributed significantly in opening new levels of inquiry in Holocaust Studies and the writing of the displaced.

When the twenty-first century began, "versions of the Third World 'humanitarian narrative' came to dominate how refugee literature was written and read at least in the west" (Bakara 290). The refugees were "cast as the needy recipients of the "gift of freedom," bestowed upon peoples of the Global South by the imperial powers of the West, now washed in the benevolence of humanitarian compassion" (290). The second decade of the twenty-first century saw a resurgence in the production of refugee writing as a response to the changing global political order. The writers like "Viet Thanh Nguyen, Roxane Gay, Warsan Shire… Ahmad Almallah and Jehan Bseiso" challenged the traditional stereotypes of refugees and reclaimed the refugees' right to question "nationalism and national sovereignty as the only legitimate grounds of political community" (Bakara 291).

Male and Female Traditions of Refugee Writing

Traditionally, refugee or migrant experiences were authenticated when they were part of a male narrative. Looking chronologically, the male tradition of refugee narratives has rethought the "hegemonic nature of manhood," an "idealized version of masculinity," "that is associated with power, dominance and control" (Kaili). The image of a refugee shatters such versions, disrupting these concepts of masculinity. The male refugee writing explores the insecurities, complexities and perplexities of their experiences in the modern global context, while confronting the issues of displacement, flight and resettlement. Their works participate "in the creation of diverse political futures" (Kaili) for men, denying the participation of women refugees. It can be seen that the refugee crisis and displacement were perceived as male issues to be resolved by men. Thus, the male writers distanced themselves from discussing wider gender issues that refugeefication creates in texts that cater to refugee experience. The female stories of exodus were either undocumented or were not published authoritatively, questioning their agency. It is in the mid-twentieth century, with the wider acceptance and popularity of the post-colonial writing that the voices from the margins gained visibility. The voices of women, indigenous groups, LGBTQs and refugees were heard with interest and curiosity within and outside the literary circles.

Though the slave narratives of women carry themes of displacement, loss of home and exile, the first recognised refugee woman writer is Olympe de Gouges, a French playwright and political activist. She fled persecution during the French Revolution following the publication of her work, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791), which demanded equal rights for women as the legitimate citizens of a nation. In the nineteenth century, many African female slave narratives were written with a similar thematic treatment found in the refugee

texts. *The History of Mary Prince* by West-Indian slave Mary Prince, published in 1831, records her constant dislocation on being shipped off to Bermuda, Turks, Caicos and Antigua by the slave owners. Her story resonates with that of the modern refugees' struggle for freedom and safety in alien countries where they found shelter.

However, the state of refugeehood as experienced in accordance with the modern definition of the term is seen in the Jewish Holocaust women's writing. The wartime diaries and journals of these women are antecedents of the contemporary refugee women's writing. They were displaced internally and outside their country during the holocaust. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947) is one such example. She wrote it in the form of letters to a confidante, hiding in a secret room in Holland with her Jewish family, recording the sensibilities of a young girl dealing with confinement and deprivation.

After the Second World War, the women writers like Rachel Auerbach of Israel, Gisella Perl and Olga Lengyel of Hungary, captured the "details about lived experience before, during, and after the Holocaust" along with the inner lives of "others who perished" and "the workings of traumatic memory" (Horowitz). Some writers like Fanya Goltesfeld (Ukrainian) and Judith Magyar (Hungarian-American) focused on the "belated despair" (Horowitz) reflecting on life after the Holocaust. Susan Rubin Suleiman, who fled from Budapest as a child to settle in France, coined the term "1.5 generation" to refer to those daughters raised by mothers who were adult survivors of the Holocaust. Writers like Suleiman wrote their "mothers' histories" (Horowitz). Some of the common themes found in their works are gender-specific, while others "characterize Holocaust writing generally" (Horowitz). The holocaust writing paved the way for women writers across regions, nationalities and

cultures to claim their narratives as instruments of resistance, remembrance and espousal, assuring that their voices promote dialogues on human rights and justice.

History of the Syrian Civil War and the Refugee Crisis

"From Damascus, jasmine begins its whiteness / And fragrances perfume themselves with her scent" (7-8) writes the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani in "A Damascene Moon," praising his land that emits the beautiful fragrances of the jasmine flower, found plenty in the city, drawing a romantic picture of the country through his lyrics. Syria, once known for the beauty of the ancient cities, souks, citadels and the alluring scents of spices and flowers with which it attracted tourists around the world, is now a shattered piece of land, defeated in its glory and might and beaten down by the brutal war.

As per the UN estimates, 6.8 million people are displaced from Syria (UNHCR USA). It is considered one of the largest refugee crises of the modern world after the holocaust. The refugee crisis was a direct result of the Syrian civil war that began in 2011. Though its beginning is perceived as the government's reaction against the students' demonstration in Daara in 2011, the opposition against the atrocities of the government had been growing for many decades. Syria has been under the control of the Ba'ath party since 1963, with Hafez al-Assad as the President. Since then, the government of Syria has been accused of dictatorship and partisanship towards Alawites, the community to which the President belongs. The President was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who initially gave hopes of renewal in the existing political system, but to the dismay of the citizens, Bashar's regime continued the same oppressive policies of the previous government.

The disconfirmation towards the existing political order, the economic disparity and the effect of the Arab Spring that occurred in the neighbouring countries

like Lebanon and Egypt, where people overthrew the dictators through collective protests, culminated in the protest against despotism in minor ways. The online campaigns by students and the secret discussions in the streets against the President gradually turned into explicit modes of expostulation, when the peaceful demonstration by students of Aleppo University demanding the resignation of the President was violently defended by the regime. With the formation of the opposition militia, the Free Syrian Army, by the rebels that demanded the liberation of Syria and the transformation of the country into a democratic one, the war turned violent and chaotic, leading to the death of thousands of militants and civilians, marking the beginning of the civil war in 2011.

The arrival of the religious extremist group, ISIS and the regime's violent measures, like the bombing of civilian areas, made the country uninhabitable. The people who supported the rebels were persecuted by the regime through detention, imprisonment and death sentences. Thus, Syrians to save their lives and their loved ones left their home country and sought shelter in neighbouring countries like Turkey and Jordan. The refugee crisis began with the increasing number of Syrians crossing international borders in large numbers and the inability of the host countries to accommodate them and cater to their needs. The Syrians who could not afford the journey to European countries were placed in refugee camps with minimal facilities. Thus, they were pushed to a state of uncertainty and vulnerability. Syrians who sought a better life further migrated to European countries, especially Germany. The German authorities were ready to welcome them, as the country was facing a labour shortage. However, many of the refugees were trapped in the refugee camps in the host countries, killed by the border police for violating the rules or drowned in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece.

The rebel group led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham seized control of Syria in December 2024, defeating Assad's military forces, ending five decades of civil war. It is estimated that more than half the country's population is displaced within and outside Syria due to the war. Even though the international agency, like the UN has interfered in the refugee issues, it has not been able to put an end to the war crimes that occurred inside Syria and provide justice to its citizens caught in the chaos. The hope to rebuild their country after the war has become a distant dream for Syrians who wish to return from their temporary asylum.

Syrian Refugee Writing

Syrian literature is officially considered part of the wider Arabic literature produced in the Middle Eastern region. It is by the end of the twentieth century that a distinct literary form emerged in the country following the independence of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1946. With the increased nationalistic tendencies in private and public spheres, the writers intended to create a national literature in contrast with the Arabic writings of other countries like Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco with which it was usually identified. In its theme and content, Syrian literature often relied on the social and political conditions of the country apart from the stories of everyday lives, love, sexuality and even existentialism through various genres like prose, poetry, drama and fiction.

The literature of Syria is inevitably "intertwined with its political background" (Al-Samman 175). It suffered censorship at the hands of the Ottoman empire, forcing the writers to flee to America and Europe and produce what came to be called "*Adab al-Mahjar* or emigration literature" (175). During the 1950s, there was an "eruption of the social realism trend in Syrian literature" (176) as "political commitment" became the "driving force" of writing, also called "*Adab al-Iltizam*" or literature of

commitment (176). A prominent novelist of this period, Hanna Mina, believed that literature should be produced for the sake of people and not for the sake of art and its aesthetics (176) and wrote politically engaging fictional works like *On the Sacks*, *Fragments of Memory* and *Sun on a Cloudy Day* that addressed the everyday problems of the people in Syria.

The Syrian literature took a downward trend with the arrival of the Ba'ath party in power during the 1960s. The writers had to choose between "living a life of artistic freedom in exile- as do Nizar Kabbani, Ghada al-Samman, Hamida Na'na', Salim Barakat and Ali Ahmad Sa'id (Adonis)- or resorting to subversive modes of expression that seemingly comply with the demands of the authoritarian police state" (Al-Samman 175-178). R. Shareah Taleghani, in *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature*, identifies a new subgenre of writing that emerged during the uprising in Syria that began during the first decade of the twenty-first century, like *Negative: From the Memory of Female Syrian Detainees* by Rosa Yaseen Hasan, *At Last, Boys* by Yassin al-Haj Saleh and *Longing for Life* by Abbas. These tales relive the horrors of prison life in Syria by those who raised their voices against the regime's tyranny.

The modern Syrian writing, especially that which was written after the civil war in 2011, contextualised war, violence, imprisonment (physical and psychological) and political persecution. These writings are a continuum of the Syrian prison writing, imitating the same revolutionary vigour of the protesters who wanted to subvert the regime. Apart from the mimetic and expressive functions of these artworks, the literature of the displaced, displayed a powerful sense of "moral fury" (Behar and Firat 3) in response to witnessing violence. Hannadi Al-Samman in his essay "Syria" published as part of the anthology *Literature from the "Axis of Evil*" exerts that the contemporary literature produced in Syria by those who were uprooted from their

homeland showcases a "constant battle between the axis of the internal evil represented by the dominance of the authoritarian state and the external evil represented by the way in which its citizens and practitioners are perceived by the West and the dominant superpowers" (Al-Samman 178). The writers explored this tension inflicted by the two worlds and examined how their voices are misunderstood or marginalised on a global scale through their texts. They challenged both the domestic oppression of Syrians in their country, the stereotypical representation of the refugees by the West and the deprioritization of their humanitarian concerns by the international literary world.

Felix Lang, a German Professor, in his essay "Transformations of the "Syrian" Literary Field Since 2011" identifies three categories of writers, novelists, poets and short story and prose writers who form three different generations of Syrian writers. The first group are the authors who had already begun their literary career when the Ba'ath party was in power in 1963. The authors in this generation include Adonis, Hanna Mina, Ulfat Idlibi and Walid Ikhlasi. The next generation of writers came to prominence in the 1980s by challenging the "social realism of Mina and Ikhlasi" (Lang 263). The third generation wrote during the 1990s and 2000s, concentrating on the conflict in the country and displaying active involvement in the political affairs. The writers like Samar Yazbek, Rosa Yassin Hassan and Khaled Khalifa dominated this period. The works of this generation of writers who were displaced from their nation portrayed Assad as a dictator and explored themes of authoritarianism, generational trauma and the collapse of the Syrian society at the hands of the tyrannical government. These writers, both veterans and amateurs, Lang notes, fled Syria post-2011. They first moved to the neighbouring countries like Turkey, Jordan

and Lebanon and later migrated to European countries like Germany and France. The capital city of Germany, Berlin, became their new literary resort (Lang 264).

The works of the Syrian refugees written in Arabic were internationalised through translation. The translations of works by eminent writers like Yazbek's diaries and Khalifa's novel *In Praise of Hatred*, into English, helped in creating a readership for the Syrian stories across the world. Lang observes, "the displacement entailed the inclusion of a completely new range of international actors that have not been previously part of the field," like "public diplomacy organisations," "various funding programs," "foreign publishers and translators," and online platforms of publication, including social media (Lang 264).

Male Tradition of Syrian Refugee Writing

Tracing a gender-based tradition in Syrian refugee writing is a complex task. As the genre is in a developmental stage, expanding in its scope as a humanitarian discourse, other conceptual issues like gender, intersectionality, female agency and resistance are less explored. The impact of war being equal on men and women, the issues they deal with in their works seem to contain political commentary on war, along with their personal stories. The everyday horrors of living under conflict, the state's control over their creativity, the pains of leaving home and a sense of alienation are common themes found in the works of male and female refugees. In many of the mainstream writings on refugees by men, women's experiences have been marginalised. *My Country: A Syrian Memoir* (2018) by Kassem Eid, a war survivor and rebel, is essentially a tale of war, its ravages and horrors. Having been part of the demonstrations and protests firsthand, the narrative of Eid captures the savagery of the violent conflict. Similarly, *Brothers of the Gun: A Memoir of the Syrian War* (2018) by Marwan Hisham, a Syrian freelance journalist captures the

bloodshed and violence of the armed conflict. Their narratives give a perception that war is an affair between men where both the protagonists and antagonists are men, and women's role in it is subsumed to that of victims. Such narratives also uphold hegemonic masculine images of men as physically powerful and whose involvement in the war is a matter of pride that can boost their self-esteem.

Other narratives like *The Last Sanctuary in Aleppo* (2019) by Ala Aljaleel and *The Pianist from Syria* (2019) by Aeham Ahmad are predominantly coming-of-age narratives where the plot revolves around the protagonist who grew up in a peaceful environment that was disrupted due to the war in Syria. It also narrates their involvement in the cause of their country's freedom and the final phase of maturity they attain. These narratives confront the societal expectations of growing up in a traditional society on a personal level, intertwined with broader political oppression, familial pressures, trauma and displacement. The stories of displacement by the male writers also seem to condemn Assad's policies and authoritarian rule. *My Road from Damascus* (2022) by Jamal Saeed a refugee, who escaped from Syria to Canada, recounts his years of imprisonment for expressing anti-Assad sentiments. He accounts for the injustices and brutal violations of rights Syrian citizens faced at the hands of the tyrannical government.

The Female Tradition

The female refugee writing from Syria does not boast of a long tradition. The refugee writing was the need of the hour, a mode of protest in the form of writing that was indispensable. It was an immediate reaction towards the oppression of the state, rather than a gradually planned process where the writer pre-plans, researches and compiles his /her ideas. Another characteristic of these texts is that they address not only nationalistic concerns but also humanistic issues, appealing to a global public. As

most of them are unskilled in English, their works are either written in Arabic and then translated into English or written and published in English with the help of an editor. Notably, with the global appeal of the refugee narratives, the memoirs of Syrian women are now considered a distinct genre and not a sub-genre of the Middle-Eastern women's writing to which it was often paired. However, Mohja Kahf, the famous Syrian-American poet, in the essay "The Silence of Contemporary Syrian Literature," argues that "there is no such thing as Syrian literature" until now, as it was "created under the conditions of repression and censorship that have borne down on Syria." The major writers like "Kabbani, Samman, Tamer, [and] Adonis…have been driven to leave Syria" (R. Anis et al 4), thus creating a lesion in the Syrian literary space. But she acknowledges the rise of a new Syrian writing genre with the help of online platforms that need not fear censorship. As the writers are now physically settled in a safe place, they write their heart out, emphasising their Syrian identity. In this regard, the contemporary writing of Syria is a blend of both nationalistic literature produced within the country and transnational/diasporic literature produced by the refugee writers outside the country.

The women writers of Syria, like Mohja Kahf and novelist Ibtisam Ibrahim Tracy, began writing about exile in life and literature long before the war. These diasporic writers explored the complexities of taking up a transnational identity, inculcating experiences of the past life in Syria and the present life abroad. During the mid-twentieth century, writers like "Ghadah Al-Samman, Colette Khoury, Qamar Kilani, Olfa Al-Idlibi," "laid the foundations of feminist literature in Syria" through the exploration of themes, related to love, female sexuality and eroticism (R. Anis et.al.1-2). It is only by the end of the twentieth century that women writers started exploring social and political themes fearlessly and "strove to expose the current dark

reality" (R.Anis et.al. 3). The women writers who were displaced from Syria like "Dima Wannous, Maha Hassan, Rasha Abbas, Rosa Yaseen Hasan and Samar Yazbek" exhibited "rich diversity" in theme and concerns that stemmed from "revolutionary context of contemporary Syria" that "accelerated women to write, publish, and openly shape the literary scene through the act of storytelling" (R.Anis et.al. 3).

The Syrian refugee women's narratives are both a continuation and a break from the Syrian Arab writing that was produced before the war. The war produced an array of memoirs by individuals who are not professionally in the writing field. These works enriched the genre with its authentic tales of living as women in war. Without literary ornamentations and testimonio-like quality, these narratives provide a first-hand account of the atrocities of war and displacement. The writers can be divided into three categories based on the thematic concerns found in their texts. The first category is the revolutionary writers who convert their texts into political ones, sharing their perspectives on the authoritarian rule and engaging in activism while speaking for a community. Samar Yazbek is a prominent writer of this category. The second category belongs to refugee writers who focus on their experiences as refugees outside Syria. While some of these writers lament the loss of their home, others consider it an opportunity to rebuild their lives in progressive nations like Germany with a better standard of living. They even praise the governments of the host countries for having accepted them and express gratitude towards their 'kind gesture.' The writers like Nujeen Mustafa, Yusra Mardini and Bana Alabed are examples. The third category of writers is not officially refugees but diasporic writers who migrated to other countries prior to the war and speak for their nation and its people, as it is the only way they can help their country and its citizens. The memoirs like *The Home*

That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria by Alia Malek (2017) and *The Boy on the Beach* (2018) by Tima Kurdi are examples. These memoirs speak on the disintegration of Syria as well as the refugee issues as secondary witnesses. Apart from these categories, a fourth informal category is visible when one looks into Syrian women refugee writing. The texts compiled by European writers and journalists fall into this category. The texts like *Our Bodies their Battlefields* (2020) by British author Christina Lamb and *No Refuge for Women* (2017) by German journalist and writer Maria von Welser present distinct voices of Syrians or their own experiences of dealing with the war victims and refugees. They act as the medium for articulation for those women who are afraid to speak, revealing their identity, or are not equipped to communicate their emotions to the world.

Writers and Texts Chosen for Study

The writers chosen for study are Samar Yazbek, Nujeen Mustafa, Yusra Mardini and Bana Alabed, who are four refugee women, displaced from Syria following the civil war in 2011 and whose narratives were published between the years, 2015 and 2018. Their works are a direct reaction towards the war and displacement, written at a time of urgency for the message to be reached to the world. Except for Samar Yazbek, other refugees are not professional writers. Rather than being a part of the Syrian literary canon, their memoirs rightly fall under the canon of global humanitarian discourses that go beyond the barriers and borders of nationality, language and geography to voice a universal problem and speak for a collective. The writers are chosen from various walks of life with varied political and community affiliations, age groups, professions and physiological capabilities to understand how these factors influence their self-awareness and construction of the selves. Their diverse perspectives on war and refugeefication help in attaining a broader view of the

challenges faced by them during escape, flight and resettlement in the host country and the deeper socio-political, cultural, economic and gender-specific dimensions of the crisis.

The study intentionally has chosen women writers to explore in depth the intricacies and nuances of women's representation of the refugee experiences and to critically analyse the intersections of gender and displacement, highlighting how displacement affects their social roles, relationships and sense of selves. It also helps to bring out how the personal aspects of their lives are indeed a direct consequence of the political actions. Women-oriented study also helps in bringing out a feminist perspective of war and refugitude and to explore the themes of motherhood, female activism and empowerment they attain through the act of speaking out. It also enables the readers to understand how they reframe the refugee discourses by challenging the traditional modes of narration and creating advanced ways of storytelling.

The texts chosen for study all belong to the genre of life narratives. Self-life writing is a practice of writing one's life, contemplating the past, in an attempt to make sense of it in the present. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiographies* (2010) state that autobiographical works are "discursive formations of truth-telling" where the narrators whose identities remain "marginal" and "invisible," "negotiate and alter normative or traditional frames of identity in their differences" (3). As refugees are a marginalised group, their life writings break the stereotypes and provide an authentic portrayal of their selves and their lived experiences of war. Syrian refugees choose this genre as it best suits to address their issues with a sense of urgency, expecting future action. It is the "most accessible of literary genres" to them as it requires "less in the way of literary expertise" and provides them with a "high degree of control over their own images (Couser 78). The

critical study of their life narratives enables to understand their subjective interpretations of the experiences of displacement, exploration of their personal and collective identities and presentation of an alternate history of Syria that challenges the fabricated and falsified versions found in the dominant discourses. As life narratives are primarily records of memories, analysing them would allow for an understanding of the cultural and social normative structure in Syria that has shaped their understanding of the selves, their community and ways of storytelling.

The following are the brief descriptions of the writers and their works taken up for the study.

1. Bana Alabed (b.2009)

Bana Alabed is a young Syrian refugee from Aleppo who attained international attention with her tweets on the Syrian civil war and her daily life under the war while living in Syria. Bana is the daughter of Fatemah, an English teacher and law student and Ghassan, an advocate. They see themselves as responsible citizens whose country belongs to its natives and not the autocratic powers. Belonging to the Sunni Muslim community, they were part of the majority sect in Syria, enjoying a sound financial background, community backing and social support. Bana is the eldest of their three children, with two brothers younger than her.

In 2011, at the age of 7, Bana had to confront the civil war and the violent bombing in her city that forced her family to flee. Though initially Bana's family was hesitant to move out of the country, the threat towards their lives pushed them to seek refuge in Turkey. Bana and her mother started tweeting, seeking help from the outside world as they were caught in the midst of chaos. They informed the world about the war crimes in Syria and how the citizens were oppressed by the regime. Bana was conferred with the Rising Star Award for individuals who have achieved

extraordinary heights by the Asian Awards, UK for raising voice for the children in Syria.

Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace

Bana's memoir was published in 2017, co-authored with her mother, Fatemah. The memoir can be seen as part of their activism to spread awareness and call for action that they started earlier through *Twitter*. The memoir follows a dual narrative mode where the voices of both Bana and her mother, Fatemah, appear simultaneously. When the former gives a child's perspective on war and displacement, the latter provides a mother's perspective and an in-depth analysis of war's effect on the lives of ordinary citizens. The story begins with their life before the Syrian war, followed by their everyday life under siege and the eventual escape from the country. The book was written as an answer to the accusation of the regime that Bana is a fake online creation by the Western powers to discredit the Syrian government. Thus, it provides detailed descriptions of the events they witnessed first-hand and proofs like photographs and images of tweets to prove Bana's existence. Through her memoir, Bana advocates for peace and justice for children caught in war.

2. Nujeen Mustafa (b.1999)

Nujeen Mustafa is a Kurdish-Syrian refugee who crossed international borders in her wheelchair following the civil war in Syria. She was born in 1999 in Kobane, a Kurdish majority city in Northern Syria, into a large family with her parents and eight siblings. Her father followed the traditional profession of Kurds, cattle rearing, with a modest income. Born with cerebral palsy, Mustafa did not attend school and her life was confined to the four walls of her house for the most part.

Though the war displaced her and the family, the condition of being a refugee opened a new world to Mustafa that enabled her to see and experience the world outside, earlier restricted to her due to her disability. Her journey of 3,500 miles as a refugee in a wheelchair at the age of 16 was reported by the Western media, making it viral on the online platforms. Mustafa became the face of the Syrian refugees' resilience at the time of adversity. The media also highlighted that refugees consist of people like Mustafa, who will enrich the country they are in with their talent and conduct.

Mustafa published her memoir, *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom,* in two editions in 2016 and 2017 with Christina Lamb as the collaborator. Lamb, being an advocate of human rights, has helped to shape her narrative as a rights discourse. She was honoured with the Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism by the Human Rights Watch in 2019. Settled in Germany, Mustafa now acts as an advocate of disability and refugee rights.

The Girl from Aleppo

The memoir traces her journey from war-torn Syria to Germany as a disabled refugee. It focuses on how she navigates through the challenges of being disabled in a conservative society and as a displaced person seeking refuge in a foreign country. The text shows how Nujeen's life was uprooted due to the violent war and the decision to flee was made at a point when her family felt that she would not be safe in Syria. The role of her family especially that of her sister Nasrine is significant in the story as it is her support system that enabled Mustafa to push her boundaries and move forward.

The memoir offers a detailed look at the journey of refugees, including the hardships, dangers and border restrictions that can create awareness among the

Syrians who will follow this path in the future. Throughout her journey, Mustafa grapples with questions of identity and belonging. As Aleppo was the only place she was familiar with, she had to adjust to the new culture, language and environment in Germany. Mustafa successfully acculturates to it quickly with her inherent talent and openness to change. The most prominent difference that one could find in Mustafa's memoir that makes it different from other refugee memoirs is her attitude towards refugeeification. She considers it a positive change that helped her rediscover her identity. Thus, ironically, refugeeification was a kind of liberation for Mustafa.

3. Yusra Mardini (b.1998)

An athlete born in Damascus, Syria, in 1998, Yusra Mardini gained prominence with her participation in the swimming competition in the Olympics as part of the Refugee Olympic Team in 2016. She grew up in Damascus, Syria, to Ezzat Mardini and Mervat Mardini, with sisters Sara and Shahed. Her father, being a swimming coach, trained her to be a swimmer, specialising in butterfly and freestyle, to compete in national and international competitions. Mardini was only 13 years old when the civil war started in Syria. The uprising destroyed their house and put an end to her training, convincing her that there is no future for her in Syria as a swimmer. She, along with her family, was internally displaced, her father moving to Turkey to earn a living, and her mother and siblings moving from one place to the other within Syria seeking safety.

With the promise of a new life and career in swimming, Mardini sisters Yusra and Sara, escaped to Germany, taking the difficult routes through road and sea. They, like other Syrian refugees, were treated inhumanely until they reached their destination, facing life-threatening incidents while crossing borders. Mardini became the focus of attention of the media when the incident of her rescue of the Syrians

trapped in an overloaded dinghy that drowned while they crossed the Aegean Sea was reported by the international media. She became famous for her act of bravery for swimming the sea, pulling the dinghy to the shore saving the lives of other refugees.

Yusra Mardini was given the opportunity by the German government to continue her practice in swimming with a new coach named Sven. With the efforts of the UNHCR, she was selected to compete for the Rio Olympics as part of their effort to spread the message of hope and solidarity for all refugees who were homeless and fleeing persecution. Though Mardini could not win a medal, her popularity as an Olympian was utilised through the media to spread awareness of the refugee issues and send messages of optimism to the displaced around the world.

Mardini was appointed as the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, an official post assigned to celebrity representatives who can use their talent and fame to advocate for the rights of refugees in 2017. Mardini's story was made part of the short story collection *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo, gaining her a new fan base among children and teenagers. Her memoir *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian* was published in 2018, which later became the inspiration for the Netflix documentary *The Swimmers* (2022).

Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian- My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph

Published in 2018, *Butterfly* is Yusra Mardini's memoir co-authored with British writer and journalist Josie Le Blond. Interestingly, the work was produced in English and not in Arabic, the writer's mother tongue, which points to her intention to present it not just as a personal story but as a public work, supporting the mission of UNHCR to shape public perception of refugees and promote their rights. The memoir

explores the human side of the refugee crisis by placing two girls at the centre of the narration and follows their journey as victims of the war.

Butterfly is modelled as a coming-of-age narrative of a young girl who transforms from innocence to maturity following the impact of war and displacement. The text recounts Mardini's birth, growing up and maturation as both an athlete and a refugee fleeing the war in Syria. Beginning with her life in Syria as a young girl, she creates a picture of a prosperous Syria that is in contrast to the war-torn Syria narrated in her work. The book follows a chronological order, explaining the events that led to the uprising, intertwined with the narrator's personal story. The escape from Syria, the issues faced by the refugees during the flight and the xenophobic attitudes of the host countries, explained in the text, make it an authentic portrayal of the plight of the modern-day refugees.

Primarily intended for young readers, the story contains themes of motivation, placing the protagonist as a heroic figure who tackles the challenges posed to her by the situation she is caught in and emerges victorious at the end. As the story is not only that of a refugee, but also a sportsperson, it embodies key elements of a sports narrative such as passion, exertion, fall and victory. Mardini also accepts and acknowledges refugeehood as part of her core identity, sports that gave her a sense of purpose, focus and continuity amid the upheaval of her life.

4. Samar Yazbek (b.1970)

Samar Yazbek is a Syrian journalist and author who predominantly writes in Arabic. Born in 1970 in Jableh, Syria, as part of the Alawite community, Yazbek confesses to enjoying the privileges her community provided as its representatives held the highest power in the nation. After completing her graduation in Arabic literature from Tishreen University, Latakia, Yazbek started her writing career by

compiling short stories. Her first collection, *Autumn Flowers,* was published in 1999. She went on to write novels like *Cinnamon* and *The Mountain of Lilies* in 2008, and *In Her Mirrors* in 2010, which established her as a powerful figure of feminist voice in contemporary Syrian literature. Yazbek rose to prominence in the international literary scene after the publication of her memoirs, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* (2012) and *The Crossing* (2015), originally written in Arabic and translated into English. These works were published after she escaped from the country following the political threats.

As a journalist, Yazbek expressed her rage against the dictatorship of Assad through her articles while working with the newspaper *Al-Hayat*. The work, *Woman in the Crossfire,* abruptly criticised the brutal repression of the protests by the regime and called for the need for revolution in Syria. Her inclination towards the Free Syrian Army and her open stand against the regime made her a target of harassment and death threats by the secret police, *Shabiha,* who work for the regime. Yazbek had to accept the invitation of the French Government, which decided to grant asylum to the creative minds who were persecuted in Syria following the rape and death threats on her teenage daughter. Yazbek had to flee Syria despite her willingness to work for the freedom of her country. But even after settling in France, Yazbek continued her revolutionary work of advocating independence and emancipation of her country through her literary pursuits.

Yazbek is the recipient of the PEN Pinter award, PEN Tucholsky award and PEN-OXFAM Novib Award for *A Woman in Crossfire* in 2012. Her Syrian war memoir, *The Crossing,* won the Best Foreign Book award in France in 2016. She also received recognition by the Royal Society of Literature for her contributions to the literary world through her works. Her works are translated from Arabic to English and

other foreign languages like French, Spanish and Dutch, giving her wider popularity and recognition in the West.

The Crossing

The memoir *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* published in 2015, records Yazbek's return to Syria during the conflict, crossing the Syrian-Turkey border three times between 2012 and 2013, with the help of smugglers. She provides a nuanced and realistic perspective on how the revolution has evolved after her escape by focusing on the experiences of the civilians, activists and rebels of the Free Syrian Army and militants of the regime instead of her personal story. The crossings were an intentional act by Yazbek meant to fulfil varied needs. Primarily, she wanted to witness firsthand what her country has become at the hands of violent and anarchist rulers and record it. Through the memoir, she also aimed to create an impact among the readers and the international agencies who could intervene in the war crimes in Syria and take efforts to stop it and ensure the safety of the citizens. Secondly, she wanted to constitute a full-functioning body called 'Woman Now' that operates for the welfare of Syrian women inside the country by bringing them together and training them with skills which can help them gain financial independence. Most importantly, these crossings convey Yazbek's commitment as a writer and activist to uphold the truth and give voice to those stories that were silenced by the hegemonic powers. By interviewing women and documenting their everyday struggles of living under war, Yazbek brings out the small-scale resistances from the marginal spaces. She reaffirms her solidarity with the women whose human rights were violated while also acting as an agent of empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

Refugee Studies is usually seen as a sub-genre of the wider migration studies. However, there occurs a conceptual and interpretational crisis when the principles related to voluntary migration is applied to the forced migration experiences. It problematizes the study, bringing out unreliable solutions or theories on refugees. Refugee Studies cater to the migratory motifs found in the refugee-flight pattern. Therefore, this thesis utilises E.F. Kunz's theory of the kinetic model of refugee movement to categorise and establish the type of refugee the four writers are. This categorisation enables tracking their migration trends and identifying their vulnerabilities as part of the group.

E.F. Kunz, an Australian Professor, classifies refugees based on their pattern of flight, as "Anticipatory," "Acute" and "Intermediate" (131-134). Refugees who undertake the anticipatory movements are privileged when compared to other refugees because they get to plan their escape journey. By observing the changing political situation in their country, they assume that the country will be uninhabitable in the future and decide to leave through proper preparation before the situation gets worse. Thus, the refugee gets to learn the language of the host country and "usually has some finance and is informed the ways by which he can re-enter his trade or profession" (132). Contrastingly, acute refugees do not get time to prepare, as their flight is an immediate response to a calamity. They "flee either in mass or, if their flight is obstructed, in bursts of individual or group escapes" (Kunz 132). Their main goal is to reach a place of safety from the violent threats of their country. As their decision is unplanned, they are forced to stay in the refugee camps until they are granted asylum by the host country or migrate further until they find better living conditions. Intermediate refugee movement is a combination of both acute and anticipatory movements.

The study utilizes three different terms namely, ‘refugeefication,’ ‘refugitude’ and ‘refugeehood’ for referring to the state in which the refugees are caught. The use of these terms is intentional as they are accurate and appropriate in defining the state and experience of refugees. Though the term ‘refugeefication’ does not have a clearly recognised origin in academic circles, it can be seen as widely used in research studies on refugees, especially in the twenty-first century. It is used to denote the process of becoming a refugee through the persecution-displacement-escape-flight-resettlement pattern. The use of the term helps demarcate it from other experiences related to migration and exile. The terms ‘refugitude’ and ‘refugeehood’ are used interchangeably to denote the state of being a refugee as opposed to the states of exile and diaspora. The term ‘refugitude’ was coined by Khatharya Um in her book *The Land of Shadows: War, Revolution and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (2015). She uses the term to denote the “state, conditions and consciousness of being a refugee” (“Critical Vocabularies”). She intended to provide a “conceptual and theoretical intervention to prevailing discourse” (“Critical Vocabularies”). Refugitude “rescues” the understanding of refugees from “reductionist pejorative connotations” and “replaces attention to complexity of refugee lives, and binaries with juxtapositions and interstices as dynamic cites of negotiation and creation” (“Critical Vocabularies”). The refugee writers chosen for the study are not clearly part of a diasporic group where diaspora who are resettled and are successfully surviving for generations. The refugees, on the other hand, are still on the move, disoriented and displaced. Their works are written on the move as a reaction against the condition they are put in.

General Theories

As the thesis is predominantly, a study on narratology or the autobiographical narrative strategies employed by the authors in constructing their selves, it makes use of the autobiographical theories of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, postulated in *Reading Autobiography: An Updated Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2024). This critical work provides a framework for analysing the memoirs as a complex and multi-layered form of self-expression. Through this framework, the thesis will examine how the texts construct and negotiate identity and memory and echo the cultural, political and personal contexts of refugee experience. The thesis makes use of the 'compendium of autobiographical genres' provided in this work, like *testimonio*, rights narrative, jockography and autobiographical manifesto, to identify the narrative structure of the narratives taken up for study. The 'tool kit of narrative strategies' like autobiographical 'I', ethics, evidence, automediality, temporality and voice have been utilised to understand how the writers construct, represent and perform their identities through the act of autobiographical writing. By making use of the seven sets of theoretical concepts, such as memory, relationality, experience, identity, spatiality, embodiment and agency, the study intends to understand the dynamic process of the autobiographical subjectivity.

Division of Chapters and Specific Theories Used

The thesis is divided into six chapters, beginning with an introduction, followed by the four core chapters arranged chronologically corresponding to the different stages of migration, namely, pre-migration, migration, post-migration and return, as focused by the writers in the texts and ending with the concluding chapter that brings together the key insights of the thesis. Each of the core chapters deals with

a single memoir and focuses on establishing the autobiographical narrative mode with which the writer has chiselled out her identity. Through this approach, the study ensures a deep and structured analysis of the self-representation of the refugee writers in focus.

Chapter II in the thesis titled "Personal as Political: Examining Activism and Advocacy in Bana Alabed's *Dear World*" draws on the theoretical ideas of Sidonie Smith as propounded in her work "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics" (1991), to establish the memoir as an autobiographical manifesto. It makes use of the six constituent aspects of a manifesto, which are appropriating or contesting sovereignty, bringing to light or manifesting, announcing publicly, performing publicly, speaking for a group and speaking to the future, to bring out the manifesto elements in the text and constitute the fact that the personal in the texts is indeed political. Fatin Shabbar's concept of motherhood as a space for political activism will be considered to understand how Fatemah negotiates the role of mother before and after the war, and uses it as a revolutionary weapon. Furthermore, as the text is fundamentally a life narrative, the use of memory will be analysed with the help of Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka's view of memory as a cultural construction and the authors' formation of the self.

Chapter III titled "Beyond Trauma: Disability, Displacement and Human Rights in Nujeen Mustafa's *The Girl from Aleppo*" has analysed trauma experienced by Mustafa as a disabled person and a refugee. In order to study the trauma of disability, the American Disability Studies expert, G. Thomas Couser's ideas as propounded in his work *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* have been utilised. In this work, Couser outlines three paradigms, namely, symbolic,

medical and cultural, to understand the cultural representation and social construction of disability and how they perform to marginalise the disabled subject.

To examine the trauma of refugeehood, the chapter relies on the concepts explored in the book *Trauma and Resilience among Displaced Populations: A Sociocultural Exploration* by South African psychologist Gail Theisen-Womersley. The eight psychological stressors that cause trauma in refugees, formulated by Womersley namely, post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, survivor guilt, refugee gratitude, alienation, violence, acculturation and loss of cultural identity, loss of home and attitude of the host country, is used to analyse the representation of trauma in the text.

In order to establish the narrative framework as rights narrative, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's notions on human rights narratives as discussed in the work "Human Rights and Narrative Lives" (2004) have been utilized. In the work, the authors explore how the personal stories of the marginalized individuals contribute to human rights awareness and activism. They argue that life narratives are powerful tools for drawing attention to human rights violations, as they humanize abstract political issues by making individual suffering visible. Using these ideas, the chapter investigates how the narrator claims the rights denied as a disabled person growing up in a conservative society, as a refugee seeking shelter in host countries and as a disabled refugee in convergence.

Chapter IV, titled "From Refugee to Rings: Examining Resistance and Resilience in Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly*" attempts an analysis of the narrative as a refugee jockography. To analyse the elements of jockography in the text, theories and concepts propounded by American Professor James W. Pipkin in *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies* (2008) and American

journalist and researcher Bryan Curtis in the essay "Capote at the Bar" are employed. The chapter makes use of three stages of an athlete's construction of the self, proposed by Pipkin, which are the most memorable play, childhood and early inspiration and rise to fame. It also analyses how the writer juxtaposes the dual identities of sportsmanship and refugeehood to bring out the complexities of refugee narratives. The second theorist Curtis's idea on jockographies as a reflection of social, cultural and political issues is used to establish the work as a social and cultural commentary. The chapter also analyses the wider issues based on the refugee crisis and the challenges and defiance faced by athletes during war.

Chapter V is titled "Nothing but the Truth": Analysing the Politics of Witnessing and Narrative Activism in *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek. It analyses the text as a *testimonio* using the concepts, definitions and theories of John Beverley as expounded in his texts, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004) and *Against Literature* (1993). According to Beverley, testimonio is a form of political intervention and a tool of social change. The chapter analyses Yazbek's role as a witness and activist who records the events of collective trauma and calls the readers into action. It also analyses how the writer, by breaking the silence imposed by hegemonic powers, seeks to attain greater visibility for her marginalised experiences.

Prof. Kimberly Nance in *Trauma Narrative and Social Action* (2006) categorises *testimonio*s as forensic, epideictic and deliberative. The forensic *testimonio*s look into past actions, epideictic to present actions, the former accusing and blaming the perpetrators by identifying their act as just or unjust and the latter praising or blaming their actions as noble or shameful. The deliberative model is future oriented. It asks the readers to take future action by persuading them of the need and urgency of the situation. The study positions *The Crossing* as a deliberative

testimonio in its purpose. It brings out the elements of forensic and epideictic contained in the text though the deliberative goals supersede the other two. The chapter also utilizes Anne Cubilié's study on the role of women as witnesses to acts of terror and violence in *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights* (2005). She establishes women's narratives as political acts that call attention to social and political systems responsible for the violation of human rights. Cubilié's ideas on gendered experience of violence are used to bring out the intersection of gender and testimony or the acts of testifying to violence by the narrator to provide insight into women's suffering and resistance during war.

Review of Literature

The growing body of research on refugee narratives has increasingly focused on the themes of trauma, identity and displacement. This review explores the existing scholarship on the Syrian life writing especially on the writers taken up for the study- Nujeen Mustafa, Yusra Mardini, Samar Yazbek and Bana Alabed, addressing various aspects of their writing and how it contributes to the wider research on refugee literature.

Bana Alabed

Though there are not many literary research studies conducted on her memoir, Bana's digital voice and narrative have been a topic widely studied in sociological perspectives.

In an article titled "Bana Alabed: Using Twitter to draw Attention to human rights violations" (2017) published in the journal *Prose Studies*, Ana Garcia analyses the use of digital media by Alabed for human rights activism. It also looks at how the complex universal image of the suffering child is harnessed to denounce violence

through a social media platform. Garcia, in a book chapter titled “Bana Alabed: From Twitter War Child to Peace Icon” (2020) published in *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life-Writing and Human Rights*, studies Alabed’s diary as a form of human rights activism that excites humanitarian emotions.

Another article @Alabedbana: Twitter, the child, and the war diary (2020) published in the journal *Textual Practice* by Kate Douglas, “considers the new variables, complexities and mediations that new media diaries bring to a discussion of childhood diaries by considering the circulation of @Alabedbana’s twitter” (Douglas 1021).

Nujeen Mustafa

Mustafa’s memoir *The Girl from Aleppo* has been examined using various concerns, be it the thematic representations of the refugee crisis, disability experience or the intersection of trauma and disability or the media representation. Research studies have situated her as a symbol of refugee youth’s resilience and hope.

The media representation of Mustafa has been explored in the research article titled “Freudian Narcissism in Cross Media Storytelling: The Curious Case of Nujeen Mustafa” (2019) by Rodrigo Almeida Sousa, published in the journal *Politeia*. There is a reference to Mustafa’s writing in this article. The article suggests that media narratives cater to the narcissistic self-interests of the readers by portraying Mustafa in a particular way that satisfies their ego. Though not an actual study of her work, there are references to certain instances from her memoir where she explains the negative effect of social prejudice and distrust.

Another article titled “Refugee, Resettlement and Reminiscences: A Study on the Ethnographic memoir of Nujeen Mustafa with Christina Lamb in Nujeen: One Girl’s Incredible Journey from War-torn Syria” (2019) published in the journal

Literary Endeavour by Ponmani and Angeline, explores the thematic concerns in the text and situates it as an ethnographic narrative.

A book chapter, “Nujeen Mustafa: Syrian Refugee Defying Labels on TedX” (2020) by Ana Belen Martinez Garcia, published in *New Forms of Self-Narration*, compares Mustafa’s story to that of Bana Alabed’s. The authors recommend a reading of the two memoirs side by side to explore the strategies they use in their work as activists. The authors also claim that the two writers compete for the title of the ‘girl from Aleppo,’ which is evident from the change of title in Mustafa’s second edition of the memoir.

The book chapter “Reflections on Transnational Borderscapes” (2022) by Ana Martinez Garcia, published in *Representing 21st Century Migration in Europe*, analyses discourse performativity and border aesthetics in Mustafa’s memoir. Scholars Tariq et al., in the article titled “A Feminine Resistant Struggle of Refugees and their Resettlement” (2021) published in the journal *VFAST Transactions on Education,* compares Mustafa’s memoir with Malala Yousafzai’s in their representation of forced migration and resettlement.

Yusra Mardini

The academic dissertation titled “Challenging Refugee Representation through Autobiographical Memoirs” (2024) by Laura Ortega Aranda, submitted to Ghent University, conducts a thematic analysis of the memoir and explores how, as a refugee author, Mardini challenges dominant representations of refugees. The study also investigates how Mardini shatters the homogenised images of refugees by projecting the differences with other refugees. Mardini’s memoir is compared with a similar refugee tale, *Hope not Fear* by Hassan Akkad, to compare the thematic concerns in the two texts.

Another article titled “Youth Matters: Shedding Light on Displacement in Syrian Girls’ Memoirs” (2021) by Alberta Natasia Adji in the journal *Life Writing* compares Mardini’s memoirs with Nujeen Mustafa’s, another Syrian refugee. The writer argues that the two memoirs are specimens of “young displacement memoir phenomena” (Adji 225) where authors are involved in the acts of creating and negotiating identities. The article also explores the refugee experiences and the tension between their personal and collective selves found in the texts.

The article titled “A True Story: The Contrasting Literary Ethics of Refugee Novels and Memoirs” (2022) by Justin Mark, published in *The Macksey Journal,* examines the contrary literary ethics found in refugee memoirs and novels. Taking Mardini’s memoir *Butterfly* as one of the examples, the writer argues that the refugee memoirs elevate the saviour complex in the readers that “complicates the creation of empathy.” (Mark 5).

Samar Yazbek

Yazbek, a prominent Syrian-Arabic writer, has several research articles written on her literary works, especially novels. These studies mainly centre on the investigation of the trauma, identity and the experience of the displacement as narrated in the text. The following is the literary research made on her memoir, *The Crossing*.

The article “From Physicality into Nothingness”: Civil War, Trauma, and Identity in Samar Yazbek’s Testimonies of the Syrian Revolution” (2017) by Hiyem Cheurfa, published in *Interdisciplinary Studies,* examines the intersection between war, gender, genre and identity in her memoirs *The Crossing* and *The Woman in the Crossfire*. It also looks at the effects of war trauma on the writer’s perception of identity and on how the writing helps her in healing from the trauma.

A book chapter published by Hania AM Nashef titled "Testimonies of War Reportages by Samar Yazbek and Atef Abu Saif" (2022) published in *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, argues that the memoirs of Syrian refugee, Yazbek and Palestinian refugee, Abu Saif, must be read as journal entries, a genre they chose intentionally to bear witness to the war. The chapter states that the only possible option for the writers is to maintain a diary when their life is threatened and to record their life events.

The journal article titled "Anarchy, Militancy, Transactional Sex and Homo Sacer in Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* (2023) by AB Sherma, published in the *American Journal of Arts and Human Science*, delves into the complex dynamics of the Syrian civil war as portrayed in the text by Yazbek. It acknowledges the rights of the internally displaced populace of Syria and proposes solutions to the ongoing crisis through various theoretical lenses.

Research Gap and Relevance of the Study

The review of existing literature on refugee memoirs points to the gaps and unidentified issues. There has been only a limited focus on the narratology or narrative strategies employed in the study conducted on Syrian refugee memoirs. Most of the studies conducted so far focus on the theme, content and purpose of the Syrian refugee narratives and not on how these stories are told. Critical studies that explore the mode of storytelling in refugee autobiographical writings, especially the analysis of the elements like memory, experience, agency, relationality, variants of the narrative "I"'s, sites of storytelling, patterns of emplotment and the role of coaxers, remain relatively sparse. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to look into the autobiographical narrative modes the writers have adopted to narrate their stories and construct their selves.

As the narratives selected represent Syrian women from varied walks of life, they provide a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of the refugee experience and explore how factors like age, socioeconomic backgrounds, professions and religious and political affiliations shape their sense of selves and storytelling processes. It promotes an inclusive study of the marginalised voices by highlighting the diversity of experiences of women of the twenty-first century resettled in both European and Middle Eastern countries with distinct characteristics. As the narratives are written at various stages of displacement, the study provides an insight into the transformation of writers' identities and aspirations over time, thereby bringing the temporal and evolutionary aspects of refugee experience into focus.

In the existing research, trauma is seen only as a theme in the narrative. It has failed to identify how the trauma shapes the narrative modes and to point out the limitations in the traditional forms of storytelling to capture the diverse experiences of the refugees. The current study analyses the representation of trauma of the refugees at varied levels and brings out the relevance of the autobiographical mode/genre of writing in aiding the writers to claim agency, enact resistance and reorganise their fragmented selves. In addition, the role of editors and collaborators in refugee narratives is given less significance. As the present study focuses on the narrative structure, it helps to bridge this gap by exploring how the editor's presence affects the representation of refugee identity and agency. The study also looks into the readers' role in witnessing, empathising and validating the claims of truth and acting collectively with the writers for a common cause. Most importantly, the study contributes to the growing genre of Refugee Studies by exploring the heterogeneity of refugee experiences, personal and political dimensions of displacement, gender-

specific issues like motherhood and renegotiation of gender roles and the role of host country policies on shaping the refugee experience.

Chapter II

Personal as Political: Examining Activism and Advocacy in Bana Alabed's *Dear World*

Introduction

The autobiographical studies experts Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography,* observe that women's life narratives on war are gaining attention as materials for scholarly study in the twenty-first century. These narratives provide perspectives of those women who participated in war that "counter notions of war heroism" (315). The memoir *The Forbidden Zone* by Mary Borden, a British nurse who worked with World War I army soldiers, records the "struggle to adequately remember fragmentary impressions of the daily assault of blood, trauma, and destruction" (315). Women in war zones produced narratives focused on their "strategies for survival" (315). To fulfil different purposes like countering dominant discourses or pleading for peace or calling for action, these war narratives break the structural and thematic parameters of the genre, moving beyond "what war does to men as well as what men do in war" (314). The narratives with women in the forefront in militant and combatant roles, shatter the "hypermasculinization" (315) typical of the war discourses.

Refugitude due to war has prompted those from the displaced spaces to recount their war experiences in an attempt to rewrite history. They indulge in creative constructions that can create an impact in the reading public and do not remain a passive constitution of the 'I'. These narratives promote the collective experiences of the others and an understanding of the 'I' as "explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others" (Smith and Watson 271).

They are fundamentally recounting the heterogeneous experiences of a collective populace. A polyvocal / inter-subjective approach to narration is essential to capture the intensity and intricacy of the catastrophe, which is a "collective communal experience" (160). Choosing the right framework enables the writers to channel their experiences with accuracy and intimacy.

Bana Alabed was born in 2009 in Aleppo, Syria. She belonged to the family of Sunni-Muslims who were natives of Aleppo, an ancient city in Syria, generationally, following a community-style living. Bana's parents, Fatemah Alabed, an English teacher and law student and Ghassan Alabed, a lawyer, were leading a comfortable life in Syria until the war. With the uprising that began in 2011, the family faced threats of displacement and death, but survived the ordeal with endurance and hope. It was Fatemah who encouraged Bana to share with the world her thoughts on war, calling for help through the social media platform, *Twitter*. From 2016, they started tweeting through Bana's account, calling for peace, to end the conflict while living in war-torn Aleppo. She addressed the powerful people like Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, requesting them to listen to the plight of the Syrians. She also posted photos and videos of the bombing, providing evidence of the wartime crimes committed by the regime, to seek outside intervention.

With the exposure given by the social media platform, Bana gained lakhs of followers who were moved by her plight and demanded justice for the people caught in war. Unable to dismiss her claims, the international news media intervened in the issue, raising suspicions about the regime's act of bombing the civilian houses in the name of liberating people from the extremists' clutches. The regime was forced to answer the concerns of the young girl who was their citizen as an urgent matter of enquiry. However, they repudiated the claim by questioning the identity of Bana and

calling her claims baseless, a manipulative online creation by the West, intended to discredit the regime in Syria, thereby thwarting the support it gets from the outside world. There were efforts from the regime to demoralise Bana and her mother to discontinue tweeting through the social media weapon called 'trolling'. They proclaimed her as the enemy of the state who needs to be driven away from the country, in case they still lived there. As a result, Bana's family was tormented with death threats, forcing them to leave Syria for the neighbouring country, Turkey, to save themselves from persecution.

With the help of the Turkey government, Bana, her parents and her two younger brothers were granted asylum in Turkey as refugees. This enabled them to settle down and speak against their oppressors fearlessly through the mode of rhetoric. Bana and Fatemah, assisted by the publishers Simon and Schuster, published their memoir in 2017, testifying their personal experience of the war and refugeefication. Though it is written as an answer to the regime's allegation that Bana is only a fabricated online persona, the text goes beyond the clarification and castigation to develop a counterfactual history outlining the experiences of those from the marginalised spaces.

The chapter navigates towards situating the narrative as an autobiographical manifesto. Fatemah and Bana Alabed try to create a text that calls for action by bringing out the human rights violations during the Syrian civil war. By not submitting to the universal subject position of war victims, they involve themselves in creating their selves as historical figures empowered and enlightened to comprehend and evaluate the oppression and resist it through the act of narration. Their work is what Gillian Whitlock, in *Soft Weapons* terms, a "crisis testimony" that "claims for redress and reparation" that is "negotiated through multi-layered processes of

producing, circulating and reading crisis witnessing" (qtd.in Smith 469). By speaking out, they intend to develop in readers "empathetic identification" with the speaking subjects.

Autobiographical Manifesto

Sidonie Smith, in her essay "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics," (1991) enunciates that autobiographical manifesto writing is a strategy employed by the marginalised subjects to attain political, social, individual and literary empowerment. These subjects "resist the totalizing definitional politics of traditional autobiographical practice" (Smith 306). This form of writing plays a crucial role in "emancipatory politics" (308) by "restaging subjectivity" and resistance (308). The manifesto helps the women autobiographers "who pursue self-consciously political autobiographical acts" to "lay out an agenda for a changed relationship to subjectivity, identity and the body" (308). Smith also states that the autobiographical manifestos are "Purposeful," "bold" and contentious" as they boldly challenge the past literary productions that contextualize history, politics and the *ancien regime*, "by working to dislodge the hold of the universal subject through an expressly political collocation of a new "I"" (Smith 308-309). Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* calls this mode of political construction a "conflicted cultural field" (145).

Deriving from dictionary definitions, Smith describes an autobiographical manifesto as "a proof, a piece of evidence, a public declaration of proclamation… by an individual or body of individuals whose proceedings are of public importance, for the purpose of announcing past actions and explaining the reasons or motives for actions announced as forthcoming" (309). Though it was originally used by the authorities in power to announce their "intentions and rulings," (Smith and Watson 268) later the resistance movements by the discriminated subjects "adopted the form

to assert authority…while calling for changes to existing laws and practices" (268). The "politically disfranchised groups" implement this strategy, "particularly in moments of social change" (267-268).

Smith derives six "constituent aspects" that manifestos possess. It includes,

1. "To appropriate / to contest sovereignty"
2. "To bring to light, to make manifest"
3. "To announce publicly"
4. "To perform publicly"
5. "To speak as one of a group, to speak for a group"
6. "To speak to the future" (309-314).

She provides these aspects after careful study of women's texts to bring out the manifesto elements in them and constitute the fact that the 'personal' in these texts is indeed 'political'.

1. To appropriate/to contest sovereignty

According to Smith, the creators of autobiographical manifestos try to take exclusive possession of the power that was vested in a monopolistic system by opposing or challenging it. The autobiographical subject of the manifesto is usually a person from an "anonymous collectivity who vigorously rejects the sovereignty of this specular *ancien regime* and the dominance of the universal subject" (Smith 309). The *ancien regime* Smith refers to is the old order that constrained the literary, political, economic, and social liberty of people in France before the French Revolution in 1789. In this type of system, certain sections of people are privileged over others, creating an unbalanced power distribution in society. Smith compares the underprivileged group, also called the third estate, to the manifesto makers who use their literary voice to speak against the injustices of the dominant order. Their texts

challenge the conventions laid down by the hegemonic discourses that impose universal ways of narrating stories, deciding on who should narrate and what should be narrated. By rejecting the established norms of representation, manifesto makers develop nuanced ways of chronicling their multifaceted emotions.

The very act of writing, by the manifesto subjects, is a form of contesting sovereignty. Speaking on one's life with control over what is narrated gives the narrators power and agency. Rather than expecting someone else to speak for them and manage their mode of articulation, these writers give their version of the historical truth that they claim as authentic. It is common to find a blend of multiple genres in such narratives that incoherently put out the story of their lives. They assert independence from the dominant literary forms by asserting their noncompliant nature.

Dear World adapts a similar strategy. By providing multiple perspectives of mother and daughter through simultaneous narrative techniques, regarding the Syrian civil war and its effect on them, the narrators create a distinct way of storytelling. Autobiographies generally feature a single narrator who addresses heterogeneous readers. However, in this text there are two narrators with different addressees. While Bana speaks to the readers directly, Fatemah's voice is addressed to Bana. The text crosses the boundaries of the narrative parameters of war memoirs with a singular viewpoint by providing the child's perspective on war with an adult's commentary accompanying it. By embedding stories within stories, the narrators create "unresolvable paradoxes" that correspond to the situation they are caught in. These "self-conscious devices" contradict the general framework of life writing practice that the readers are familiar with (Ribó 68).

The mother and child narrators provide a "pastiche of textual memories" by "incorporating multiple forms of self-inquiry," borrowing from various genres like letters, diaries, testimonies, memoirs and manifestos. They incorporate several visual components, such as photographs and tweets, making it a verbal story. Thus, their narrative is composed of "heterogeneous modes" that are "organized achronologically" to enable the readers to "see more clearly how narrated "I"'s are indeed multiple" (Smith 137).

There is no hierarchical placing of the two narrative voices as both contribute equally to the emplotment. Though the memoir attributes authorship to Bana alone, the interior narrative gives equal space to both. The narrative gaps in the child's perspective that were deliberately created to reflect the child's natural inability to comprehend the complexities of war are filled in by the broader and more reflective perspective of the mother, whose version goes deeper in philosophical ways to unearth the inner emotions that individuals go through in war. Fatemah's section is interspersed within Bana's section to bring an asymmetrical tone to narration. By alternating between Bana's and Fatemah's voices, the text provides a multi-dimensional viewpoint to the issue of war.

The experiences from Bana's perspective seem to be reflected on a surface level, as the narrator, while writing the memoir, is still a child unable to understand the psychological ruptures of war. However, Fatemah, being the adult narrator, provides context and depth to Bana's emotions by interpreting them from a mother's perspective. Though this is the case, Bana is given the liberty to speak only on those things that seem to matter to her, giving her agency. Conventionally, the child is always spoken for by the adult who interprets the child's experience. As the narrative is focused primarily on Bana and her life, it stands on a democratic plane, giving

equal rights and equal space for her to speak. It adds to the credibility of the narrative and helps in creating an emotional rapport with the readers. The child's voice exists independently without interference, where she is allowed to express her fears and at times lack of knowledge on certain matters. The language is direct, honest and without any literary embellishments to keep it realistic. The absence of hierarchy is an attempt to interrogate dominant historical narratives that give less prominence to others' voices, blaming them for being irrelevant in establishing the historical truth.

Smith notices that "Through the manifesto, the autobiographical subject confronts the ghost of the identity assigned to her by the old sovereign subject… a fixed object position representing culturally intelligible and authorized performances of identity" (309). These fixed identifications," she asserts, like "woman," "black" and "lesbian" also called as the "ideological "I" function as "cultural templates for repetition" (309). As it is popularly said, repetition breeds contempt; the marginalised groups feel the need to reverse such universal identities with specific dominant characteristics imposed on them. It disables them from displaying their individuality and succumbs to the standardised versions of projecting the self.

Fatemah and Bana attempt to transcend the fixed identifications and disrupt the familiar depiction of mothers and children by dissenting from the traditional roles and expectations associated with their assigned identities in the context of war. Through this act, they claim agency and redefine their gender, political and social roles. Bana, who is expected to remain a passive victim of the war, projects herself as an active survivor who advocates for peace through the act of narration. She also proves her ability in political participation as she could bring global attention to the injustices of the regime to the global audience. In the narrative, Bana declares herself as the spokesperson for other children in Syria who are denied their rights like her.

Rather than fitting to the stereotypical mould of the innocent child who is dependent and voiceless, Bana uses her innocence and intelligence to communicate with the international authorities to inform the urgency of the situation, thereby breaking the recurrent rendition of children as powerless.

Fatemah, similarly, moves beyond the gendered expectations on women and mothers by the conservative society that commands restricted social positions for them. While she embraces the qualities of a nurturer and protector of her children, she also projects herself as a strategist, an activist and an advocate who, within the domestic spaces, challenges the oppression through the democratic medium of online interactive spaces. However, not intentionally, she takes up various roles other than a mother according to the situation to claim her presence in those spheres restricted for women. She carries out political activism through *Twitter*, making her daughter its face to gather attention from those powerful locations that disregard pleas for help by refugees from Syria.

The fact that both Bana and Fatemah speak for themselves is a sign of empowerment, as they could resist the attempts of the regime to suppress their voices. They could convey themselves so powerfully that the regime considered them a threat that could damage the false propaganda circulated by them to the world outside. The narrative deviates from the typical war narratives that incorporate violent details about death and destruction by highlighting the positive aspects, like the mother-child bond that helped Bana and Fatemah navigate through the challenges posed by war. Though it speaks on the tragic loss it has brought to the country, it also tells the world about the resilience of Syrian civilians that helped them survive and the power of communication to bring change to the political scenario of Syria by proposing

alterations in the power dynamics between the individual and the society and nation and its people.

2. To bring to light, to make manifest

Smith holds that an autobiographical manifesto is a “liberatory autobiographical practice” (310) that has a “political agenda…to force issues into the light of the day” (310). It intends to bring “culturally marginalized experiences out from under the shadow of an undifferentiated otherness” (310). The manifesto writers who are marginalised by the dominant powers speak out to reflect the voices from the margins, previously unheard. It must be because of their conviction that the essence of truth of the victims’ lives comes out only when it is spoken by those who experienced the oppression first-hand. The portrayal of the oppressed by the dominant discourses may hide the unbalanced power structure that disrupts the relations between the individual and the nation. Thus, the manifestos are capable of providing “an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the centre” (Smith 311).

The narrators of *Dear World* try to bring to light those experiences of war victims of Syria and displaced refugees that are ignored in the mainstream cultural discourses. They also try to rescue the generalised portrayal of the Muslim women whose experiences and identities are stereotyped, which often leads to misconceptions and misjudgements of their actual problems and hides the real cause of oppression. The memoir also calls for a revision of the term ‘refugee’ and its interpretation as a powerless, identity-less victim who cannot name his/her experience and seeks help from the privileged groups to be heard.

Bana and Fatemah challenge the attempts to depoliticise and dehistoricise their state of being by framing their narrative as a politically contextualised text addressing

the role of political actors, ideologies and orders that contribute to their situation. They speak about “specific histories and politics that have led to refugee displacements” (Frangos and Ghose 5). These incidents include describing the pre-war period in Syria, the events that triggered the uprising and the violence instilled in the lives of Syrians by the regime through destructive ways, situating the text in a larger historical framework. By narrating these events, the narrators explore the root cause of the conflict to make it known to the readers. On a surface level, the causes are authoritarian rule, political repression, economic corruption, sectarian tensions, the influence of the Arab Spring and historical grievances that led to the war and displacement. But, on a deeper level, there is a power play exhibited by the regime where they disrupt the equal distribution of power between the centre and the margins. The coercion was used as an advantage by the regime on both physical and psychological levels. They functioned institutionally as well to control and shape social behaviour formally and informally. Though it is evident that the narrators perceive the uprising by the masses as a resistance strategy against the oppression and operation of power by the regime, they leave it to the readers’ prerogative to interpret the causes in an objective manner. By describing the historical events, they intend to remind the readers that their suffering is part of a longer and complex history. Thus, the text brings in historical context to the suffering of refugees through this process, leading to an accurate representation as opposed to the incorrect and insufficient portrayal of the displaced.

By providing the political causes and implications of the humanitarian crisis, they bring in the complex interplay of political forces that are actively at play. They highlight how political decisions influence their everyday lives, like the decision to bomb the civilian areas in East Aleppo, to cut electricity, water and internet to weaken

the opposing forces by the regime. The narrators also bring to attention the international power structures that could have intervened in their issues in meaningful ways to create a historical precedent to be used later in humanitarian issues on a global level. The memoir critiques the irresponsible actions of such agencies, as they failed to see it as an issue interlinked with global political dynamics.

Smith observes that, through the manifestos, its subjects intend to affect "an epistemological breakage of repetition" (310). By 'repetition,' Smith means the Western practice of restating negative stereotypical identities that reinforce the system of oppression. The overgeneralization of the marginalised groups contributes to building prejudice and discrimination against individuals who belong to these groups. The text seems to reconstruct the misconstrued identities of Middle-Eastern Muslim women as it is addressed primarily to the Western audience. These texts portray them as only "victims of human rights violation" and not as "political actors" (Morey and Santos 62). Affirming a legitimate representation of the Muslim women, the text creates "a new or alternative knowledge" (62) dissimilar to the standardised conception. One could see that Fatemah is a woman with a political vision and social understanding. It is evident from her version in the text that she clearly states her ideologies that stand opposed to the authoritative ones propagated by the regime. She takes a firm stand against the war, calling it evil. Through her narrative, she informs her daughter's future self that even though they might be displaced, far from their home country, it is Bana's birthright to live in Syria and reclaim their land and tradition forcefully robbed from them. Through such statements, she transfers a responsibility to the Syrian children, like Bana, to uphold their Syrian identity and reminds them to be there to witness "a country that is rebuilt and a people reborn" (*Dear World* 199). She despises the regime's act, fearlessly stating that their country

belongs to them and not to the oppressive powers. She intends to transform her text into a historical document, which future generations can refer to find out the truth of Syria's past. Thus, Fatemah establishes herself as an authoritative individual who is aware of her rights, can comprehend oppression and fight against it.

It can be seen that Fatemah also projects her religious faith not as an oppressive force but rather as a source of strength and guidance. She intends to counter the Western dominant narratives that look down upon veiled women. They consider it a sign of submission and cowardice. She tells the readers how faith helped her to find hope and tranquillity amidst the chaos and unrest outside. At times, the readers' attention is diverted from the contributions of the narrating 'I' to credit the larger spiritual force. She follows the narrative model that "relies on the spiritual intervention of a higher power" (Smith and Watson 201) in deciding the fate of its believers. The faith has also worked to retain the lost emotional connection with her community. Following religious ceremonies enabled them to assemble and share their material possessions and strengthen their bonds. Fatemah's contribution in empowering society by bringing in collective measures to educate the children in Syria during the conflict is noteworthy. The readers are convinced of the progress Muslim women have attained with education and financial independence, enlightening them that there is empowerment in the marginalised spaces. Through these contestations and recuperations, Fatemah delivers a newfangled picture of the women in a *burqa*.

Through the act of narration, Bana and Fatemah attempt to humanise the common people who live through the warfare, requesting the readers to see beyond the statistical numbers and recognise the human impact of armed conflict on the vulnerable. As it is addressed to the international community, the text poses certain

questions to them regarding their inaction during the tough times. Fatemah expresses her frustration and anger, amplifying the tense mood to inform the readers of the urgency of the situation. She calls for solidarity from other marginalised spaces around the world.

3. To announce publicly

Smith states that the personal and the political are conventionally found to be binary oppositions, and the very purpose of the autobiographical manifesto is to recognise the “vexed relationship” between the two (311). The idea that the personal is political in the context of women’s experiences was put forward by Carol Hanisch during the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s, which later became its slogan. Hanisch expressed a common belief among the feminists that private experiences are not indeed private but shaped by the social and political foundations that constitute the system of power. The feminists took it as a tool to explain various instances of gender inequality and oppression in society.

The personal issues narrated by Fatemah and Bana reveal larger issues of power and oppressive normative practices in society. The war is represented as a collective destructive force that annihilated the lives of the civilians and affected individuals from all spheres of life. The memoir reveals how it affected the lives of women, especially mothers and children. The everyday experiences of a mother and child, as implied in the text, may seem common and ordinary as a direct consequence of the conflict, but they resonate with the deeper political manipulations by the regime using power.

As part of an economically affluent section, the experiences during the displacement are different for Fatemah and Bana when compared to several others who are mentioned in the text and who go through abject poverty, as they had huge

material losses in war. The narrator confesses that the advantage of the class factor has played a huge role in giving her family the ability to plan their escape. Fatemah's family was able to sustain in Syria longer through the war and arranged the ransom to the terrorists who kidnapped her brothers, as they were financially able. As they belong to the Sunni community, which is the majority sect in Syria, they could also draw help whenever necessary, which points towards the prominence certain sects enjoy in the country that decides upon their accessibility to power and resources.

It is relevant to study Bana's version in the narrative where she recounts what she sees and hears about the war, as it implies a broader perspective on the nature of war. The descriptions of bombing that destroyed their houses, the capturing of her uncles by the secret police and Bana and others waiting to hear bad news anytime on the death of someone they knew, point to the unjust side of war. It can be understood that Bana and her family did not overtly support any party during the civil war, but had to face the catastrophe due to the intense bombing in residential areas in Syria and were subsequently refused permission to leave the country. Bana's personal suffering in the war is the direct impact of the political decisions taken by the regime. It highlights the real consequences war has on common people.

In the text, Fatemah describes herself as a "grown up; twenty-five-year-old with a husband and two kids, and one more on the way" (*Dear World* 87). These descriptions of Fatemah point towards the social arrangement in Syria. She remembers having an "arranged marriage" (2) planned by the families. She takes the readers to her past, where she was put under mental stress, as she could not conceive due to infertility. The social system of Syria expects women to get married at a young age and bear children to attain social acceptance. The male members of the society make the important decisions, and women depend on them even in moments of crisis.

This practice points towards the patriarchal mode in which the Syrian society functioned. There are "two dimensions of patriarchy" at play here – "public and private" (Benstead 2). It is obvious that Fatemah's private right was curtailed when her father chose her life partner, but at the same time, the public rights, like education and career, were accessible to her. She could express her emotions through social media and start a campaign regarding their plight, which indicates that Syrian women like her were given opportunities in "work, politics and education" (Benstead 2). Through these facts, it can be construed that there should not be a single, one-dimensional scale to measure the experiences of women in Syria, as it encompasses multi-dimensional facets.

In the same way, the personal issues are affected by the political and social system, the personal actions can also bring large changes to the political system. Shahaf Zamir, in the essay "Explaining Online Personalized Politics" states that "the emergence of online platforms, especially social media, created a new arena in which personalized politics can be fostered or restrained" (109). This is a platform where marginalized individuals can perform activism by taking up the role of political actors denied to them earlier. The text reveals how a social media campaign started by Fatemah and Bana, two ordinary citizens in Syria, could reach people globally and inform them about the breaking of war-rules by the regime. Their tweets led to political discussions that forced the regime to clear their stand and justify their actions to the international agencies. Through "online personalism" (109) they created a face for Syrians' suffering, which helped to draw audiences' empathy.

Helene Helboe Pedersen, in her study titled "Personalization of Representation: A Conceptual Clarification" states that "personalization of politics" brings representational changes (2). The individuals who are involved in this get to

participate in politics, aimed at intervention in existing norms. Through personalisation of the public, Bana makes her suffering not just an individual issue, but also something universal. Bana addresses the readers directly, making them feel part of the suffering. The readers are called to action as they are made to feel responsible for human rights violations in a world, they are part of. The plea for help that Bana and Fatemah make through their narrative and social media platforms points to the need for urgent intervention. Through the tweets, photos and videos they shared through *Twitter*, they made the audience secondary witnesses to the events. The war is seen by the outside world as a violation of the rights of a young girl who is struggling to survive.

4. To perform publicly

Smith calls autobiographical manifesto "a public performance" that "revels in the energetic display of a new kind of subject" (312). This new subject is the one that critiques those identities that are endorsed by the dominant structures that reflect the standardised values and expectations. The hegemonic social system expects people to adopt the "culturally sanctioned identities" (312) based on gender, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religious belief, etc. and perform according to the set rules. By bringing to light how these identities function oppressively on an everyday basis, the manifestos label it disruptive to the formation of an authentic self. Smith reminds that the temporal and spatial factors must be taken into consideration to historicize the identities for a better understanding of their intricate functioning.

Fatemah and Bana try to redefine the identities imposed on them in various ways. They oppose, challenge and sometimes contradictorily embrace these forced identities as part of their resistance strategies. In Fatemah's narrative, one could see her struggle to navigate the identity of motherhood. It is important to analyse her

representation of motherhood before and during the war to bring out how she uses subversive ways that both complement and contradict the dominant ideologies. She goes through different transitions within the identity of motherhood, affected by external factors. To historicize this concept of motherhood, it is important to discuss the idea of motherhood, taking into consideration the spatial and temporal factors.

Fatemah - Performing Activism through Motherhood

As it can be derived from the text, the story is set in a conservative society rooted in patriarchy. The ideologies put forward by this society reflect the universal concept of womanhood and motherhood. In certain aspects, it reflects the Western concept of motherhood that understands it as a "lack or absence rather than as a positive creative force" (Irigaray). Luce Irigaray, French feminist and philosopher, in her speech "Speculum of the Other Woman" (1974) postulates that the patriarchal view reduces women to be mere biological tools of reproduction, objectifying women. This view, according to Irigaray, must be revised through the proper representation and understanding of maternal experience as a transformative power. In the text, Fatemah admits to submitting to the repressive norms of society by accepting being a mother when she was uncertain about it. She eventually agreed to obey the norms of society that expected her to enter into motherhood soon after her marriage. The readers are made aware of the struggles she underwent to manage her studies in law and child rearing. Her narrative thus explicitly points out the narrator's disagreement with the patriarchal system that pushes women to be an "accomplice" to "re-enact" the role entrusted to women to conform without questioning. Contrarily, the narrator also seems to fall for the strategic trap of the socio-cultural system that attracts women to take up the role of mothers by idealising it and proffering it with utopian qualities. It projects the reproductive capacity of a woman as divine, an attribute of a

real woman (Ghatak). As a manifesto maker, Fatemah is honest in admitting her diversions fearlessly to the readers. She justifies her role as an activist/propagandist by transforming the role of motherhood in creative ways to fight the oppression of the regime during the war.

The war affected the essentialist performance of Fatemah as a mother. Fatin Shabbar in the essay "Motherhood as a Space of Political Activism" asserts that war reshapes "roles and experiences of mothers" (208). She notes that the contribution of mothers during wartime is "not merely one of nurturing" but of defying. By ensuring the survival of their families, "which may include carrying out domestic duties" and "providing a living" she engages in "direct and indirect conflict with the enemy" (208). Even though it might seem unusual, Fatemah explaining to her seven-year-old daughter what death is, entrusting her with higher roles to perform and pushing her to go with her everyday life during the time of crisis, should be seen as her move to psychologically equip her daughter to face the changed circumstances and resist the violence and oppression (Shabbar 209).

Shabbar stresses, "Mothering children in war zones and in militarized societies is inevitably a political act" (209). Just by engaging in the act of motherhood, Fatemah enacts resistance against the oppression. By choosing to be a mother amidst the war, she challenges the oppressors who tried to sabotage the rights of Syrians to lead a customary life. The war intends to disrupt and eliminate the opposing voices. Metaphorically, motherhood contrasts the characteristics that war embodies. The text declares motherhood as a symbol of strength, endurance and positivity, while warfare as cowardice, repression and negativity. Both these concepts are made binomial dichotomy with oppositional values that cannot co-exist.

In the memoir, Fatemah reimages herself as a revolutionary mother both in personal and political spheres. She uses it as an "antilogos weapon" that stands opposed to the dominant discourses on motherhood. The concept of motherhood that Fatemah portrays is characterised by transgression, a quality that varies from the general understanding of motherhood. She uses the state of motherhood as negation and negotiation. By negating the advances of the regime to disrupt the family structure, Fatemah leads the daily life, trying her best to be involved in mundane activities. She also pushes other family members to follow her footsteps to get involved in the routine practices like birthday celebrations, visiting parks and markets, preparing and enjoying meals. She further takes a step by taking Bana to the school, which is in a dilapidated condition and arranges a temporary set-up there to educate the children. Thereby actively engages in the act of defiance against the regime.

Fatemah refuses to accept the oppressive conditions of war and resists the denial of agency by speaking out. She upholds her identity as a mother by subsuming other roles and exploring her personal feelings associated with it. She successfully couples her private emotions, like her dreams and aspirations as an individual, with those of hers as a mother. She contrasts her selfhood before and after the war to indicate how war intensified the negation of other identities. Countering the idea of motherhood as weakening, especially at the time of crisis, she presents it as her escape from the chaos. The character of Fatemah and the regime stand in opposition symbolically. The war thus becomes a battle of the nurturer and the negating forces.

As a negotiator, Fatemah balances her dual role as a mother and an activist, giving equal attention to both. She carefully fulfils the demands of her children while conducting her activism through social media. This negotiation takes place in the narration as well. Fatemah's voice transmutes as a mother and an activist, sometimes

appearing as distinctive and at other times as unified. She frames her story as a navigation through her choices and dilemmas, performing dual roles. The tension these sudden transitions create within the story is a typical feature of the manifesto that reflects the tension in the external world. The two roles are sometimes contradictory as one aims at covering and the other at exposing. As the mother's voice is addressed to Bana, intended for her readership, Fatemah chooses her words carefully. She restricts herself from revealing those emotions that might create doubts and fears in Bana's mind. However, as an activist, she indulges in naming the culprits, listing their felonies and calling them responsible for the injustices with proof. When the voice of the mother is more constrained and sangfroid, it is loud and liberated in the activist's.

Bana - Defying the Dominant Framings of Childhood

Similar to her mother's story, the story of Bana, the child "offers a counter-narrative to dominant framings of children in war as passive victims" (Berents 460). Helen Berents in the essay ""This is my story": Children's war Memoirs and challenging protectionist discourses" (2019), states that narratives that encompass children's experiences during war tend to ignore their agency and their ability to resist. What "dominate discussions of children's experiences" is "their overwhelming, and pressing, care, as well as the longer-term needs of education and employment" (Berents 461). This approach positions them as passive victims. According to Berents, "Such totalizing narratives of victimhood obscure and homogenise the complexity of the lived experience of children in war" (461). Finding fault in the dominant narratives, Berents suggests a solution "to fully understand the implications of children's experiences of conflict" (461), which is to "consider the persistent everyday lives of those within conflict zones not reducible to either "victim" or

"combatant" (461). An analysis of children's writing reveals the "limitations of protectionist-dominant approaches" (Berents 463) that label children who went through the war as "the ultimate victim" whose childhood is characterized by dependency and vulnerability (Berents 465). Their experiences are also "reconceptualised" (465) leading to disrupted representations. They are viewed falsely as "unwilling and uncomprehending tool of vicious regimes or the unwitting sufferer of tragic circumstances" (465).

Bana's narrative shatters these kinds of misconceptions about children. The self-representation of Bana proves that children are individuals who participate actively in the mechanics of society and contribute to its development. She subverts the conventional narratives of childhood by positioning herself as a global agent who can communicate the truth of the situation by placing her discourse in the global context. Bana interrupts the hegemonic portrayal of young children in the war narratives, typically dominated by the adult narrators. Rather than waiting for the mainstream discourses to take up her story and tell it to the rest of the world. Bana claimed agency by directly speaking to the world through the medium of *Twitter*, briefing her experiences through short tweets. She engages in a power struggle with the regime that tries to stop her attempts at articulating her emotions. This also proves Foucault's notion of functioning of power as not one-dimensional but dispersed and decentralised. Bana's narrative exemplifies the fact that power can operate at marginalised sites using available resources through which they can produce alternative knowledge that challenges dominant discourses. By reclaiming her voice that was subsumed in the dominant discourses, Bana proves that she is an agent of social change.

5. To speak as one of a group, to speak for a group

Though an autobiographical manifesto is a narrative from a personal space, it is more of a memoir than an autobiography. When autobiographies promote "an 'I' that shares with "confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority," memoirs promote an 'I' that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others" (Smith and Watson 271). The speaker of the manifesto "positions herself expressly as a member of a group or community…an auto/ethnographer" (Smith 313). The personal experiences that are recollected retrospectively reveal, to a large extent, the culture practised collectively. Smith suggests that 'I' in the manifestos stands for "collectivity" or a "counter-public sphere" (313). This sphere is a "multiple, invoking identification around various experiences of oppression and exclusions from the central or centrifugal bourgeois public sphere and its ideology of the universal subject" (Smith 313).

To understand how the narrators bring in collective experiences in the text, it is important to analyse how they use memory as a tool to encompass the voices of the other without losing the individualities of the subjects. According to Smith and Watson, life narrators incorporate multiple modes of telling stories to the public. They use "collective remembering" to address the issues of others. This mode reflects the fact that the act of remembering is "an activity situated in cultural politics and is a "collective activity" (44). In the essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," the authors Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka categorize the collective memory into two, communicative and cultural. Communicative memory "includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications" (126). Cultural memory is "characterized by its distance from the everyday" (129). They postulate that cultural memory "preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of unity and peculiarity" (130).

Through evoking cultural memory, Fatemah and Bana situate themselves as one among the displaced Syrian refugees and speak as their spokespersons. They both represent victims of different positionalities in terms of age, political participation and power. Smith and Watson point out that it is important to recognise "on whose behalf one remembers" (45). It can be seen that though Fatemah's voice reflects the collective experiences of women in Syria as she navigates through different personal and political roles during the time of crisis, she does not take up the role of an active agent who writes her memoir for others. The 'we' in her version in the text stands for her and Bana or any other member in the family. In contrast, Bana acts as an emissary who is on a mission to speak for the oppressed others. Bana's version in the text becomes a depository of the voices of those children who were silenced by the dominant powers. The 'we' used in her version clearly points to the Syrians as a whole, generally or the Syrian children, particularly at different times based on the context.

Smith and Watson use the phrase "sites of remembering" (109) to denote the practices, physical places or media (including online platforms) that are used by the members of a collectivity to preserve, recollect and transmit their collective past. These sites provide them a chance to maintain their sense of identity, history and continuity. The memoir itself becomes one such site as it functions as a medium through which Fatemah and Bana capture their collective experiences of living under siege, preserve memories for future generations and communicate them to the readers.

Fatemah and Bana narrate the religious rituals they perform as part of festivals like *Eid-al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adda* by gathering in a common place to "remember, re-enact, and reaffirm" (Smith and Watson 40) their collective beliefs that constitute their identities. These rituals are indeed a way of collective remembering that are

"elicited, acknowledged and valued" (40) by the members of the Sunni community of Syria that the narrators identify with. As religion is connected intimately with their everyday lives, the narrators are seen projecting themselves as Islamic believers to the Western world beyond their identities as Syrian refugees.

The photographs and narrative descriptions of destructed playgrounds and parks act as symbols of the lost childhood of the children in Syria due to war. Similarly, the readers could witness Fatemah, the adult narrator, lamenting the destruction of historical monuments, souks and museums as these were places of collective memory and public knowledge. They stand as reminders of the historical past and "shared national history" (Smith 45) of the Syrian collectivity. One could see that Fatemah attaches her private feelings of comfort and peace to the citadels of Aleppo, whose destruction led to the loss of her connection with history and her ancestors (*Dear World* 2-3). Through remembering these concrete symbolic objects, the narrators preserve national memories for future generations.

In Bana's perspective in the narrative, she takes the responsibility of clearing the image of Syria and its people misrepresented through the dominant media. She develops a collective identity rooted in credence, honour and harmony. She describes Syria as a "special place" that has been home to multiple generations of people from different communities who live in harmony (*Dear World* 15). She describes Syrians as "kind and honest…generous and loyal to Allah" with high family values (15). She creates these images not only to correct, but also to present herself as a genuine orator to the readers.

The autobiographical manifestos also reflect nationalistic tendencies. Through this, it "negotiates the landscapes of identity and difference" (Smith 314). Smith affirms that the manifesto postulates a "testimonial nationalism" and "quarrels with

competitive discourses…and through its narrative itinerary stages a breakage in repetitions" (314). The narrators of the memoir clearly manifest nationalism through their narrative. Fatemah and Bana convey their loyalty towards their country and the feeling of pride towards their country's heritage hinting at their willingness to express themselves as nationalistic. This attempt at placing themselves as loyalists is a counter-narrative to the regime's claims that their tweets on the daily life under siege are an attempt at degrading their country on the international platform. Through their testimonies, they glorify their nation as great with regard to its history, culture and people. By bringing out its unique facts like calling Aleppo the "oldest continuously inhabited cities in the whole world" and emphasising the qualities of its people as "kind and honest," (*Dear World* 5) the text reinforces a collective national identity.

6. To speak to the future

Autobiographies conventionally focus on retrospective aspects. The western autobiographies in particular engage in what Smith calls a "narrative itinerary of self-disclosure, retrospective summation and self-justification" (314). The autobiographical manifesto, being a postmodern phenomenon, "writes under the sign of hope," looking at the future rather than the past (Smith 315). Smith notices that, "the manifesto attempts to actively position the subject in a potentially liberated future distanced from the constraining and oppressive identifications inherent in the everyday practices of the *ancien regime*" (315). The motive of the speaker is clearly declared in the text as an attempt to look at the future with hope despite the negative circumstances. The manifesto constitutes a "new revolutionary subject" who holds a "utopian vision", "offers an agenda for "I" transformations" and inspires the reader to "see beyond the constraints of the here and now to the idealized vision of a perfect future" (Smith 316).

As mentioned in the earlier section, the narrators of *Dear World* make use of their cultural memory to recollect the past, interpret it in the present and place it in the future. It provides a sense of continuity and foundation for future generations to rebuild their disrupted collective identity. By sharing the history of their country, the narrators want the future generation to learn from the mistakes of the past, reconstitute their lost connection with Syria after displacement, and rebuild their nation with its past glory. Therefore, instead of presenting herself as a victim, Fatemah positions her daughter as a hero by creating a plot of her story from birth to growth, tracing her glorious development as an individual. Bana's story is narrated as a tale of a child-hero who can be remembered by their community with pride in the future. Through this act, the manifesto subjects challenge the familiar, universal portrait of a hero, usually a male with super-human powers. The character of Bana contradicts this image of hegemonic masculinity as a young girl of seven years who is physically insignificant when compared to the military power of the regime. Fatemah and Bana prove that the heroic act does not constitute physical fighting and winning over the powerless.

By inviting global attention to the political affairs of Syria and speaking on behalf of the oppressed, Bana becomes a global figure who uses her narrative as a weapon, proving that the small everyday acts of resistance can indeed transform a society and bring hope for survival. Fatemah compares Bana with global voices of peace and equality like Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi to emphasise her role in being the symbol of peace, hope and courage for the Syrians caught in adversities. She intends a global appeal for her narrative and recognition for her daughter on the international platforms. She wants the readers not to see Bana as a victim of war but as a beacon of bravery.

It can be noticed that Fatemah and Bana use the word ‘hope’ repeatedly in the narrative, highlighting its value as a narrative tool and as an instrument of social change. In the progression of the narrative, it not only gives the characters courage to move forward, but also gives the readers assurance that things will get better. This assurance contrasts with the overwhelming despair within the text. This juxtaposition of the two contrary conditions heightens the emotional impact of the memoir. It also empowers the reader to have a positive attitude to face adversities. Using it as a moral weapon, the narrators resist the advances of the regime to inflict pain and discourage Syrians to keep fighting for the betterment of their future. The vision of Syria that Fatemah has for her daughter is an idealised version of the country with peace and prosperity, “a country that is rebuilt and a people reborn” (*Dear World* 199).

The narrative ends with both Fatemah’s and Bana’s wishes for the future to be better. Fatemah says,

> I have modest dreams for the future, Bana. I want for us to create a new home for our family and to fill it with things that we love. I want to you and your brothers to get a good education. I want to be able to finish university and your baba would like to find work to support us, maybe open up a shop. We want what everybody wants, what everybody has always wanted since the beginning of time: a simple and happy life. (*Dear World* 198-199)

This reinforces the theme of hope and the message the narrators intend to convey to the readers and the world in general that there is always a potential for change despite the desolate conditions. It points out that their story is not just about the past, but also about the future. It gives the impression that the story of the narrators and subsequently the future of Syria has not come to an end but reached a

transition stage. The readers are given a sense of continuity that the narrators are moving forward to a better future, leading to an emotional closure with optimism.

Strategic Essentialism

Apart from these six aspects, Sidonie Smith talks about other concepts commonly seen in women's manifestos. Gayathri Spivak Chakraborthy puts the idea of strategic essentialism forward in an interview with Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz in 1984. She acknowledges that though one can criticize essentialism, it is inescapable. The marginalised groups embrace essentialist roles to criticise it eventually. However, using it strategically cannot put an end to oppression but can only act as a tool for understanding the universal position and in bringing out its discriminatory side. These tactics are commonly used by the marginalised subjects who take up the dominant identity categories to promote a political interest or to accomplish collective objectives.

It is not through avoiding repetitions or proclaiming a "non-universal position" (Smith 314) that Fatemah in *Dear World* resists the dominance of the hegemonic powers, but by using the concept of essentialism strategically. It is evident in the way she uses the concept of motherhood in its representation. In the memoir, Fatemah assumes the role of a Syrian mother who is a symbolic figure that arouses universal identification and solidarity for all mothers and children experiencing the terrors of war. By projecting herself as a vulnerable and protective mother, a simplified yet powerful identity, she connects with readers from all spheres. The connection that she creates strategically helps in convincing the readers of the authenticity of her experiences. Even though the narrative is structured as a manifesto, an effort to speak back at the oppressor, the narrators do not speak up on the political scenarios but rather follow the essentialist model of the peace narratives that focuses on the

message rather than the actions. This strategy appears useful as it fulfils the narrative's need to create awareness and call for action.

Fatemah uses the role of mother also as a tool to resist patriarchal oppression. She uses the same role to engage in political participation, making her presence in the public sphere. The image of a mother and child suffering is something that has a universal appeal. It is associated with archetypal symbols where the mother embodies love, protection and care, and the child is the symbol of innocence. These images of mother and child contrast with the war, which is a symbol of cessation and dissolution.

Fatemah's photograph in the memoir, wearing *abhaya,* is another strategy, a gesture that points towards religious essentialism. Though the narrator is aware that there are Western misconceptions about veiled women and there are possibilities of misinterpretation of her words, she goes forward with the picture, thereby extending solidarity with Muslim women. The readers are enlightened on the revolutionary calibre of Muslim women who come from a marginalised space with the choice of their attire.

Narrative Strategies

The narrative techniques employed by the writers have played a major role in transforming the text into an autobiographical manifesto. Thus, it is important to examine the framework of the narrative. The text is structured as a collective life writing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* (2024) describe this genre as a "coproduced or collectively produced narrative" of individual speakers of which one is "identified as representative of the group" (219). These collaborative narratives are "multiply mediated by the interviewer and editor" (Smith 219). In *Dear World*, the narrators explicitly acknowledge the presence of the editor Christine Pride,

who helped them compile the book. Though the narrators claim to have sufficient knowledge of the English language, there are no multiple parties involved, like in the production of translation works. Smith and Watson recommend a "tripartite schema" to understand the role of three kinds of people "who contribute to every story action" (103). The "producer or the teller of the story or the "autobiographical narrator" (103), the "coaxer" or the "persons or institutions that elicit stories from speakers" and the consumers or readers or "audiences who interpret stories," (Smith 103) constitute the three kinds of people.

The Coaxer

In this regard, it is important to bring out the contribution of the coaxer or the editor of the narrative in transforming it into a manifesto. As the editor of *Dear World*, Christine Pride opened a pathway for Bana and her mother to tell their story in book form. Pride reveals being captivated by Bana's tweets and moved by the heartbreaking incidents in Aleppo. She confesses to modelling Bana's journey similar to that of Malala Yousefzai, a contemporary human rights activist who, like Bana, fought against the inhuman treatment at the hands of terrorists in her home country and went on to become the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2014. The coaxing by Pride seems to be implicit, as the editor's voice does not appear directly in the text. But through the interviews she gave in the online platforms, it is clear that she had a role in creating a particular image of Bana as the "human face" of the "quagmire" (Serrao). She also infers parallels between Bana and Anne Frank, a Jewish girl who was persecuted by the German forces during the Second World War, as the book begins with a quote by Frank. The comparison is only on a surface level, as it can be construed as a marketing strategy by the publishers.

The editor has also strategically avoided delving deep into the political affairs of the country, including the involvement of extremist groups like ISIS, typically seen in Syrian war narratives. The war is portrayed as a one-on-one battle between good and evil, just as a child can perceive it. Pride has also made sure that evidence like photographs and tweets are included in the memoir to counter the allegations of the regime that Bana is an online creation, a social media manipulation to attract Western audience with the picture of a "photogenic sweet girl" (Dirgham). In a book review written by Susan Dirgham, there are allegations raised about the involvement of the Blair Partnership, a PR agency that handles the marketing of Bana's narrative. The agency, she says, supports British Foreign policy and discredits the Islamic countries like Syria for political gain. She points out that J.K. Rowling's endorsement of the book is meant to attract the attention of the Western audience. However, despite these accusations, the makers of the book went forward with the same version of the book in its other editions. It is because the editor foresaw such negative allegations that may come up after the publication, just like how it happened after Bana started tweeting, that she designed the narrative as a manifesto, declaring to the world that Bana is not a propaganda but a person.

The Narrator

Dear World uses the dual narrative or split narrative technique where two narrators appear in the text with distinct voices. The two voices are clearly separated using different fonts and page colours in the text. Though the two authors are given equal narrative space, Bana seems to be the primary author on whom the book confers its authorship. Fatemah is the secondary or complementary author who endorses and advocates what Bana says in her version. The two voices are set in different tones. While Bana's version exhibits child-like innocence and cheer in describing the events,

Fatemah's takes a serious tone, often cynical at times. There is also a difference in the way the tone changes with changing circumstances in Fatemah's narrative, but remains the same in Bana's.

Smith and Watson, while describing the relevance of relationality in autobiographical narrative study, opine that the "voice in the autobiographical narratives is polyvocal, an ensemble of voices" (125). It is an "interactive story that provides the biography and the autobiography of the others" (57). Thus, it is significant to bring out the use of the voice of the others by the narrators in the text to strengthen their arguments. Such embedded voices can be seen in Bana's version in the narrative and not in Fatemah's version. Fatemah's voice is monovocal, modelled as a letter addressed to Bana. However, Bana's version resembles the narrative framework of a memoir that recounts the past in a chronological order. She incorporates the voice of others in dialogues and free indirect speech. One could see voices of the people close to her, like her grandparents, mother, father and siblings, within the narrative. However, the voices of other war-victims, who constitute the voice of a community silenced by the hegemonic powers, are not "individuated" like that of her loved ones (Smith and Watson 125). These voices are in "relative harmony" without contradictions or conflicts in their spirit and essence.

The narrators' voices shift subject positions while narrating different stages of their lives. For example, Fatemah speaks as a victim, a witness, a survivor and a revolutionary activist, navigating through different roles, sharing the concerns that the subject position has given her. Bana's character, on the other hand, moves back and forth from being innocent to authoritative. She can be seen speaking unaware of the manipulations of the world, at other times giving out philosophical reflections on war and life. The narration shifts its focus to serious topics like death, destiny and other

grim prospects, with the arrival of the catastrophe- Syrian civil war. She speaks with an adult's wisdom when putting out statements like "But the way I missed Yasmin was different. It gave me a feeling like I was sinking inside" (*Dear World* 115) and "To be scared all the time and to see people getting hurt and dying while also trying to have hope makes you so tired. I didn't think life would ever go back to happy times like before; it was getting worse" (*Dear World* 141). Bana's version in the text also incorporates the description of banal things related to everyday life, sharing with the readers stories about her dolls, books and adventures uninhibitedly.

Fatemah's sections in the text are framed as a letter, where the addressee is Bana and the signatory is Fatemah. It seems to be a "private correspondence" (Smith and Watson 267) between mother and daughter, where the mother directly addresses her daughter's future self. Her section is split into five parts positioned between Bana's chapters. It does not contain titles, salutations or greetings to Bana but ends with a valediction, "Love, Mommy" bidding farewell to her daughter. Her section is italicised throughout and designed as an informal postcard that marks a clear distinction from Bana's section, formatted with the typeface, Sassoon Primary, designed especially for children. The titles of the chapters in Bana's sections are full sentences like "Maybe we could learn how to stop the war" and "We took turns helping each other have hope." The use of this style must have been a conscious decision of the publisher to make the story feel like a stream of consciousness narrative by a child without interruptions. The formatting without traditional rules also heightens the effect of the text as a child's natural way of telling a story. The titles are Bana's emotions related to the incidents narrated. The child-like expressions corresponding to her age and perspective enhance the connection between the narrator and the reader, making it feel more intimate and immediate.

It is important to discuss the significance of Fatemah's voice in contributing to the narrative. Apart from being the complementary voice, Fatemah's voice adds emotional depth to the whole narrative. It provides the political and historical context to the events narrated by Bana. She explains the events that led to the uprising, how the war entered their lives and their involvement in it as civilians. The readers are provided with a clearer and broader perspective on the Syrian civil war and the refugee issues through Fatemah's narrative. She uses her section for promoting social rights by pointing out the issues faced by mothers and children during the war and refugees in host countries. She uses an inter-subjective approach reflecting on the common maternal concerns of women in Syria, though she does not claim to speak on their behalf. It is through her section that the activist mode of the narrative is explicitly seen.

Fatemah employs "narrative activism" or the use of storytelling to influence social change to activate "political consciousness among individuals and forming communities of solidarity across differences" (Smith and Watson 220). By coming out from a marginal site to speak, highlighting the civilian experiences, countering the refugee stereotypes and raising global awareness about the plight of Syrians caught in war, Fatemah effectively uses the narrative as a tool to empower herself and others. 'Others' here refer not only to the war-troubled Syrians but also the readers who are made a party in the narrator's mission to help refugees in crisis.

The Addressee

The addressees or narratees are the intended audience of an autobiographical work, to whom the narrator of the text speaks. Smith and Watson state that "Life writing is avowedly addressed to one or more narratees, listeners, implied or imagined reader" (146). The readers complete the tripartite cycle of storytelling. The response

of the audience differs with different narrative genres. In the contemporary world, the online interactive sites have made the interaction with the audience live, enabling quick feedback. In such mediums, the audience "is palpably there, accessing, soliciting, judging, even contributing to adjusting the story being told" (Smith and Watson 146). However, the readers of the printed narratives may respond in diverse ways as they come from "different experiential histories and geopolitical spaces that can produce radically different readings" (Smith and Watson 146).

Dear World is addressed to multiple audiences. Fatemah's letter, though structurally addressed to Bana, has implications inside the text that the author intends to take her message to certain other consumers of the book. Though the letter is personal, Philippe Lejeune in "Practice of the Private Journal" states that "I" in such writings "is motivated by a search for communication, by a will to persuasion" (192). The addressee of Fatemah's letter, other than Bana, is implicit. Even though Fatemah expresses her apprehensions and suspicions in her letter to Bana, "As things became more desperate so too did your questions: Do people know this is happening to us? Does anyone care? Why do they keep bombing us? Why won't they stop? Why can't we have peace?" (*Dear World* 123) meant to be answered by the international powers and peace agencies who are obligated to act during the time of the violation of human rights in Syria. She holds them accountable for their inaction. She also inculpates the perpetrators and brings them to the spotlight for their misdeeds. By addressing Bana's future self, she intends to intergenerational transmission of the memories of her country and self to resist social erasure and preserve them against the distorted histories. Furthermore, she intends to pass on values of peace, resilience and justice to counter the narrative of violence and hatred.

Fatemah seems to narrate certain incidents to those imagined readers outside Syria whom she wants to empathise with her on the devastating loss. With the opportunity the form of letter offers, she "engages in self-reflection, social or political critique, and philosophical speculation in condensed form" (Smith and Watson 132). As a characteristic of a manifesto, like the narrators, the narratees are also not universalised. There are implications of the narrator's understanding of the diverse audiences to which the memoir is going to reach, and therefore, it is structured accordingly. The multiple perspectives of mother and daughter can serve the readers from different age groups. She seems to be aware of the cultural barriers that can interrupt the meaning of the message she is trying to convey. Thus, there is an effort to persuade the readers of her intentions and motives while narrating the personal and public incidents.

As the title implies, the narrative of Bana is addressed to the world in general. This world is "idealized" (Smith and Watson 132) as a place where people are impartial and sympathetic just the way a child perceives it. She addresses the world outside Syria, whom she contrasts with the cruel authority in Syria. Bana's narrative directly acknowledges the readers, opening her mind up to them as a confidant. She clearly distinguishes between 'you' and 'we' as the readers who are not aware of who Syrians are or what happened to their country and the community of Syrians whom she represents. Rhetorically, she poses certain questions like "Did you know that the war in Syria has killed about five hundred thousand people, and many more are still getting hurt and dying everyday?" (*Dear World* 201) to the readers to apprise them of a disturbing fact on the violation of human rights and making them feel to be responsible to take action against it. She seeks to make them her accomplice in her mission to help the displaced. She lists down certain recommendations to her

imagined readers that they could take into consideration while helping refugees. Thus, Bana creates an imagined community of readers whom she takes into confidence, entrusting them with duties, sharing with them her emotions like fears and desires and asking them to witness with her.

Use of Visual Aids

As the narrative can be considered a project aimed at proving the existence of Bana, the use of evidence apart from the verbal is necessary. For this purpose, photographs and images of tweets are positioned systematically at various narrative junctures. According to Smith and Watson, the personal and public sources used by the narrators are tools in collective remembering. The photographs, they say, help in "structuring the personal memories" (44). But as a narrative centred on war memoir, photographs are used in the memoir to reflect not just personal experiences but public experiences as well. The narrators have depended on the photographs to access memory, as it is "critical" to their project of creating an alternative history that stands close to reality.

It is in Bana's section in the narrative that photographs are used. It is designed to attract young-adult readers with short chapters and numerous pictures that correspond to the events described. The photographs do not play the usual role that it do in autobiographies or biographies, as to provide the family background, the stages of growing up, achievements of the subject or to showcase the locations or spaces dear to the narrator, like their ancestral house, academic institutions or places of other interests. But in *Dear World,* it is used as a tool of collective self-expression. What appears to be personal is, in actuality, a representation of the general condition in Syria. The photographs appear to have been taken by someone related to Bana, most probably her mother, to document the progress of the uprising and their life under it.

The photographs correspond to Bana's life under war, the bombings and more significantly, the tweets she posted on *Twitter*. The motive behind using photographs is to represent the historical truth and assert their experiences as authentic. It was important for the narrators to establish their credibility as the regime denied the very existence of a girl named Bana and rejected their plea for peace as propaganda by the West to discredit the Syrian government.

The photographs used in the text are a mix of personal and public memory. Anna Topolska, in the essay "Shaping Memory through Visuality" (1989), proposes that this mixing is an attempt to fulfil the "cultural education" (66). She asserts that, by "showcasing the experience of the individual," the "existential agony" of the community of victims can be derived (66). She suggests the use of twin concepts, *Studium* and *Punctum,* coined by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), as a framework to analyse and understand the effect of photography.

When *studium* is the general interpretation of a photograph, shared commonly by the viewers, that which indicates "the cultural dimension of the photography" (Topolska 65), *punctum* is the subjective interpretation of it that "pierces or wounds the viewer" creating a profound emotional response (qtd.in Topolska 65). It is the *punctum* that "constitutes the true essence of photography, and allows the viewer to transgress the shared culture and learned collective memories" (Topolska 71). She also states that there will be a minor detail in the photograph that helps in "individual association" (65) for the viewers or readers and takes the photograph "beyond the intended message and shared set of connotations" (71).

The viewer experiences both *studium* and *punctum* while viewing the photographs. They may be able to derive a common understanding of it and can also

identify a small detail in that trigger in them different emotions related to their personal experiences. Topolska opines that "a *punctum* experience" does not happen to everyone and not all photographs can provide that. The photos of rubble and bombing in the memoir, for those readers who have gone through a similar experience, can trigger trauma, and for those who have not, can be a symbol of future calamity that they must be careful of. It can remind them of the temporality of materials.

As Barthes has noted, this experience *punctum* can wound the viewer emotionally. Therefore, the photos like Bana's toys left in the rubble and a broken window through which she gazes outside can resonate deeply with the readers as an indication of her lost innocence. The photos of Bana's destroyed home and those of her siblings in despair can serve as universal symbols of suffering, reminding readers of the fragility and impermanence of life. The use of certain photos, like that of the leaflet written in Arabic, claimed to be dropped by the regime's planes during the civil war, is included to add authenticity to the narrative and to strengthen the narrators' claim of their presence in Aleppo when there were airstrikes.

The photograph imprinted on the cover page, a part of the peritext, uses the method of juxtaposition of two contrary images. Gerald Gennette argues that the use of these external elements must be taken into consideration while analysing a text, as "they comprise a threshold that can dramatically affect its interpretation and reception by variously situated reading communities" (Smith and Watson 149). They are not neutral, but embedded with meanings. Thus, the photo of Bana smiling amidst the ruins on the cover page is of significance. The publisher must have intentionally juxtaposed elements of joy and destruction and hope and hopelessness to shock the readers and convey the bizarre nature of the war. Through this image, the viewer is

perforated by the recognition that the child's normalcy is completely out of place in such a setting, emphasising the tragedy of war where incorruptible innocence is forced to coexist with desolation and distress.

The photos of Bana and her brothers enjoying food and planting crops in the terrace during the depredations also point to a contradiction. Highlighting the theme of hope, these images represent the act of resilience in the face of annihilation. The photos of the newborn brother of Bana contrast the predominant presence of death symbolically by representing renewed hope and continuity. It acts as a comic relief to the readers by subverting the reader's attention from the tension created by the tragic incidents narrated in the text. There is an enjambment of other ideas like normality and abnormality, fragility and strength, represented through these photos, intended to represent those emotions the narrator is unable to verbally articulate.

There are photographs of Bana, her siblings and her mother looking at the readers with a smile at the end of the memoir corresponding to the timeline of the story where they escaped from Syria to Turkey. According to Topolska, this gaze of the characters creates a bond between them and the readers. The people in the photo appear to "“feel” this particular historical moment in that spectral sphere" (Topolska 73). Through this photo, Fatemah carries to the reader's time "all that these eyes had seen during her time- also …the war, her experience of the occupation, and of the uprising, together with the fear and trauma" all embodied in a bitter smile (Topolska 73-74).

The images of Bana's tweets serve multiple functions in the memoir. Her tweets gave her global popularity and made her the face of the neglected children of the Syrian civil war. It serves two purposes: one is to establish her credibility, and the other is to function as a peritext to reframe the narrative from the conventional

standards. The text brings a nuanced approach in its choice of titles, typeface, page layout and chapter organisation. This framing is done to enhance the "truth claims of the narrative" (Smith and Watson 149). These peritexts, Smith and Watson suggest, "establish the bona fides of the person whose story is told, attaching authenticity to tellers who may lack narrative authority and to stories that contest dominant narratives" (150). Therefore, the second purpose indeed serves the first purpose as well.

By inviting the readers to see it as proof and a means of propagating their message, the tweets play a major role in politicising the text. The tweets are provided with the date of their posting, making them verifiable. The tweets are intrinsically connected to the author's real life; thus, their inclusion is not a choice but something inevitable to complete the narrative resolution. The narrative also acquires a contemporary significance with the use of social media content as part of the printed text. This approach is also a blend of traditional and modern methods of storytelling. The tweets taken alone can form a separate narrative that documents the events in a condensed form, but is fragmented. It serves the function of a testimonio, a message communicated due to the urgency of the situation and calls for action. This message usually contains an experience of exploitation. The tweets, unlike the narrative, reach the intended audience quickly, posing a threat to the perpetrators who do not get to disrupt the communique. The tweets also capture the unfiltered immediate response to violence, making it veridical.

Ironically, the digital world gave her a feeling of security and reassurance that her physical world failed to provide. The innocence of her language is obvious in her tweets such as, "I am sick now. The war started again, there's no medicine, Please pray for me dear world. – Bana #Aleppo" and "We are not armed, why do you kill us?

– Bana #Aleppo" contrast sharply with the violent circumstances she describes. The discrepancy between the ingenuous and unwary expressions of the child, Bana and the adult reality of war provided by Fatemah makes the narrative a problematic one. It brings the element of subversion into the text. The language of Bana is the "language of revolution" (Smith 316). With its contradictions, it transgresses from the dominant models of self-expression.

Summation

As an autobiographical manifesto, *Dear World* deviates from the conventional storytelling practices. More than a declaration, the text is an affirmation of the narrators' newly constituted identity. It contests the sovereignty of the universal subject and dominant discourses by speaking up on their experiences from a marginalised position, claiming agency. Bana and Fatemah present their culturally marginalised experiences and challenge the fixed identifications like women and children by establishing themselves as activists and spokespersons of the oppressed. They also attempt an epistemological break from the repetitions often seen in Western discourses where Muslim women are portrayed as weak and submissive.

The narrators project themselves as political actors capable of affecting social change. The text, as a manifesto, positions the new revolutionary subjects in a liberated future distanced from the constraining and oppressive identifications. Through a child's appeal, it invokes in readers a responsibility to take action against the injustices on the displaced populace, thereby advocating change, awareness and acceptance. By embedding the personal stories of awakening to social justice, their work invites activism in a collective voice, ideologically making it a manifesto.

Chapter III

Beyond Trauma: Disability, Displacement and Human Rights in Nujeen Mustafa's *The Girl from Aleppo*

Introduction

War, violence, genocide and other human predicaments can lead the victims to be pressured to tell their stories to the world. The narration intends not just the sharing of horrific experiences of escaping death, but also speaking back at the hegemonic power structures in an effort to gain agency. The very act of speaking out therapeutically heals the traumatic wound and ameliorates their condition. These narratives are produced by ordinary people who would not have otherwise written about their uneventful lives. Thomas Couser, American professor and disability studies expert, identifies autobiography as the genre commonly used by such writers, as it is the "most universal and democratic form of literature" (3) capable of addressing everyday experiences without literary ornamentations. It must be noted that the catastrophe alone will not generate such profound narratives, but "there must be some cultural authorisation –some sense that one's story is valid and valuable" (Couser 2) that motivates them to speak. The Syrian refugee memoir, *The Girl from Aleppo* by Nujeen Mustafa, is one such "nobody memoir" (Couser 2), the author being unknown before the publication, that conspicuously testifies to the events relating to the Syrian civil war, the displacement and the refugee crisis. Furthermore, it evaluates the social arrangements of disability through the bodily experiences of the narrator.

Nujeen Mustafa is a Syrian refugee who escaped to Germany, following the Syrian civil war, in 2015. Affected by cerebral palsy, Mustafa was physically disabled

from birth. This condition forced her to travel in a wheelchair, pushed by her sister Nasrine. She was born into a Kurdish family of ten with her parents and seven siblings, living in Kobane, the hilly borders of Syria. Mustafa spends most of her life inside her house, as there were fewer facilities and resources for her in Syria to explore the outside world as a disabled person. She did not attend school and did not enjoy a social life with her peer group. Mustafa's link to the outside world was the television on which she watched American soap operas that also helped her to learn English. The skill that she acquired proved useful while travelling as a refugee in European countries. As the situation in Syria worsened with the increasing bombing in civilian areas, her family decided to move her out of Syria to Germany, where her elder brother had formerly found asylum, along with her sibling Nasrine and other family members, soon to follow. Her extraordinary journey at the age of sixteen, despite her physical condition, became known to the world when reporters of English news channels broadcast her story, acclaiming her as a heroic figure and the true symbol of refugee resilience.

In 2016, she published the first edition of her memoir, *Nujeen: One Girl's Journey from War-Torn Syria in a Wheelchair,* with British journalist and writer Christina Lamb. A second edition of this memoir was published with a new title, *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom,* in 2017. This memoir chronicles her sixteen-month-long gruelling journey across Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea to Greece through Macedonia to Serbia and Hungary, and finally to Germany. Mustafa was awarded the Nansen Refugee Award by UNHCR in 2017 and the Alison Des Award for extraordinary activism by Human Rights Watch Organisation in 2019.

The Girl from Aleppo is an impressionistic exposition of the human predicament of war experienced at discrete and collective levels through the eyes of the witness, Nujeen Mustafa. The chapter analyses the traumatic experiences of the narrator affected by the distorted perception of disability in the conventional Syrian society and the bigoted comportment of the refugees in the host countries. The fluid nature of the author's identity is brought to light by examining the transition attained through the congruence of self-perception and external judgement. The chapter also proposes to read the memoir as a human rights discourse, as the author intends to build alternate ways of thinking by challenging the mainstream society's discriminating nature and thereby promote respect for human dignity and solidarity.

Disability Experience: Three Paradigms

Thomas Couser in *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, proposes three paradigms to understand the cultural representation of disability and evaluate the disability experience, which are the symbolic or metaphorical paradigm, the medical or individual paradigm and the social or cultural paradigm. The symbolic order provides an understanding of disability in religious or spiritual light. It originated from the conventional Western ideology that prescribed anomalies as "revelations of divine will" (Couser 23). Mustafa's narrative does not discuss the Islamic doctrine on disability. There is no indication that the marginalised position, Mustafa is confined, is the outcome of the religious beliefs of her community. However, Mustafa believes in the ultimate fate vested upon her by God, and it is conceivable that she views her condition as part of the fate which she cannot alter.

The medical diagnosis and treatment helped in demystifying the irrational notions and dogmas surrounding her disability. However, it made her condition look

like a disease, which needs a cure. In the medical paradigm, disability is a dysfunction of the human body, deviant from the normal or healthy body. Thus, the medicalisation of the disabled condition made it appear as an "individual burden" or "personal tragedy" (Linton 11). She was judged by others, with either curious or pitiful eyes, as she looked different from her sisters, whose able bodies were privileged and normalised.

Mustafa, in the memoir, remembers going to different doctors who interrogated and interpreted her condition, suggesting treatments. She also reveals the pain she had to undergo after the surgeries. She did not have control over her body while growing up and relied on doctors to decide what her body was and how she should live with it. Mustafa's interpretation of these events takes a detached tone as the treatments could only improve her physical condition and not her emotional state of being. She tries to establish authority over her body by putting down her perspective in the narrative, and in the process, she re-establishes "subjectivity in the face of objectifying treatment" (Couser 4).

Mustafa's sense of self was affected by her physical condition. In the text, cerebral palsy, being a permanent disability, becomes an integral part of the narrative rather than a mere "interruption of life" (Couser 2). The memoir takes the form of a 'quest narrative,' a term coined by Arthur Frank in his work *Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, Ethics* (1995). It is concerned with bringing about "a view from the ill person's perspective in which the central problem is how to avoid living a life that is diminished, whether by the disease itself or by others' responses to it" (Frank xvi-xvii). Mustafa becomes the wounded storyteller who has "suffered and lived to tell the tale" (xi). Her stories are not mere reports of the events but "a process of discovery" (xvi). The narrator shares her physical pain with the readers so that her narrative can

become a guidebook to others who face similar conditions and get to know that they are not alone. Mustafa thus transforms from a “fragile human being” to a “guide, a companion and a truth teller” (xii).

Mustafa diverts the readers’ attention from the physical vulnerability to her intellectual smartness. She introduces herself in the memoir as the collector of facts who is perspicacious and astute. She proves that she has a standpoint in the ongoing political affairs in Syria as she opposes Assad’s regime and exposes its brutal treatment of Syrians who raised their voice against the injustice. She regrets not participating in the protest against Assad due to her condition, “All I could do was listen to the protest songs. I didn’t even get to tear down an Assad’s poster!” (*The Girl from Aleppo* 64). She shares the intricate details of the Kurdish culture and tradition, chronicles the community’s history and its present position in Syria, meticulously, so much so that there is an alternate history being scripted through the text. She identifies herself as a proud Kurd who calls for the creation of the Kurdish nation called Kurdistan.

Mustafa grew up listening to Kurdish folktales that supported the “normative ideology” (Davis 21). The stories consisted of heroes who adhered to the normalised physical standards and villains with disabilities. One of the qualities of the central characters, which the readers/listeners identified or related with, was their normativity, while abnormalities such as different types of disabilities, even within folktales, were despised. She establishes her viewpoint by exemplifying the story of *The Beauty and the Beast* that propagates the idea that it is the inner self that matters, and not the outward appearance. Thomas G. Couser, in his essay, “Introduction: The Embodied Self,” holds that this type of viewpoint reflects “the traditional Western Valorization of soul or mind over body” (6). It is typical of a narrator of disability

memoir to hold such views as they wish to highlight the heroic spirit in them rather than the bodily illness. The emotions she exhibits are relatable to the readers who read her narrative with the curiosity to understand what it is like to live with such a body. Mustafa accepts her condition as such and does not shy away from revealing the reality of how disability causes disadvantage.

The drawbacks of the biomedical model are exposed by the social or cultural model of disability, which the disability rights activists claim is the most appropriate tool to analyse the disability experience. This paradigm views disability as a social or cultural construction and not as a medical condition. Lennard J. Davis, in his work *The Disability Studies Reader,* tracks the evolution of this concept. He notices that, like disability, normalcy is also a social construct. Human beings are evaluated based on the degree of similarity with the ideal, the body that only God possesses in beliefs and traditions. This ideal body is not attainable by humans, which in turn created the concept of "average man" (David 17). The average man, according to the norms, consists of specific bodily measurements, "both physically average and a morally average construct" (17). This average body was then defined as the normal or healthy version of the human body, "devoutly to be wished" (17) by human beings. Disabled bodies that did not fall under the category of either ideal or average became an undesirable trait, often described as "unfit," "diseased," "crippled," "depraved" and "defective" (David 20). The terms ideal, normal and abnormal became universally accepted to stigmatise individuals based on their bodily conditions.

Robert McRuer, in his essay on the Crip Theory, notes that one must examine the "primary institutional sites which produce the social and cultural codes that constitute the ability and disability concepts" (3) to understand the disability experience. These sites of "violence, restriction, confinement, and absence of liberty"

(Snyder and Mitchel x) make the social existence of the disabled problematic. Their positioning in the society is liminal, having not yet "passed a test of full membership in cultures that adhere to a strict progression through rites of passage" (Gill 358).

Non-inclusive Nature of the Society

When disabled individuals are excluded from everyday activities and are denied equal access to resources and opportunities, they are supposed to be living in a non-inclusive society. The social understanding of disability, for the people in Syria, was conventional, lacking a deeper awareness. It manifested in their fear of disruption of the social order (Linton 3), which restricted them from amalgamating the disabled into the mainstream society. In Aleppo, Mustafa was shut out of the formal social system, confining her to the four walls of her apartment. She did not have privacy like other members of the house due to restricted mobility. "The worst thing about being disabled is you can't go away and cry somewhere on your own," (*The Girl from Aleppo* 32) she says. She was denied formal education, leisure trips and interaction with her peer group, which negatively affected the development of her personality.

Mustafa's functional needs were not addressed in her social environment. There was a lack of understanding of the disability issues in her family and community. There were no efforts from others to support her in being independent. People who visited her house expressed sympathy for her, assuming that her quality of life is poor. Her condition was stigmatised, reducing it as a tragedy that occurred to her family. She was "socially dead" as her condition was conceived as "socially dangerous" (Murphy et al. 237). What characterises the social experience of Mustafa is this denial of equal rights and "full humanity" (Gill 359).

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, USA identifies seven barriers that prevent the disabled from inclusion: Attitudinal, Communication, Physical,

Policy, Programmatic, Social and Transportation. Mustafa, at various stages of her life, has faced multiple of these barriers. Being aware of the marginal positioning at her home and in the community, she confesses that she felt like "an extra member of the world's population" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 33). She was neither welcome into the adults' world nor into the children's. She was not allowed to involve herself in the household chores or any outdoor activities, which made her unproductive. The pet tortoise, which her uncle gifted her, symbolises her physical and emotional condition of being self-restrained and stagnant. Decisions were taken on her behalf. She was carried by others while travelling. She was also provided for both emotional and physical needs.

Social/Cultural Standards and Gender Inequality

The cultural standard of the Kurdish community is patriarchal in nature. Men held the primary power of the family and property. They were policymakers and moral authoritarians. The religious traditions were rigid and repressive when it came to women's roles. The position of Kurdish women in Syria as subordinate is an outcome of the ideology that asseverates inequality in gender roles. The traditional concept of a Kurdish woman's role is that of a wife, a child bearer and a homemaker. Mustafa's disability indicated her incapacity to cater to the traditional role, and she was considered an unworthy citizen of her culture. To reduce the disparity others had with the disabled member of the family, Mustafa's mother took efforts to prove that she was mentally healthy by citing examples of how she remembers facts and learns quickly. According to Thomas Couser, disabled persons feel pressured to prove that they are diligent to avoid being viewed as weak and vulnerable, and they need others' help to survive. Disabled individuals experience pressure to prove themselves believable to readers. Mustafa asserts her mental prowess in the narrative to establish

herself as a reliable narrator who can provide accurate information about sensitive issues like the civil war and disability rights.

In *The Making of Blind Men*, Robert Scott elucidates the disabled as people who are "conditioned to be dependent and compliant, a social role that is systematically learned but which the people view as the natural outcome" (Gill 356). Mustafa was granted "superficial acceptance" (355) as she was mindful of her "tenuous status" and took care "not to exceed the tacit limit of social tolerance" (355). She was often rewarded for adopting an attitude expected of her. She was docile, dependent and wilfully obeyed others, abiding by the "stereotypical ascriptions" (357), so that she would "pass as socially acceptable" (355).

As she could not comply with the social and cultural standards of normalcy, Mustafa took over a "pervasive, indeterminate limbo-like state of being" (Gill 359). Each time she tried to have a conversation with someone outside her home, it tended to be "tense, awkward, and problematic" (Murphy 86). She felt removed from society and experienced a mental and physical "quarantine" (Gill 359) imposed on her. She internalised this stigma as something she deserved. One could see her justifying the denial of her basic rights as normal, as she believed that her disability caused difficulty to others. It must be assumed that her compliant self was only a facade she adopted "for the sake of expediency or to avoid being labelled as ungrateful or bitter" (356-357) because Mustafa relinquishes this role as her circumstances change. The social and cultural environment around her fostered a "patronising and distorted representation of disability" (Linton 4). It is important to note that instead of exhibiting outrage at her social positioning or expressing despair at her fate, she takes a neutral, non-combatant stance at the repressive treatment of her disabled condition while living in Syria.

Mustafa, who conceived her disabled body as a burden to people around her, felt that the favours she received were out of sympathy. This behaviour reasserted the idea of victimhood imposed on her. The social arrangement is such that the disabled individuals remain in the lowest rung of the social hierarchy so that the hegemonic structures can maintain power over them. The dominance exists on physical, moral and intellectual levels with the consent of the subordinated disabled groups. The family becomes part of the civil society that helps in the mobilisation of consent and inadvertently participates in their suppression.

Strained Interaction with the Non-Disabled during the Flight

The flight of a disabled refugee is undeniably formidable. They require assistance in travelling, communicating and utilising the available resources. The wheelchair in which Mustafa travelled was pushed by her sister Nasrine throughout the journey. She was the only incapacitated member in the group and felt guilty that her presence slowed the group's journey. It was during this journey that Mustafa got the chance to interact more with the able-bodied individuals. Fred Davis, an American sociologist, states that disability is a "threat to sociable interaction" in his essay "Deviance Disavowal" (1961). According to Davis, it is difficult for disabled persons to build a normalised relationship with non-disabled persons. Mustafa had to face unwanted attention due to her "visible handicap" (123). Though able-bodied individuals were ready to help her, being carried by others made her feel powerless and subordinate.

The narrative sheds light on the fact that the privacy of disabled individuals is not a matter of concern to others, and often, their permission is not sought. The non-disabled persons are also not at ease in interacting with the disabled, as they are either too cautious about being politically correct in their actions and words, or they

completely avoid interacting with them due to fear, unfamiliarity or disinterest. It was Mustafa, who, usually, started the conversation by disclosing her personal information to provide the non-disabled companion assurance that she is normal in other aspects and is trustworthy. She had to encourage them to identify with her in terms of shared interests and perspectives so that they would open up to her. Mustafa confesses that she had no friends to say goodbye to when she left Syria, as she had no chance of meeting individuals of her age outside her home. Thus, she was not familiar with the ways of building and sustaining relationships; however, she was capable of identifying her weakness and establishing positive associations with others.

Trauma of Refugeefication

Refugees experience trauma due to war, violence and displacement. It creates in them physical and psychological wounds that lead to the disorientation of their psyche. According to Dr Gail Theisen-Womersley, a South African psychologist, trauma in refugees occurs at three different stages, namely, pre-migration, migration and post-migration (31). The three collectively contribute to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder in refugees. This affects their perceptivity and functionality that resulting in the rupture of the self. The experiences at the three stages, though traumatic, instil community bond and multi-cultural coalition, helping them in survival. Mustafa's memoir establishes that refugees experience trauma at varying degrees based on the class they belong to and the resources available to them. Mustafa classifies her family as "five-star refugees," (*The Girl from Aleppo* 204) as they were financially stable to provide themselves with the resources needed to escape to the country of their choice to resettle. However, the text meticulously encompasses multiple voices of refugees from divergent backgrounds to provide a panoptic view of the true heterogeneous refugee experience. As represented in the text, the refugees

experience trauma at three different phases, namely, pre-migration phase, in which their life is threatened due to the dangers in the home country, migration phase, in which they face challenges like border crossing, xenophobia and discrimination and post-migration phase, in which the refugees encounter various challenges of integrating into a new country.

a. Pre-migration phase

Syria, being a cluster of various Islamic communities, was a place of constant tension between groups claiming superiority. The Kurdish community to which the author belonged to was pushed to marginality as they were treated as foreigners who migrated to Syria long ago. The Kurds, who were formerly displaced due to the defeat of the historical Ottoman Empire, were forced into exile, scattering them into various parts of Modern Turkey, Syria and other parts of the Middle East. This created in them a sense of homelessness and a feeling of betrayal. The older generations of Kurds who resettled in Syria transmuted this trauma to the younger generation of Kurds, who were reminded of their past through oral tales daily. Mustafa's narrative reflects this trans-generational trauma as the narrator clearly distinguishes 'us' and 'them,' while addressing other Syrian communities like the Shia and Alawites, projecting her non-identification with the nation. She calls for the creation of Kurdistan, a nation exclusive to the Kurds all around the world, subsequently making herself part of the collective Kurdish dream imparted by her forefathers. As a young individual born in Syria, she positions herself in an in-between state of identification as a Syrian and a Kurd living in Syria. This ephemeral status continues throughout the text as the narrator experiences displacement again, which warrants her sense of uncertainty.

The Syrian civil war exposed the citizens to a variety of cataclysmic experiences emerging from violence, death and destruction. Mustafa exposes the tyrannical government of Assad and his exploitation of political power. She proclaims her leftist political stand, openly opposing the government, giving seditious overtones to the narrative. The dystopian environment in Syria, as described by the author, resembles the setting of the novel *1984* by George Orwell. The totalitarian and repressive regimentation of Big Brother and his Thought Police on the inhabitants of Oceania can be directly correlated with that of President Assad and his *Shabiha*, the secret police's manipulation of power to suppress the anti-regime voices.

Mustafa criticises the government for being unsympathetic towards the plight of Syrians caught in unforeseen adversity. She sheds light on the internal conflict and communal disharmony in Syria nurtured by the regime to continue in power. She wants readers to understand that her religion consists of sects with variegated beliefs and values, and should be treated and perceived so. This is intended to avoid compartmentalising the Islamic believers with the extremist and terrorist groups, a strategy used by the West to subjugate them.

Mustafa compares the condition of war-torn Syria to that of poor African countries. She says that people became dependent on the government for fulfilling their necessities. The sounds of nature and the buzzes of busy markets were replaced with the noises of shelling and firing throughout the day and night. Mustafa remembers living in constant fear of being killed since the war started, and this foreboding made her and her family indifferent towards the daily death tolls. Leaving the country for them meant losing their properties, community bonds, support systems and familiar cultural and social environments.

According to Kirmayer and colleagues, the moral emotions like shame, guilt and humiliation are used by the hegemonic powers to inflict damage and torture on the victims (84). To understand the impact of the regime's torture on the Syrians, it is necessary to know the "personal and cultural meanings of a specific kind of violence" (84). Considering this, it can be understood that the regime projected itself as a fatherly figure who punished his children for their bad behaviour. It destroyed people's houses and denied them access to resources, creating a sense of danger and disrupting their faith in the revolution. Those regions in Syria which supported the regime's rule were excluded from bombing, and other regions held by rebels were destroyed. People who supported the rebels were made to feel guilty for the death of their fellow citizens. The regime instilled the idea in people's minds that they were not powerful enough to fight against the government. They had no choice but to support the government if they needed to continue their life in Syria.

Mustafa calls Bashar al-Assad a "dictator" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 62) and compares him to Hitler and Stalin, positioning him as a ruthless politician who will be remembered for his wrong deeds in history. She laments the fact that thousands of rebels who fought and died in the revolution for the democracy of Syria will be forgotten. She acts as a witness to the events that took place in Syria rather than an active participant and expresses her anguish in it. Nevertheless, she speaks about her sister and other women who could contribute to the revolution by taking part in the protest against Assad, which indicates Syrian women's advancement in the political sphere. Mustafa attempts to persuade Western readers to reconsider the status of women in Islamic nations as progressive and empowered, and prohibits the possible use of her narrative as a "soft weapon" (Smith and Watson 132) in "culture wars" (131) in contemporary global politics. The author criticises the powerful Western

countries like the U.S. for not intervening in the plight of Syrians during the war. She bravely expresses her disappointment in realising that the dominant West has stakes when it comes to the political affairs of the East, contrary to its media-projected image as the champion of humanity and peace all over the world.

b. Migration phase

According to the Australian sociologist E.F. Kunz's kinetic models of refugee movements, the pattern of Mustafa's flight and displacement falls under "acute refugee movement" (132). It indicates her escape as part of the unanticipated mass flight of Syrians, seeking safety in the neighbouring country of Turkey, following the Syrian civil war. Though the group that Mustafa accompanied found temporary shelter in Turkey, the push factors there became so overwhelming that they found it necessary to migrate further. Mustafa says that there was "no life" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 115) in Turkey for the Syrians. There were no options to work or continue studies there. The only way was to work illegally and earn "rotten salaries or... nothing" (115). The escape from Turkey was also difficult as they were restricted from taking the journey by flight. Hence, they were forced to take the route through road and sea, which exposed them to further exploitation.

Refugees were exploited by the smugglers during the flight. Mustafa calls them "blood sucking flies" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 162) who financially deceive refugees. The dinghies, which they often provided, turned out to be damaged or overloaded, which caused them to drown in the sea. They also charged large sums of money for the same and did not take responsibility for the accidents. Thus, many refugees lost their lives while escaping. The narrative exposes various challenges faced by refugees while travelling through foreign countries to find shelter, ambiguity in gender identities, discrimination in refugee camps, xenophobia and uncertainty.

i. Ambiguous Gender Identity

The experiences during migration disrupted the family and cultural systems. The members of the family were separated, as they could not travel together. Subsequently, they had to switch the traditional roles of men being the breadwinners and women, homemakers. Women who lost men in their families during the war took financial responsibility for their families and learned to creatively utilise the available resources. Because of the unfamiliarity with the clothing style of European women, they felt cultural shock as they had only witnessed women in modest dress, complying with the cultural demands in Syria. For refugee mothers like Mustafa's sister Nahda, the protection of children became the priority. She did not get involved in the process of planning, executing and negotiating the fundamentals of their escape and seeking asylum. Women like her followed their husbands or male members who led the group without much thought. She depended on others, maintaining the traditional role of a Kurdish woman.

Refugee men lost agency, as they were no longer the decision-makers and executors. This ambiguity challenged their gender identities. Confined to refugee camps, these men could not carry out their day-to-day activities involving socialising with other members of their community, freedom to travel and retain their professions. They were also not able to carry out their religious rituals or train their children for the same. They became less productive and emotionally frustrated, which in turn made some of them behave violently in the host countries.

ii. Refugee Camps

One of the important aspects which affected the refugee experience is the stay at the refugee camps. The camps were constructed outside the mainstream society so

that the host country population do not fraternise with the refugees. They were treated as outcasts who do not deserve to be incorporated into the social fabric of the host country. These places were notorious for "undermining human dignity, discouraging mutual support and creating dependency" (Theisen-Womersley 33). The refugees were stripped of "pre-migration protective supports" (UNHCR 3), like familiar language, food and living conditions, help, and comfort from their extended family and community. Mustafa shares the sad reality of having Syrians who were successful professionals among them and had held dignified positions in their country, standing in long queues waiting for their turn to receive food and water. Mustafa witnesses the pitiful conditions in refugee camps located in Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria and Hungary. Mustafa remembers it as "filthy and full of cockroaches, and the guards beat people and forced them to take tranquillisers to keep them quiet" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 182). For disabled persons like Mustafa, it was even more difficult as she had to seek help from others to be carried around, which made her feel weak compared to others.

iii. Xenophobia

Vamik D. Volkan, in his study on refugee trauma, reveals that the unwelcoming attitude of the host countries poses a threat to their journey forward. In European countries like Hungary, Croatia and Austria, refugees were treated with hostility and prejudice. This notion arises from their inherent belief in the difference from the "newcomers" (Volkan 79) as "us and them" (79). Mustafa notices that this attitude does not evolve from realistic reasons, but rather, from the misrepresentation of refugees from the Islamic nations as terrorists by the Western media. This prejudice spreads among people and "collectively become crystallised as the "normal" thing to be" (84). They are afraid of losing the large-group identity through the intermingling of the two groups and the amalgamation of their cultures. This will lead them to be

protective of their identity from that of others. Hungary, a Christian nation, saw the inflow of Syrian refugees as a threat to its religious identity. They tried to keep the refugees away by inflating the price of goods, labelling them as criminals, carriers of infectious diseases and accusing them of taking away their jobs. To restrict refugees' mobility, they built a twelve-foot fence that connected with Serbia. This wall is a physical manifestation of the metaphorical wall that existed in their minds.

iv. Period of uncertainty

Refugees, after reaching a putative destination, are caught in a period of uncertainty. J. Metraux calls this period in the refugee journey "suspended or mute time" (52). He defines it as "being absent from all temporality, the social life of [refugees] being also a waiting period, a suspended time, a time dissolved in the heart of an indeterminable parenthesis" (52). They have to live in camps allotted to them under strict scrutiny until they are granted asylum. During this period, which continues for months, they live with the fear of repatriation.

After going through the tough ordeal of the escape journey through unwelcoming host countries of Europe, refugees like Mustafa had to face "prolonged uncertainty" (Theisen-Womersley 34) until German authorities granted them asylum. They were sheltered in make-shift tents with donated clothes and accessories. During their stay there, they were not supposed to involve themselves in any kind of occupation and had to depend on the social welfare that offered meagre emoluments. Mustafa records, many of them experienced "fear of repatriation" as they did not fulfil the requirements of the German authorities related to age, skills and qualification. They lived a life of boredom and loneliness, as they were restricted from any productive endeavour. They were "left with a life in limbo" (Theisen-Womersley 35), discriminated and dishonoured, thus, their process of "social integration" and

"personal development" in the new country became stagnant. As they were treated as masses, they lost their individual identity, which led to a lack of self-worth and self-esteem (Theisen-Womersley 35). They felt trapped in the current situation and became unconfident about their future (35).

Being exposed to the "traumatic stressors over an extended period" (Theisen-Womersley 36), they become insecure and begin to accept the "compromised and precarious political, social and economic position" (36) they were in. They got preoccupied with thoughts on loss and uncertainty, which contributed to their apprehensive state of mind and became a poor judge of character and were easily deceived by others. They also lived in a "state of permanent emergency" (36), due to fear of getting caught and trapped in a country they did not want to settle in. The refugees, who sought asylum in a host country, had to wait for an unspecified period until asylum was granted. Betty Ratcliff "identifies the period before and after being granted asylum as two distinct periods in the psychological lives of migrants" (34). Refugees became impassive in their actions and self-contained in their emotions. This condition resembled the traumatic withdrawal syndrome characterised by depression, hopelessness, and reluctance to engage in day-to-day activities. According to the memoir, the adult refugees were affected more than the children, who adapted better to the new environment.

c. Post-migration phase

After resettling in a new country, refugees were in a state of transition. From a period of uncertainty, they moved to a phase where they must quickly adapt and integrate. They are "now expected to fully participate in a new socio-cultural environment and locally reconstruct their lives, all the while maintaining their cultural identity" (Theisen-Womersley 38). Syrian refugees were welcomed with two contrary

emotions, inhibition and validation, by the Germans. Different groups in Germany opposed, supported or remained indifferent towards the refugee influx. Vamik D. Volkan, in his work on refugee trauma, *Broken Spirit*, says that refugees were received as both "victims/heroes" and "diseased intruders" (14) all at once. A part of the German population believed them to be terrorists or extremists who may bring "catastrophic consequences" to their country. They treated the refugees with contempt, blaming them for hindering the German citizens' everyday life. Their xenophobic attitudes were aggravated further by the opinion of the people, who held the leadership positions in the political and cultural realm. Refugees were thus treated as "economic and social threat" (Theisen-Womersley 39) to the Germans. Theisen-Womersley formulates eight psychological stressors that cause trauma in refugees during the post-migration period, which are post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, survivor guilt, refugee gratitude, alienation, violence, acculturation and loss of cultural identity, loss of home and attitude of the host country.

i. Post-traumatic stress disorder

The causes of PTSD ranged from "Human rights abuses," "Traumatic loss," "Lack of basic human needs" and "Separation from others" (Knipscheer et al. 178-182). Having experienced all of these, the refugees underwent depression, which manifested in different ways. Mustafa started showing the signs of PTSD as she started having nightmares about the bombing in Syria. She remembered that the Syrian refugees were unable to follow their traditional rituals and prayers, which put them in mental agony. Most of the adults became withdrawn from social life as they were put into an unfamiliar environment. Learning a new language was difficult for them compared to the younger refugees. They were also restricted by additional laws that limited their mundane activities. Mustafa's sister, Nahda's law degree that was

not recognised in Germany. As a result, qualified individuals like her had to stay unemployed waiting for government grants. This, in turn, affected their self-worth and belief in having a promising future. As a aftermath of staying for a prolonged period in camps, there occurred damage to the psychological state of refugees. It affected their self-esteem. They began to shed their high hopes for the future and only yearned for a normal life.

ii. Survivor guilt

Due to "negative self-evaluation" (Murray et al. 1) during the post-traumatic period, Mustafa remembers feeling guilty about leaving Syria, like many other refugees. She had to leave behind some of the members of her family and community who still faced a dangerous predicament in Syria. The news of her uncle and aunt's deaths in the bombing escalated this feeling. She regrets that they were only concerned about their survival and did not bring any material possessions from Syria, like the family photographs that could have been kept as keepsakes to reconnect with her country and culture. The house allotted to them in Cologne, Germany, was styled as a Christian household, which made them feel estranged. She started comparing life in Syria and Germany and tried to find the pros to reassure herself that they had taken the right decision to escape.

Hanna Murray and colleagues, in their study on survivor guilt, suggest that the survivors try to make sense of their survival and want to compensate for their survival with an attempt to give back something to the non-survivors. The guilt in the refugees also plays a part in "promoting group cohesion" (Murray 3) and "preservation of interpersonal relationship" (Murray 3). Mustafa tries to "work off" (Murray 3) her guilt and make it even by speaking for the refugee rights and highlighting the plight of Syrian refugees, making use of the popularity she gained through the media news

reports. She inculcated the stories of other refugees she met during her journey to provide a wider picture of the issue.

iii. Refugee gratitude

The Girl from Aleppo is structured as a refugee success story that essentially shows gratitude to the host nation that granted the author asylum. The memoirs written by German-settled Syrian refugees find a similarity in their approach to glorify the host nations' considerate act. Mustafa observes that the German authorities intend to replace the country's negative reputation attained through the inhuman treatment of Jews during the holocaust by allowing the massive inflow of Syrian refugees. The narrator's opinion of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel as the "feisty lady" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 220), who was the ultimate hope for all refugees, shows her willingness to portray Germany in conformity with the country's pre-designed image. It is also important to identify Germany as the "locational site" (Smith and Watson 64) where the coaxing to produce the success narratives takes place. As a host country, Germany welcomed the Syrian refugees and gave them hope to rebuild a new life. There is a tacit expectation on their part that encourages the resettled refugees to show gratitude.

Mustafa contrasts the "good refugees" (Nguyen 18) as loyal and useful to the country that gave them asylum, and 'bad refugees' as ones who exploit their refugee status by bringing violence and terrorism to the host country. In a personal interview conducted with Mustafa, she asserts, "Every refugee feels the pressure to prove himself in the new host country, to prove that he is a good guest. Because whenever something bad happens, refugees are one of the first groups to be blamed". Narratives like Mustafa's have represented Germany in a positive light as part of maintaining a good refugee image. This pressure upon refugees led those who are recounting the

survival story to hide certain details regarding the insensitive treatment they received in the host country. However, Mustafa adroitly manages to bring out multilateral exegesis of refugee experience - both uplifting and downgrading - at the hands of the hegemonic powers.

iv. Alienation

“I hadn’t really thought about what it meant to be a refugee, that you have no rights, and that people might be intimidated and look at you as aliens or as people with no lives who kill each other, not realising that we do the same as them- get up in the morning, brush our teeth and go to school or work” (*The Girl from Aleppo* 235). These words of Mustafa characterise the collective experience of Syrian refugees in Germany. She recounts that the German neighbours found a problem with their lifestyle. The children in the refugee families were threatened with being taken away by the authorities if they did not follow the German way of bringing up children. Mustafa could not understand what made them different from the Germans, apart from their nationality. She says that the resettled refugees were always careful about their behaviour in public, as any deviation may gain unwanted attention and legal action. This repressive environment, along with the traumatic memories of the home country, made their assimilation into the new culture difficult.

v. Violence

As recounted in the discussion with Mustafa, she argues, “refugees are seen as a danger, a problem that needs a solution and not a resource or a benefit to the host country.” Refugees were believed to bring violence to the country as Germans thought that *Daesh* or ISIS terrorists hid among them. The Neo-Nazi movement in Germany opposed the Syrian migration to their country and blamed Syrians for taking

away their jobs. The xenophobia among the Germans became "more generalized" (Volkan 101) when incidents like a terrorist attack during a Paris football match and the sexual assault of a German woman by a drunk-migrant took place. There were demonstrations against the migrants to review the Syrian asylum claims. The refugee shelters were burned by those protestors. These actions prove that Germans, with the arrival of the refugees, became aware of their large-group identity and any attack on the members of the group psychologically affected all of them. It created massive hostility towards the newcomers. They felt "contaminated" (Volkan 100) by the refugee's presence and began "exaggerating major differences, elevating minor differences to significant proportions" (100). As a result, the two communities stayed away from each other, increasing the physical and psychological gap between them. Even after settling down, Syrians were treated as refugees and not as German citizens. Mustafa remembers that Germans also displayed 'islamophobia' because of "malignant shared prejudice" (Volkan 101) towards Syrians, considered as one large group of Muslims who have arrived in their country as intruders. The fear of being culturally contaminated by the other group prevented them from intermingling and resisting any chance of cohabitation.

vi. Acculturation and loss of cultural identity

After migrating to the new country, they were "now expected to fully participate in a new socio-cultural environment and locally reconstruct their lives, all the while maintaining their cultural identity" (Theisen-Womersley 38). However, for Syrians who held a different cultural identity, this was difficult to achieve. The Syrians who were familiar with the joint-family system found the nuclear family system in Germany unacceptable. The close ties with their extended families provided them with a sense of safety. The new living environment made them vulnerable and

insecure. The sense of alienation with the new culture delayed their acculturation. Though young refugees learned the German language, the older generation found it difficult to learn and speak the language. They were also worried about giving up their mother tongue, Arabic, as it best suited to express their emotions.

Mustafa compares the social life of Germans and Syrians and evaluates the German lifestyle as more disciplined and organised. The strict rules threatened Syrian refugees' peaceful living as they were constantly scrutinised by the social services. Any mistake on their part invited serious repercussions, including the separation of the family members. They lived in constant fear even after escaping from war and death in Syria. Mustafa notices that, in Germany, someone always had a problem with them, and they had to work hard to avoid complaints. Most of the Syrians found it difficult to live up to the expectations. They were pressured to appear different from who they were to avoid being treated as outcasts. They were always viewed with suspicion, which negatively affected their confidence. In the memoir, one could see that Mustafa, like other refugees, was preoccupied with proving her worth to the Germans.

vii. Loss of home

Unlike the immigrants and migrants, the wish to return to the home country is seen less in the asylum-seeking refugees who underwent acute movement of displacement. Mustafa has contradictory views on this. She misses her home in Syria because of the familiarity and warmth she received from her home and community. However, she refuses to go back to Syria, as the old Syria does not exist anymore. She confesses to being acculturated to Germany, as she no longer recognises the new Syria as her own.

viii. Attitude of the host country

Theisen-Womersley brings up J.W. Berry's study on the effect of the "acculturative preferences of the host society" (39) on the refugees' interest and capability to integrate. As per the study, the host country either encourages or discourages "ethnic diversity and participation in the larger society" (39). In this light, the German host society, as represented in *The Girl from Aleppo*, encouraged acculturation and opposed the ethnic uniqueness of the Syrians. Vamik D. Volkan recognises such host societies as hostile and malignant. The Germans tried to project the negative aspects of the newcomers, which eventually were generalised and assimilated into the Syrian identity so much so that they started believing it to be true. Though she opposes the host country's labelling of the refugees as mendacious, it is seen in the memoir that Mustafa confirms that terrorists were hiding under the pretext of being refugees.

Volkan's theory also brings to light the "cultural amplifiers" (96) of large groups related to certain historical events that the group members share in common. Among those, certain incidents become "chosen glories" and certain others "chosen trauma" (96) that are cardinal to the large group identity. The historical event of the holocaust that occurred in Germany during World War II has created an image for Germany as unfavourable, adverse and pessimistic. A burden of shame and remorse was transmitted inter-generationally in Germans because of their ancestors' implicit and explicit involvement in the genocide. The Germans utilised the chance to welcome and grant asylum to the Syrian refugees to transpose the image of a perpetrator with that of a saviour who champions human dignity and liberty. Mustafa exposes the political and social advantages the country obtains through the intake of the refugees. She tries to establish that the refugees are portrayed to the world as victims and dependents who are in need of external help. Their condition is exploited

by the host countries to increase their human resource and falsely claim international merit.

Syrian refugees tried to keep hold of their past cultural identity by continuing the ritualistic practices like daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan and preparing Syrian dishes. They tried to maintain the “non-sameness” (Volkan 99) from the Germans. The psychological border between the two groups helped them to stay “uncontaminated ...stabilizing each group’s mutual projections and externalizations” (100). Any unacceptable act from the refugee groups, like violence, rape and non-cooperation, began to be essentialized as the common group trait and this became a tool to marginalise them.

According to Theisen-Womersley, refugees face multiple losses during the migration that thwart their progress (40). Due to the separation from family and other support groups, Syrians faced “social isolation” (40). The isolation became all the more acute due to the hostility from the host countries. “Unemployment” and “unstable working conditions” led to “deskilling” (41) of many refugees. They felt “social and occupational worthlessness” and “lack of satisfaction” in the host country, leading to “unequal power relations and negated legitimate freedom to act” (42). The sense of otherness experienced by the refugees forced them to “discover a new sense of identity” (43). The discrimination in the host country had a profound effect on their “sense of self, identity formation, relationships with others” (43). It hindered the development of a “positive identity” (43).

Human Rights Narrative

The Girl from Aleppo is a memoir that recollects traumatic episodes of disabled refugee Nujeen Mustafa’s life. Readers are confronted with the brutality of war, the exploitation of refugees and the social stigmatisation of disability. The

narrator champions the rights of the disabled individuals as well as refugees by exemplifying her personal journey of confronting disability and the collective experience of refugeefication. Therefore, the text can be read as a human rights discourse, an autobiographical mode of narration recognised by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith in their work *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004). This kind of narrative contains stories that "reinvest the past with a new intensity, often with pathos" as they "test normative conceptions of social reality" (Schaffer and Smith 4). As victims of social injustice, the narrators come forward to testify to the rights violations and assert their rights. They imagine a just social world that promises justice and equality through the acts of narration. Schaffer and Smith also assert that these narratives are often written by "people with limited political purchase in a national arena, often competing and conflictual in their appeals, accumulate nonetheless into a chorus of voices demanding response and responsible action" (2).

Mustafa speaks not only for herself but also recount stories of others whom she identifies with, at the time of suffering. While speaking against the oppressive regime in Syria, she also imagines herself from the position of others who were victimised in the war, speaks for them, and thereby contributes to the "human rights project of social justice and reconciliation" (Smith and Watson 133). By narrating the story of survival, Mustafa intends to call the readers to act, to validate their suffering and to protect the dignity of the other. She urges the readers to reconsider the depraved status, history has bestowed on the refugees. By offering a witness account of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis, Mustafa makes an "ethical call to empathic identification and accountability" (133-134) to the issues of the disabled refugees.

Mustafa, in the narrative, provides a vision of the world she expects to see. After enlightening readers about the true condition of refugees in flight, she pleads with the host countries to treat them with kindness. She reminds them that they are primarily humans, before getting tagged with numbers in the camps. She acknowledges the challenges and concerns related to the refugeefication and reframes the narrative's structure to break the misperceptions and stereotypes on refugees. She narrates the positive aspects of living in Germany and shows that different communities can exist together in harmony. She explains the international rights of refugees, so that the book can also be read as a reference for those in Syria who are willing to relocate to Germany.

The text was created due to the urgent need to disseminate the human rights violations faced by refugees during their escape from Syria to Germany, and to seek revision in public thought and action regarding their approach to the ongoing crisis. The altered mindset of people is expected to expedite the acceptance of refugees. She raises rhetorical questions for readers to reflect on and arguments, data, and facts to be rechecked to avoid generalisations. She has highlighted the policies that are discriminatory towards the refugees, like the fingerprinting system that traps them in unwelcoming host countries and conducts advocacy with policymakers in bringing amendments to it. Mustafa hopes that the refugees are recognised beyond their labels.

Apart from the refugee issues, the text also addresses disability rights and the need for body positivity. As Schaffer and Smith put it, "narratives of disability direct attention to the failure of advanced democracies to address the particular needs of the disabled as denials of basic human rights" (2). She discusses disability issues constructively to proclaim that it is not an obstacle to an individual's progress. She expects to break the existing stereotypes and myths surrounding the abilities of a

disabled body. Her concerns about getting a suitable partner in the future are a result of the unrealistic beauty standards imposed on young girls like her from their teenage years. She exemplifies with her own life that this may lead to issues in personality development and self-confidence. The text recommends altering such misconceptions and developing value-based living conditions that provide space to a diverse set of people.

Mustafa's narrative questions the values that Syria as a nation professed to uphold by narrating her actual experiences as a witness. She points out the treatment of the Syrian government of its citizens before and during the war as oppressive. The Kurds' condition in Syria of being treated as foreigners bespeaks the denial of the rights of freedom and equality. Mustafa provides instances where they were not allowed to speak Kurmanji (Kurdish language) or celebrate their festivals in public as a violation of their cultural and linguistic rights. It was common for them to be denied their citizenship, access to education, jobs and other public services. The text is a poignant reminder of the struggle of the Kurdish community for the recognition of their rights in Syria.

As a rights discourse, the narrative is an assimilation of the voices of collective suffering. For the refugees and the disabled individuals, Mustafa acts as the spokesperson of their trauma by addressing both personal and collective issues faced by these groups in adversity. The issues raised in the memoir, like xenophobia, violence, loss of identity and home, reflect the experience of refugees in general.

The narrative does not stop by drawing attention to the violations but moves a step forward by mentioning certain errors in the international policies and suggesting revisions in them. She questions the term 'refugee' being forced on the displaced Syrians, as it has derogatory connotations in the West. She suggests reconsidering the

use of this dehumanising term as it reduces them to a statistical data point or number. She recommends identifying and addressing them as humans with individual identities. Mustafa also requests that the international powers look into the crimes and instances of abuse against refugees in the foreign countries through which they travel. She mentions countries like Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and Croatia to be unsympathetic towards the refugees and testifies to their breaking of the international refugee law. These pleas are addressed to agencies like UNHCR that can act as a quasi-judicial government forum and interfere in the unlawful acts against refugees. She urges the agencies to ensure a safe journey for the refugees to protect them from betrayal at the borders by the smugglers and to put an end to the death of refugees due to drowning in the Aegean Sea.

Mustafa issues a call for "institutions, communities and individuals" to respond to her story, "to take responsibility for the recognition, and find means of redress" (Schaffer and Smith 3). Evidently, she is successful in drawing the attention of the international agency, UNHCR, which enlisted her memoir as an exemplary illustration of the refugees' optimism and resilience and recognised Mustafa as "the human face of an increasingly dehumanised crisis" (UNHCR India). Similarly, the honouring of the Human Rights Watch organisation "for her tireless advocacy promoting the rights of refugees and people with disabilities" (Human Rights Watch) with the Alison Des Forges Award in 2019, increased Mustafa's popularity and recognition as a persuasive voice that "encouraged international disability reform efforts" (Human Rights Watch). As a human rights narrative, her memoir recommends re-evaluation of the "policies regarding people with disabilities in humanitarian crisis" (Human Rights Watch). The Human Rights Watch Organisation observes that, after the publication of her memoir, the "EU Commissioner for

humanitarian assistance has announced new measures to ensure that the delivery of humanitarian aid meets the needs of people with disabilities" (Human Rights Watch), indicating the right reception of her message at the international platforms.

Therefore, it can be construed that the narrative rightly falls under the human rights framework of narrating stories that are "strong" and "emotive" (Schaffer and Smith 4). Using the genre of life writing, Mustafa was able to "bring forward claims of human rights abuses" (3) and "provide necessary evidence and information about the violations" (3). By speaking out about the trauma, she activates the function of the rights discourse, which is to testify to the hidden truths. Her testimony brings to attention the actuality of being a disabled refugee.

Narrative Style and Strategies

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, while formulating the components of the autobiographical acts, identify the role of "coaxers/occasions" (64) in triggering the storytelling process. They define it as a "set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories" (64). The spate of Syrian war memoirs published during the last decade indicates that there is a need to create credible and real chronicles of Syrian civil war victims to counter the narratives that depreciate the refugee survival journey. Mustafa's memoir joins the community of such narratives issued from the marginal sites by presenting common concerns over disability and refugee status. It transcends the limitations of self-representations by addressing the plurality of the refugee experience. It also transgresses the traditional war-survivor pattern of story by inculcating the interpretation of the social arrangement of Syria and the impact of refugeefication through Mustafa's bodily experience.

The Syrian refugee memoirs often appear as collaborative publications due to the refugees' lack of proficiency in English and inability to articulate their experience.

Their lives are interpreted by others who might be from different cultural and racial backgrounds. Christina Lamb, the editor of Mustafa's memoir, is a British Journalist who has created literal manifestations of various Muslim refugee voices, like *I Am Malala*, the memoir of Malala Yousefzai. *The Girl from Aleppo* is an "as-told-to-narrative" where Mustafa is the informer whose story was used by Lamb as a source material for ghostwriting her life. The narrative is in first-person as spoken by Mustafa, and the editor does not appear directly in the text. The partnership between the two is "voluntary" and "mutually beneficial" (Couser 335) however, there exists a power imbalance in matters of race, age and skills of the partners. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy and authenticity of the information provided in the narrative, as Mustafa had the opportunity to review the work before publishing. The editor's prowess in anti-war activism led her to frame the story into a human rights narrative, asserting freedom and equality for the marginalised. Lamb has maintained the diction that resembles Mustafa's soap opera English which she learnt by watching the American TV series *Days of Our Lives*.

It can be seen that at times the collaborator, instead of speaking for Mustafa, speaks as her. The subject's own perception of disability, her intricate emotions related to living with a disabled body and the resistance towards social oppression are overlooked by the writer. This exclusion can be read as the strategy of the editor to make the Syrian refugee crisis the central motif of the memoir. Nonetheless, it must be assumed that the editor has not taken liberty in appropriating the life story without the consent of Mustafa and represented the subject the way she wanted, keeping her best interest in mind. Also, there were no "ethical violations" or "inequities" (Couser 338) that may have led to misrepresentation of the subject and harmed her reputation, privacy and integrity.

The emplotment of the narrative follows the "triumph over adversity" (4) and not over discrimination, as conventionally seen in disability memoirs (4). She affirms faith in her strength to overcome cerebral palsy with the physical independence she gained after relocating to Germany. She endeavours to fit into the new cultural environment and consequently integrate into the mainstream society. By claiming her space in the world, she moves to a position of greater power and agency.

The American literary critic, Fredric Jameson, in his essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," states that the texts produced from the third world nations are essentially "national allegories" (69) as they reflect the collective community experience and not just the individual destiny. The Syrian refugee crisis, as narrated in the memoir, represents a refugee experience in collectivity. Syrians who escaped the war and were displaced to other countries as refugees became a social group because of their shared experiences and reactions. The feeling of oneness with the group helped them to survive the mental trauma of solitary victimhood. This in turn created a solid relationship with other members of the group based on acknowledgement of the other's presence, treatment of them as equals and acceptance of the other as they are. In such an atmosphere, Mustafa was able to disclose her identity as the norms and rules of disability disappeared. Mustafa was noticed by others, and her skills were considered helpful and utilised by other group members due to this change of attitude. The otherwise shattered communities became one large community of refugees seeking a solution to the same issue. This naturally took away the significance of 'I' or the subjective experience of the author and replaced it with intersubjectivity. Mustafa became the voice of this newly formed group consciousness and her version of the war and refugee crisis of Syrians must be regarded as one of the authentic narratives of the actual events. Confined to a

structure, or a patterned arrangement, which limited her choices and opportunities, Mustafa gains agency by acting independently, as a free agent against the manner dictated by the social structure.

The writer assumes a sense of shared identity with the Jews during the Nazi-Germany rule while maintaining the uniqueness in her experience. The refugee camps were correlated with Nazi concentration camps to expose the brutality and reproach the oppressors. In this context, the narrative can be read as a relational narrative. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose three types of "textual others," historical, contingent and significant, who help the authors in the "formation or modification of self-consciousness" (86). One can notice that the narrative implicates the story of Anne Frank, a young victim of the Holocaust in Nazi-Germany who became known through her diary, recording the candid confessions of a young mind. The story of the historical other is implicitly hinted at in the narrative, which leaves it for the readers' postulation. The other here exists in the narrative without being directly addressed, but hypothetically identified with. The author does not name the other as she intends to project the uniqueness of her experience. The voice of contingent others appears at various parts of the text, for instance, the voice of the economically backward Syrian refugees whose experience of refugeefication differs from that of Mustafa's who tags herself and her family as the "five-star refugees" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 204). This set of people was not financially well off and did not have enough resources to restart their lives in the host countries, while refugees like Mustafa and family could afford their journey to the country of their choice, making the process of flight and resettlement different. Mustafa compares their style of living and the cultural arrangement, especially their marriages (arranged) and tries to explain and justify the system so that the readers would not misconstrue it as irrational and regressive. In this

light, the text resembles the feature of postcolonial texts that write back at the oppressors.

Refugeefication, for Mustafa, opened up new horizons from being housebound to a vagabond. A situation which could have been traumatic for an able-bodied person turned out to be therapeutic for Mustafa. Mustafa, who appears as a Kurd in the first part of her narrative, transforms her self-representation by identifying herself as a Syrian refugee in collectivity in the later part of the text. Her identity is fluid as it evolves by inculcating the factors of both individuality and collectivity. The transition of the self indicates that the narrator has subsumed new roles effortlessly. She achieved mental and physical liberty from the confines of her home and reached a place where she could utilise her skills and thereby reveal her inner self.

While narrating the escape, she reveals her desire to be 'normal' like others multiple times. Before her refugee status, Mustafa led a dual life, "smart on the inside, average on the outside" (Gill 362). She could not express her authentic self as her "spontaneous reactions" (362) may lead to mistreatment and may face the risk of being perceived as ungrateful. Her willingness to participate in the war and her eagerness to fight against the oppression were hidden within herself, as it was hopeless to reveal them. The contradiction between her public and private identities made her act as a different person outside. Thus, her disability became a performance she enacted in everyday life, based on the social norms, like gender and race. This obligation to act as a passive victim was achieved through the use of self-denial and renunciation of rights, which includes freedom of movement, speech and possession. The "helping behaviour" (361) was covered up by the pretention of being "weak, childlike, suffering and needy" (362), so that her "socially assigned identity" is not damaged (362).

The role of the refugee, though forcefully assigned to her, shattered the preconceived notions with which she was treated in her pre-refugee life. The refugee identity levelled the social hierarchies in Syria, integrating them into one coterie. The positive experience she had from the non-disabled people, who were "devoid of prejudice" and appreciated her efforts in adjusting to the crisis (Gill 368), during the journey helped her attain a view of herself as "whole and ordinary" (363). She could alter the central position that disability had in her self-identity. Refugeefication helped her to re-assess the stereotypical and socially devaluing norms and values that were imposed on her with negative attributions of disability.

Summation

Nujeen Mustafa brings out the traumatic experiences of the disabled individuals and the Syrian refugees crossing borders in her memoir. Upon analysing her work using the theoretical concepts of Schaffer and Smith, it is discerned that the text resembles a human rights discourse. By pointing out the violations of rights, Mustafa converts her personal testimony into a testament of the collective suffering of the Syrians displaced from their home country. Her work is a plea to the world to reconsider viewing refugees as statistical figures or numbers. By exemplifying her personal transformation from being a passive victim of social, cultural and political marginalisation to an empowered individual who can inform the readers, question the perpetrators and demand justice for the Syrians as a collective.

Mustafa, being a disabled refugee writer, balances her personal and political considerations to avoid the dangers of generalising and essentialising her experience. Through her recollections, she creates awareness about the stigmatised positioning of the disabled and the irrational discrimination against refugees. Her story is a public appeal from a minority space to reconsider the treatment of refugees who are caught

in a state of social dilemma and physical vulnerability. She shatters the misconceptions around disability by demonstrating how smart and articulate she is to the readers and challenges the age-old stereotypes used to marginalise disabled individuals. She effectively advocates for the human rights of refugees by addressing their issues and suggesting modifications in the existing policies.

Chapter IV

From Refugee to Rings: Examining Resistance and Resilience in Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly*

Introduction

Refugitude has affected individuals from multifarious spheres. Irrespective of class, communal and regional variations, war begot unfathomable loss to people. They are forced to flee their home country, predominantly due to two reasons: it is dangerous to live in a place where bombing or armed conflict may occur at any time and it is pointless to assume that war would end and they could escape from their entrapped state of limbo. This condition disables them from fighting back, helping the injured or leading a life of normalcy with soundness of mind. During such hard times, sports and games are looked upon as superfluous and wasted labour. Athletes in the war-ravaged areas face challenges to engage in systematic training to stay fit, maintain their performance capacity and balance their emotional and physical state of being. These athletes, when turned into refugees, are pushed to a state of betwixt and between. Their narratives express their irresolution in choosing adherence and devotion to their home country that they represented earlier in international platforms or resentment towards it for transmogrifying them into stateless derelicts.

Yusra Mardini is one such refugee athlete who had to flee from her home country, Syria, after the civil war that started in 2011. Mardini was born in Damascus to Mohammed Ezzat Mardini, a swimming coach and Mervat, a physiotherapist. Her father trained her and her sister, Sara, in swimming to compete in freestyle and butterfly stroke in regional tournaments. Being a Sunni Muslim, the majority sect in Syria, Mardini and her family lived a comfortable middle-class life, enjoying social

and mental support from kinfolk. It was when Mardini got selected to the National Team and began training for the international competitions that conflict arose in Syria, motivated by the Arab Spring, a political phenomenon in Middle Eastern countries like Egypt and Lebanon that led to the fall of their rulers. Following their decision to flee, Mardini and her sister Sara crossed the Syrian border to Turkey and from the Turkish coast to the Greek island of Lesbos. It was while crossing the Aegean Sea in an overcrowded dinghy that the unprecedented incident occurred that later gave Yusra and Sara a reputation as responsible refugees. The sisters, to save the people from the drowning dinghy, jumped overboard and swam, pulling the rope attached to the dinghy to the shore, utilising their swimming skills. The international media portrayed their act as heroic, making them celebrities overnight. This popularity created a pathway for Yusra to be the face of refugees, breaking the stereotype to compete in the Rio Olympics, 2016, as part of the Refugee Olympic Team.

Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian, My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph is Mardini's memoir that recounts the trials and tribulations of a Syrian refugee fleeing the conflict zone to seek refuge in the host country, Germany. The work is a response to the humanitarian crisis and human rights violations experienced by the displaced populace in Syria. Apart from the refugee-survival tale, the text is a perfervid exploration of an athlete's journey of conquering the limits with resilience and determination. By dealing with pressures, adapting to the new techniques and recovering from injuries, the athlete seeks to return to peak performance. The memoir, published in 2018, was co-authored by Josie Le Blond, a Berlin-based journalist and writer. Raising awareness and providing access to the necessary information for

survival, the text becomes an authoritative handbook for displaced refugees and asylum seekers.

Written by an athlete escaping a conflict zone, *Butterfly* attempts to balance her experiences as both a sportsperson and a refugee. The two conditional identities are juxtaposed in the narrative, the latter altering the subjective position of the former by inducing trauma that accompanies it. The text gives a nuanced insight into the refugee trauma, probing into the unexplored issues of sports and refugeefication that demand attention in the modern world. It interconnects the personal and the public to create meaning and build an image of the self. As the text deviates from the structure of a typical sports memoir to inculcate wider perspectives on the social aspects of war, displacement and resettlement, it needs to be read as a refugee jockography.

Jockography

Bryan Curtis, an American sports journalist, in his article "Capote at the Bat," published in the *New York Times* in 2007, coined the term 'jockography.' The term originated from the words 'jock,' which refers to an athlete who is active in his/her sport and 'graph,' meaning an illustration. In American pop culture, the term is used as a stereotype for a young, enthusiastic man who is primarily interested in sports rather than studies, enjoys privileges from the authorities and symbolises performative masculinity and the essential male ego. As a literary genre, it is as an autobiography/biography of an athlete or sports personality chronicling his/her personal and professional life. Jockographies highlight the athletes' sports achievements, pivotal performances that changed their careers and the challenges and pressures they faced both on and off the field. These texts are self-written or ghostwritten (collaborating with a professional writer/editor), depending on the writing prowess of the sports personality.

James W. Pipkin, American Professor, in his scholarly text on sports autobiographies, *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies* (2007), calls jockography an "authorized biography" (9). The professional writers or collaborators are predominantly responsible for the outcome or the contents in a jockography. They conduct interviews and discussions with the athletes, with which they create the narrative and submit it to them for additional input and requisite changes. However, the presence or contribution of this collaborator is often not disclosed in the text.

More often than not, elite athletes or those others who have achieved celebrity status in sports publish jockographies. Nevertheless, the genre has been used as a platform by individuals connected to sports other than athletes to articulate compelling stories on the field, like the controversies and scandals surrounding sports and behind-the-scenes details of the celebrated performances. The sports personalities use jockographies as a medium to clarify and confess to the readers and rehabilitate their tarnished image due to serious allegations. The genre encompasses various stages in an athlete's life, from discovering his/her passion at an early stage of life to achieving success as a proficient performer in sports. It unravels that part of the athlete not familiar to the public through the competitions and media-circulated stories. It tells the readers how the athlete experiences sports from inside, all the while "exposing," "sensationalizing" and "marketing" the self (Pipkin 2). Thus, the narrative is not only the "mechanical account of public events," "on-the-field accomplishments" and "facts and statistics" (Pipkin 2), but the interpretation of the personal experiences that reveal the truth of their lives.

In accordance with Pipkin's viewpoint, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, observe that jockographies might seem to reflect only the

celebrity sports players' experiences in "over-coming obstacles with reflections on sports culture, stardom, and finding a code of ethics for their subsequent careers" (163). However, they notice that these writings go beyond the boundaries of sports writing to become "a lens for cultural studies of personhood, everyday life, and public fantasy" (164). It traces the "trajectory of early hope, achievement, disillusionment, and distilled wisdom" of the athlete (163) and incorporates multiple "autobiographical templates" or "modes of storytelling" to expand its territory to inculcate broader discussions on socio-political issues. (163). Thus, they call it a hybrid genre that interweaves various styles, modes and techniques together. The writers may choose coming-of-age, conversion and overcoming-of-origins modes of narrative depending on their agenda. Phil Jackson, the American basketball player, incorporates elements of spiritual autobiography into his sports memoir *Sacred Hoops*. He "combines his story of coming of age in the rural West with observations on practising Taoist meditation as a useful discipline for basketball" (163). Sports memoirs may also help the writers to fulfil other intentions than sharing their life stories. For instance, Bill Bradley, the American basketball player, launched his political career with the publication of his memoir, *Life on the Run* (163).

Bryan Curtis notices a rigid pattern to which most jockographies adhere. It consists of three mandatory sections, beginning with the athlete's "most memorable play: a great catch, a walk-off, home run," (Curtis) followed by the childhood days where the athlete discovers his/her penchant in sports, the adversities faced and the liberation through sports, ending with the "rise to major league stardom," (Smith and Watson 272). This is achieved through detailing the "great moments that culminate in "that championship season"" (Pipkin 2). The most effective jockographies, according to Curtis, are the ones where the person reveals his/her inner life and provides

"dugout wisdom" and "eye-popping revelations" emerging from the optimised understanding and acquired awareness of life.

As mentioned earlier, jockographies consist of three sections corresponding to the three different phases in the athlete's life. However, as the text chosen for study, *Butterfly,* is written by Mardini, who is a refugee, it incontrovertibly embodies elements of a refugee narrative as well. Thus, the text becomes a refugee-jockography intertwining the themes of displacement and trauma to Mardini's journey in sports. The three phases are re-modelled as follows: 'the most memorable play' in an athlete's career, usually found as the prologue in sports memoirs, is replaced with the most challenging moment as a refugee who is crossing the Mediterranean Sea, for it represents not only Mardini's escape to freedom but also symbolises transformation from innocence to maturity and wisdom. In the second phase, Mardini merges her formative years of training and growth in sports with her memories of pre-war Syria, the war and the displacement. The third phase that corresponds to the athlete's 'rise to stardom' stage is modified as the resettlement stage, where Mardini redefines her life after trauma by navigating through refugeehood and a career in swimming in Germany. This intersection of the two distinct experiences helps the writer to bring broader discussions on socio-political issues surrounding the refugees, which adds depth and complexity to the narrative and expands its scope as a literary genre to motivate and enlighten the readers.

Butterfly as a Refugee Jockography

1. The most memorable play

As a refugee-jockographer, Mardini begins the memoir *in medias res*, narrating a part of the boat rescue story, the first climacteric in her life as a refugee

and a swimmer. Mardini's initial confusion, spontaneous planning and expeditious action seem like the customary steps in an athlete's performance. Thus, the most memorable play that typically constitutes the expository section of a jockography is replaced with the ordeal at sea where she and her sister, through expert teamwork work rescued Syrian refugees whose lives were at stake. Even though she could have narrated any of her achievements in sports as the opening of the memoir, she chose the refugee plight because she intends to highlight the central themes of her story, which are survival and hope. Her confession that she decided to jump-in though the waves were unfamiliar to her, indicates her bravery, a trait of a pro-athlete. She concludes, "We're Mardinis. And we swim," (*Butterfly* 2) asserting that she is best in what she does, also hinting to the readers about their family legacy in swimming and their choice of swimming as a career. Exhorting the sense of togetherness among refugees in crisis, the sisters' act of bravery breaks the stereotypical conviction of refugees as tactless and heedless.

Bryan Curtis points out that the initial anecdote in jockographies is a "defensive strategy" by the author to inform the readers what to expect further in the text and why the text should be considered worth reading. Mardini does not reveal the aftermath of the rescue operation, thereby keeping the readers intrigued by the outcome, though there is an assurance from the narrator that she would not let anyone else die on her watch. Titled 'The Boat,' the chapter is Mardini's testament on how sports saved her life. If not a swimmer, she could have drowned like other refugees in the overcrowded dinghy. It was the physical strength that she gained through years of practice that helped her in having self-assurance and poise to navigate through the challenge of swimming in the dark water that is "unlimited, wild, and unknowable" (*Butterfly* 2).

The opening scene in the text also performs the functions of a prologue. It not only reveals the central theme of the narrative but also foreshadows the events to come, like the larger struggles Mardini faces as a refugee. It also introduces the core characters like Yusra and her sister, Sara and sets the foundation for their roles as agents of social change in the narrative. It also creates an emotional connection with the readers who are invited to feel the terror, exhaustion and hope of that night, which lays the groundwork for empathy and understanding towards refugees, as they continue reading.

The moment described in this section marks the fundamental shift in the author's perception of swimming from a competitive sport to that of a life-saving skill. It altered her relationship with swimming and made her realise that sports are not just about winning medals and achieving records or any other personal achievements, but also about survival. This change in her perception is reflected in her attitude while swimming for the Olympics, narrated later in the text. Instead of winning, Mardini confesses that her focus was on representing the displaced refugees through her participation.

The sea in this part of the text becomes a metaphor for both survival and struggle. When Mardini jumps into the sea to save the people from drowning, she is reclaiming her agency, using her power to challenge fate. It is also a symbol of the suffering of Syrian refugees, representing the uncertainty and anxiety of forced migration. The crossing of the sea can also be seen as a symbolic act; it points to the transition of Mardini's identity from an ordinary Syrian girl to her rebirth as an exponent of refugee rights and a successful athlete in Germany.

The chapter also undertakes other thematic functions as well. It tells the readers what refugee groups consist of: "Mothers and their babies, old men and

women, strong young men" (*Butterfly* 1) and the predicament most of them face, which is death. It points out many of the human rights violations the refugees undergo, like the betrayal by the smugglers who give them damaged dinghies, the oppression by the regime that mercilessly made their life difficult in their home country and the attitude of host countries that force the refugees to migrate further. The section thus throws light on the plight of Syrian refugees trying to escape and tries to evoke sympathy in the readers to stop blaming the refugees for attempting to seek refuge in safer places while also drawing attention to the offences meted out to them.

2. Pre-refugee phase

The pre-refugee period in the memoir features Mardini's childhood in Syria as an athlete. The author allots only a brief section in the memoir to describe her childhood days and early life before the uprising in Syria. This part reads as a story of a naive girl who is familiar only with the safe and comfortable environment her country provided before the war and is ignorant of the harsh realities of the world outside. This younger self exudes an assurance of the inviolability of her home. Titled as 'The Spark', it revolves around Mardini's interactions, social, cultural and political, that shaped her personality apart from tracing the developmental stages of a swimmer with formal plot threads like the entry into swimming, her initial inspirations, achievements and father's influence in choosing it as a career. It resembles the chapters of a typical sports memoir where the athlete confesses his/her confusions and uncertainties, navigating through myths and truths they encounter about sports and life. The memories of Syria recounted by Mardini in this part of the text slowly take a traumatic turn with the arrival of the war. Though the text does not discuss in detail many of the factual data related to the country, the people and the catastrophe, it

dwells in understanding its effect or impact in personal, social and cultural spheres. The recollections by Mardini are analysed as memories of homeland and memories of war.

a) Memories of Homeland: De-bunking the Myth of Childhood and Non-Idealisation of Homeland

Gillian Whitlock, in her groundbreaking book *Autographs,* comments that those autobiographical writings compiled by persons from the marginalised groups, "who have not been authoritative or dominant," are more likely to be "a record of incursions of history and conflict rather than a pre-adolescent idyllic phase" (xxvi). In line with this perspective, Dana Schweizer, in the article "Lost Innocence: The Representation of Children in Literature of the Great War," opines that, in war-trauma narratives, children "exemplify grief and pointless loss" and "manifest the absence of hope" (Schweizer). A "significant part" of such discourses tries to capture "death, loss, and mourning of great magnitude for an entire generation" (Schweizer). Though there are criticisms that claim representation of children in war narratives is propaganda-driven, there is no question when it comes to the impact it had on their innocence. They are denied a "conventional childhood" to "take part in many duties surrounding the war" (Schweizer).

Mardini's narrative as a refugee chronicle counteracts the "mythologies of childhood" as ideal, innocent and happy (Douglas 41) by creating a "new emphases" (Douglas 4) underscoring the trauma of violence and displacement, the Syrian civil war inflicted on children and adolescents like her and her sisters. It emphasises that children are participants in the social rearrangement that occurs during the conflict and are victims of the hegemonic political order. From denying their right to

education to their right to live, the civil war enforced restrictions that curtailed children's freedom. Instead of acquiring life skills from school, her younger sister Shahed, who was confined to her home, learned how to differentiate between the shelling, bombing and missiles from the sound of the explosion. Though Mardini discusses her "engagement with the romantic trope of innocence," it soon turns to "ambiguity, challenging the "connotations of innocence" (qtd.in. Debrauwer). She shows readers that the early years of children in Syria were shaped by the trauma of war. They were forced to make life-or-death decisions to survive in the catastrophe.

The Australian professor, Kate Douglas, in her work *Contesting Childhood*: *Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*, notes that during the reminiscence on childhood in autobiographies, the narrators always point to their "firsts," like the "first word…first step…first day of school" and so on (23). They also elucidate on the occasions that shaped their "self-fashioned and socially constructed identities" like "birthdays, graduations, marriages" and "anniversaries" (Douglas 23). Though briefly mentioned, Mardini does not delve into such detailing of her memory. As the focus of the narrative is war and the refugee experience, these matters are given less significance. Thus, the writer restricts herself from elaborating on the biographical details to indulge in the traumatic remembering of the effect of war. Mardini's memoir, therefore, functions to question the "cultural function" of "autobiographies" as idealising childhood. By historicizing and politicising war, she adds a new attribute to the characteristics of a child growing up in conflict zones. She asks the readers to witness the difficulties and trauma of being a child caught in war (Douglas 19).

Non-Idealisation of the Homeland

Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* states that the migrant writers construct an imaginary version of their home countries that they lost through nostalgic

memories, as they cannot reclaim the real land. The memories, though fragmented, serve to establish their connection with the homeland and maintain a sense of belonging and continuity. These writers, observes Rushdie, are "haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated…which gives rise to profound uncertainties" (10). Their identity is "at once plural and partial" as they "straddle two cultures" and two nationalities (15). He also states that the migrant writers idealise the past and use memories as a way to survive the trauma of displacement and alienation in the new country. This idealisation can hinder the authentic representation of the country's past and can pose the threat of exclusionary nationalism.

Though certain aspects of Syria are portrayed vividly, Mardini narrates the pre-war Syria with a critical eye. She highlights the normalcy and stability in the pre-war Syria, like the depiction of the swimming practice, family gatherings and academic life. Syria is represented as a promising land where young athletes are trained to participate in international competitions, provided access to necessary resources and athletes like Mardini are encouraged to aim for the Olympics. The pre-war Syria is hailed for its significant place in history, beauty and heritage. For instance, she describes Damascus as follows,

> I'm glad to be here in Damascus. I'm proud of my city, one of the oldest capitals in the world. For centuries, it has been famous across the Arab world as a centre of culture and trade. The city has been the jewel of many empires…But for me, as for so many others, Damascus will always be the city of jasmine. The green vines dotted with white star-shaped flowers climb up every wall in the old town. They entwine above the narrow alleyways to form a heavenly scented canopy. (*Butterfly* 38-39).

However, she is critical of the gender constraints brought by the traditional cultural arrangement in Syria. She remembers that older female swimmers restrain themselves from their swimming careers "after they hit puberty" (*Butterfly* 12). Customarily, Muslim women are expected to wear *hijab* or modest clothing like a veil to cover their heads. Mardini stresses that though the modern Syrian youth like her and her sister are not forced to follow the Islamic customs and observe strict practices, their parents are questioned by the older generations regarding the appropriateness of young Muslim girls wearing swimsuits. Though Mardini could shatter these barriers to continue training in swimming, she expresses concern about Syrian Muslim women's ambitions that are curtailed by conventions.

Mardini's clarification regarding her choice of not wearing hijab and being a non-observant Muslim in Syria serves two purposes. Firstly, it breaks the misconception that the West typically holds about Muslim women in the Middle East as submissive and secondly, it informs the readers that her identity goes beyond her faith, as she wishes to be looked upon for her achievements in sports, the ethical values and principles she inherited and her progressive outlook towards life at large.

The gender constraints are evident in the familial spaces as well. Mardini's father, Ezzat, embodies the traits of a traditional patriarch who decides upon the course of his daughters' lives and careers. Though Mardini is thankful to her father for framing her career, she is uncertain about her father's decision to push Sara, her sister, into practising swimming even after she disclosed her disinterest and got injured during a competition. Additionally, they were devoid of the carefree and fun-filled childhood, of playing out and meeting up with friends, to not skip the training sessions in the evening or enjoy their favourite food, fearing weight gain. Although Mardini adapted to these, Sara rebelled against them as she enjoyed other activities

typical of a teenager. Sara was also questioned about the choice of her dress and her companionship with boys. Mardini's relationship with her father is thus marked with tensions emerging from an ideological conflict between tradition and modernity. Mardini resists this domination in subtle ways in an effort to assert her independence and agency, which is evident when Mardini decides to refrain from her swimming practice in the absence of her father and distract herself with the typical teenage diversions.

Noticeably, the writer negotiates the social expectations and her desire for independence by breaking free from them while maintaining respect for the cultural roots. Though her experience is different, Mardini speaks on behalf of other women in Syria whose cultural constraints affect their professional roles. She criticises the larger systemic issues in Syria that neglect women's ambitions in favour of the traditional religious norms. What constitutes her memory of pre-war Syria is the ambiguity that originates from the writer's duality in her approach to the representation of the homeland. She seems to be appreciating it at times, criticising at other times, emotionally attached at times and detached at other times. However, she strikes a balance between affection and assessment in her depiction of Syria. While she cherishes those facets of her homeland that shaped her identity and worldview, she is also candid about its drawbacks as a society, especially the gender inequality and political authoritarianism. Through the authentic representation of her country and its culture, Mardini rescues the narration of her memories of Syria from being over-idealised.

b) Memories of War

War is posited only as a background to her personal story and not as the central theme. Mardini focuses on war's impact on a personal level, that is, how it

affected her personal life. She describes the events related to war as a witness or a young civilian caught in conflict. Her narration consists of the spectatorial version of the war rather than a deep emotional interpretation of it. The impact of the war is implicated through the depiction of everyday life, like its interruption in school life, swimming practice and family gatherings. Mardini also refrains from holding up one's end and remains politically neutral. She does not offer an explicit critique of the Assad regime or the rebel group, two opposing parties fighting in the war. One could see the writer narrating the suffering of the Syrians, including the trauma of loss and fragmentation of safety, home and social unity, rather than accusing a particular party for the devastation. The narrative does not digress from its primary intent, which is to record the writer's transformative journey rather than providing a political commentary on war.

Mardini dwells in traumatic remembering while narrating her experiences of war. The memories of life under siege seem to be fragmented and incomplete. Mardini remembers selectively, highlighting certain aspects of Syria while downplaying certain others. This attests and validates Mardini's limited awareness of the political changes happening around her as a young girl. The political events that culminated in the uprising are narrated not as a cohesive or continuous concatenation but as a confusing, aperiodic and overwhelming set of episodes.

Inayat Ullah in "War Memory, Psychological Trauma, and Literary Witnessing" (2020) constitutes that narratives that revoke traumatic memories have the "capacity to augment history" (4) as they focus not on providing the statistical information on the lives lost, damage to the infrastructure, projecting the abuse and naming the perpetrators. It goes beyond to probe into "the minds of the victims, their sufferings" and "their post-conflict lives" (Ullah 4). *Butterfly* attempts to evoke

memories similarly related to war. The events narrated in the text are not a historical account of the conflict, chronicling its trajectory, but an illustration of its effect on the psyche of the survivors aimed at evoking empathy among the readers. Thus, the text functions to create a "metaphorical insight" (Ullah 4) through the portrayal of the life of the narrator. The readers get the idea about the impact of war from the incidents Mardini narrates, like the terrorist attack on their car, an uninformed search by guards at night, the bombing of the stadium where Mardini practices swimming, their constant shifting of houses and financial constraints. These events are not randomly selected to be part of the narrative but have been consciously chosen to unmask the oppressive ideologies that produce the incident, the violence involved in the warfare and disregard for human rights.

It can also be construed that the events Mardini chose to represent to be part of the memories of her homeland are those events that haunt her on a "continuous basis" (Ullah 5) as the survivor of trauma. Her unwillingness to dig deep into the incidents and its repercussions indicates the prevalence of the fear towards the tragedy that occurred in the past. Kali Tal, the American trauma studies expert in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, states that the survivor's mind does not record the events related to trauma in their actuality like a videotape but stores it as "mediated images, revisions and interpretations" (qtd.in Ullah 6). Thus, it is futile to search for accuracy of historicity in the works of the survivors. In the memoir, Mardini focuses on interpreting the events and what they meant for her on a personal level over the objective details that are usually seen in narratives of the past, like year, time and location. The fragmented nature of her impressions of the past reflects the working of trauma on her psyche.

While narrating the life under siege, especially an episode of living in an apartment in Muhajireen, a posh area in Damascus, the text deviates completely from the horrors of the war to a more casual tone. There is an emotional dissociation from the tragedy happening around the narrator. This deliberate digression is introduced to point out the changed emotional state of the narrator and other individuals around her as the bombing, shelling and killing became a normal occurrence, which they routinely encounter as it had lost its capability to create a state of shock and distress in them. This might also indicate the emotional numbness caused by trauma that prevented Mardini from remembering and experiencing the pain again. The narrator utilises this part of her narrative to discuss other aspects of her country hidden from the outside world, like the Syrian cuisine, apparel, streets and souks, lifestyle of modern Syrian youth, their social life and other ethnographic details. Such descriptions help not only to educate the readers but also serve to preserve the cultural memory and resist its erasure from the public memory.

3. Resettlement phase: Displacement as Disruption, Impact of Refugitude on Sports and Role of Media

In the third and final part of the jockography, the struggles and stipulations of an athlete's journey to victory and recognition are discussed. It is the stage where athletes attract international attention by winning matches on global platforms. There occurs a breakthrough performance that puts them on the map and achieves visibility through interviews, social media and news outlets. The media plays a major role in bringing popularity to these athletes and positioning them as heroes or celebrities. This, in turn, lets them secure sponsorships and endorsements, taking them to the status of 'elite athlete.' The narrative, as a refugee jockography, juxtaposes the

refugee and athletic experiences. It provides details of displacement or forced migration experiences that caused her mental injury, her resettlement in Germany, her experiences of participation in the Olympics and the eventual rise to fame as an advocate and ambassador of rights and equality. The impact of refugitude is portrayed in the memoir on individual and collective levels. On an individual level, Mardini discusses how it affected her career as a sports person and on a collective level, on Syrian refugees as a whole.

Displacement as Disruption: Collective Level

Athletes' memoirs recount their journey from fall to rise; a set pattern found normally in narratives of a similar nature. The fall or career break occurs due to their constant failures or physical injuries that interrupt their progress and performance. In *Butterfly*, displacement becomes the 'injury' as it broke the progression of Mardini's life and swimming career in Syria, compelling her to renounce her homeland, community and professional aspirations. When athletes are injured and they fail to perform well, they question their ability and identity as performers and competitors. Similarly, Mardini's displacement and escape from Syria affected her sense of stability and normalcy, pushing her to a state of limbo.

Displacement in the memoir is portrayed as a collective traumatic event, and therefore, Mardini employs the technique of collective remembering in narrating the memories related to it. According to Smith and Watson, "acts of remembering are relational, they are implicated in how people understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past" (26). They also point out that memory is inescapably an "intersubjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection of a past by a subject, but of recollection for another subject" (qtd.in Smith and Watson 26). Therefore, when the narrated 'I's identity as an individual transforms to that of a

refugee, there occurs a shift in what the 'I' stands for. It starts representing a collectivity that shares the common experiences of trauma. Thereafter, Mardini also discards the use of 'I' to replace it with a 'we' like "We wind on the road," (*Butterfly* 123) "We walk on in silence" (*Butterfly* 122) and "We survived" (*Butterfly* 118). The 'others' are constituted by the heterogeneous group of displaced Syrians from different walks of life. Mardini observes the fellow refugees closely, understanding their issues, evaluating their characteristics and lamenting on their collective plight.

According to Ullah, the feeling of solidarity with other victims makes the narrators forget their own predicament, and they narrate the trauma as secondary witnesses retelling what they have listened to from the victims. Mardini provides her take on certain incidents that already caught the attention of the public through media like the incident where refugees were held captive in Hotel Berlin in Budapest, the Austrian truck disaster where many refugees were killed getting trapped inside a truck while trying to escape and the tragic event of Alan Kurdi. These events are portrayed as part her own trauma or part of their shared trauma and not as random events. Mardini becomes an interlocutor who speaks on behalf of her Syrian refugees regarding the marginalization. She creates an imagined community of refugees through her narrative who are connected through the shared suffering of war and displacement. The sense of solidarity that Mardini achieved is visible in the narration of the boat-rescue incident. This episode marks her transition from a victim to that of a survivor. She intends to break the stereotypical understanding of refugees as passive and vulnerable and establish them as resilient subjects through her and Sara's act of bravery.

Though Mardini laments the loss of the pre-war peaceful life in Syria, she does not express a desire to return to her country. For her, Syria now exists only in

memory, whose characteristics are in sharp contrast to the present-day dilapidated country that she is only aware of through the media. She tries to establish a connection with the host country, Germany and its culture by learning the language, integrating within the host communities and encouraging and supporting other refugees to resettle and acculturate. Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* states that the displaced individuals who are "cut off from their roots, their land, their past" feel "an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (140-141). Here, it can be construed that Mardini, as an orient, is attracted towards the liberal and modern ideological and normative system followed in Germany. Though Mardini disapproves Germans' understanding of Syrians as backward and inferior, she does not oppose the image projected by Germany as saviour or protector of the refugees. She praises the facilities provided by Germany to the athletes and the gender equality and economic freedom that women enjoy there. In this context, the narrator contrasts present-day Syria and Germany as binary oppositions. However, Mardini does not completely disregard her country. She emphasizes the values, morality, and principles she acquired from Syria as the primary influence in building her personality.

In her recollection of life during resettlement, Mardini is torn between her loyalty to her home country and that of her host country. Though she is displaced from her country, she feels a deep emotional connection with Syria and her past life there before the war. At the same time, she feels a sense of gratitude towards Germany, which granted her asylum and provided a safe environment to restart her life and career in swimming. Thus, she navigates through these dual identities by maintaining a connection with her roots while embracing the new culture. The

narration of her participation in the Olympics as part of the Refugee Olympic Team reflects this dilemma. The ambivalence attains a balance when Mardini accepts the refugee tag and integrates it into her identity. Instead of identifying herself as a Syrian or German, she projects her self as a refugee who belongs nowhere and somewhere at the same time.

Impact of Refugitude on Sports

The Canadian Professors and experts in Kinesiology, Nicola J.Hodges and Joseph Baker, identify three stages in an athlete's development to expertise. The first stage is the early development stage that covers the "initial involvement in sports and physical activity" (38). In the memoir, this stage of Mardini's swimming career is characterised by the training she received from her father and her participation in the international competitions that won her medals in butterfly and freestyle strokes. The second phase is the intermediate development, where there is an "increase in specialization and investment in training" (38). For Mardini, this stage was interrupted by war and displacement. It is apparent that Mardini was entering the third stage, also called the "level of expertise," when she had to escape Syria in search of safety from violence. It is in this stage that the athlete focuses exclusively on "deliberate practice," delivering "world class performance" and "masters involvement" with "increased emphasis on endurance activities" (38). Though Mardini qualified to compete in the Rio Olympics, she could not deliver an expert-level performance due to her lack of training.

In a study made by CBS News, Boston, it is a common pattern in "great sports narratives" that "a player suffers a serious injury mid-game, one that debilitate most humans, then return to not only *keep playing* but play *well*" ("In-Game Performances by Injured Athletes"). It is common for athletes to get physical wounds, but for

Mardini, it was psychological, an aftermath of war trauma, more intense and collective as it affected the people around her, too. Though Mardini tried to restart the training that was suspended long ago, the threat of bombing and possible repercussions held her back. She recounts, "Death is random and ever present. It falls from the sky in the street, in midday traffic, without warning, then we dust ourselves off and carry on" (*Butterfly* 63). Thus, by the time she had to undergo expert skill training to achieve the highest-level performance in swimming, Mardini had to stop all kinds of activities related to swimming. The displacement and refugitude thwarted her training sessions, resulting in the decline of her physical fitness, including muscle atrophy and weight gain, loss of precision, timing, and coordination, leading to decreased motivation and confidence.

Janine Rose and others in the essay "Return to Play in Sports" notice that returning to sports before sufficient recovery exposes athletes to possible failure to attain set standards in performance. Mardini resumed swimming under Sven, her new swimming coach in Germany, and she realised that she had lost the power and flexibility of her muscles. Due to the lack of nutrition and workouts, she had become way behind other swimmers of her age group, disappointing the coach. Mardini also faced other issues, like the lack of bond or mutual understanding and coordination with her coach and exposure to new training methods like the two training sessions a day that she was unfamiliar with. She reveals that Sven was unsure of her capabilities as a swimmer initially and compares him with her father, who constantly challenged her with high standards and expectations to succeed.

Mardini confesses to experiencing survivor's guilt for having survived the dangers of war and displacement when other less fortunate fellow Syrians were still trapped in the country. She had psychological troubles like nightmares of being

caught inside the rubble in the bombing and a constant sense of alarm caused after receiving ceaseless tragic news on the Syrian's predicament. Consequently, she had to face the "negative effects" athletes endure, like the decline in performance and possibility of serious medical complications (qtd.in Rose et al.).

Role of Media

According to Pipkin, it is typical in sports memoirs that athletes talk about the contribution of the media in their lives as sportspeople. It is portrayed as a "double-edged sword" (23) that can either elevate them or demote them. Mardini, in her memoir, recounts that the media has played a crucial role in building her image as an athlete and pushing her to stardom. Media "reinforces the image of the athlete in a positive tone, not giving prominence to their "off-the-field" character" (Pipkin 23). Noticeably, in Mardini's case also the media coverage also brought her extra attention during the Olympic Games, as the representative of refugees all around the world. They portrayed her story as an extraordinary tale of survival and heroism. Framed as a human-interest narrative, Yusra's escape from Syria, her effort to save fellow refugees in the sinking boat by swimming for hours in the Aegean Sea, was circulated globally by international media to make the world aware of the refugee resilience. This popularity, in turn, helped her capture the attention of the Olympic committee, which was forming a team for the stateless athletes to spread the message of hope.

Mardini confesses that at times the media stories were exaggerated versions of the truth. She also felt overwhelmed and perplexed by their increasing interest in her story. However, Mardini was convinced that she could become a role model and inspire people caught in crisis to look forward to the future with hope only by sharing her story through the media. The media coverage of her appointment as the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador and the face of major refugee campaigns highlighted her role

as the spokesperson for refugees. The news value that Mardini's story had was that it was an incident of human rights violation and an instance of injustice that could resonate well with the audience. With the follow-up potential, the media covered her continued development from surviving to thriving, emotionally engaging the audience.

Changed Perception towards Sports

The final section in the text also highlights Mardini's changed perception towards sports. It is in this part of the narrative that she narrates her experiences of participating in the Olympics. By then, her understanding of swimming had evolved to that of an emblematic success or an instrument to reveal to the world that Syrian refugees are not passive victims, but rather empowered and resilient individuals. She uses the platform of the Olympics to share her story and athletic achievements to advocate for the rights of refugees. Sports, for her, transform from being a personal ambition to a means of survival and a mode of storytelling, representation, and activism.

Exploration of the Inner Self

Some athletes use their memoirs to raise their voice against the injustices in social, political and cultural spheres. In Pipkin's observation, a true jockography should go beyond speaking on the mechanical narration of the life events of the sportsperson to interpreting his/her inner life without the fear of judgment (2). The writers of jockography may also put forward certain ideologies they adhere to uncompromisingly. This crucial aspect makes a jockography an effective one and saves it from being a shallow rendition of an athlete's life events. Therefore, in

addition to the three phases of a jockography, the chapter will now analyse the other dimensions of Mardini's work that make it more insightful and relevant.

As a jockographer, Mardini redeems her narrative from being a "ludicrous performance art" (Curtis), an accusation Bryan Curtis imposes on new sports memoirs. He also notices that "pro-athletes have brutally repetitious, uninteresting lives, where even a "restless, questioning mind… has few outlets other than a play station" (Curtis). Contrary to this, Mardini opens up about her inner life within the cultural and social framework she is familiar with. She feels empowered by the choices she made, though they were risky ones.

Social Commentary

Besides the strokes and swims, it delves into the memoir is a social commentary on the Syrian refugee predicament. The narrator recounts the destructive war in Syria that dislocated the majority of its population to unknown and often unwelcoming territories. Mardini mourns the loss of home, holdings and history. As refugees, they followed the acute movement, which E.F. Kunz describes as the escape journey without planning to save one's life. Mardini and her group could not scheme their peregrination, falling into the traps of smugglers. She chronicles the routes covered and the borders crossed as a refugee, intricately depicting the woes and hardships they go through. She pinpoints countries like Hungary for their mistreatment of refugees, taking advantage of their ignorance of refugee rights. She also describes the fear of women refugees in revealing their identity as Muslim in European countries because of the hostile environment. They were instructed to "look European" (Butterfly 144) changing out of their *hijabs* and *abhayas,* affecting their religious sentiments. The physical hardships refugee mothers go through are even worse. Umm Muqtada, a Syrian mother of two, whom Mardini meets during the

journey, had to forget her own health and well-being for the protection and safety of her children with limited resources. Unaccompanied by men in her house, women like Muqtada undergo stress due to family separation, uncertainty and fear of detention.

As a refugee in Germany, Mardini had to “swallow her pride,” (Butterfly 195) adjusting in the *heim* (refugee camps) with donated clothes and charity, as she lived a comfortable life in Syria. She says that refugees have no choice but to live with the meagre funds allotted to them. She reminds the readers that a refugee needs to be reasonably well off at home if they need to successfully cross borders and pay smugglers. Mardini considers herself lucky to have money to travel, as a lack of finances could have made them end up in the refugee camps in “Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey” (197) where refugees are treated with hostility. She shows her gratitude towards Germans as she could experience their generosity and welcoming attitude towards refugees. Nevertheless, she also exposes their misconceptions by the West on refugees through narrating an incident where Sara encountered a German volunteer who believed that refugees come from primeval places with no technological advancements, lacking a decent standard of living. The German woman was surprised to know that Sara had a phone and used a laptop back in Syria. Mardini says that they had to do “lot of explaining” (198-199) about who they are as “Europeans are confused” (198) about the world they come from.

Mardini feels disappointed as her education is interrupted and she has to restart from ninth grade in Germany, even though she is 17. Though young children like her sister Shahed easily adapted to the new culture by learning German quickly, her parents found it difficult to acculturate. Without the linguistic expertise, it was difficult to find jobs, make friends and reach out to locals. In addition, the lack of social support provided by the extended family members for her mother and the

necessity to start all over to settle down with the new career as a life coach for her father made their resettlement process protracted. Mardini's family represents the condition of every refugee family in exile. Their wish to go back to Syria is bleak because of the unceasing war in Syria. The lack of agency, the inability to control their life course, puts them into greater psychological stress.

By pointing out the traumatic incidents faced by refugees, the memoir raises awareness of the Syrian refugee plight, bringing visibility to their authentic experiences. The memories Mardini recounts offer an emotional interpretation of the refugee experience as opposed to the objective/statistical facts on refugees provided by the media to the readers. By narrating these events, she makes sense of the overwhelming experience of war and displacement. One could notice abrupt transitions and interruptions in the narrative while describing the trauma. At various points in the narrative, Mardini's reflections on trauma, like her descriptions of survivor's guilt or witnessing of violence and death, are abruptly stopped, where the narrator shifts the focus to a different topic, suggesting that she finds it difficult to process certain emotions. The narrator also juxtaposes the moments of hope and victory with those of suffering induced by the complexities of displacement. For example, while describing her relief at settling in Germany, she reflects on the plight of her friends who could not make it to Germany and died on the way. Similarly, while describing her achievement of participating in the Olympics, she remembers the collective struggle of refugees who are trapped in camps, hopeless of a future. These instances reveal the psychological effect of trauma on Mardini, engrossing the readers in a similar state of disorientation and reinforcing the emotional connection with them.

Cultural Notions

Pipkin's study purports that in jockographies, "Athletes' experiences become not just a mirror of culture but a magnifying glass" (17). It "reverberates with broader social significance" (5) and represents "a social trend, a class of people, a generation" including "the private sphere, gender roles, and emotional life" (5). Just like any other life narratives, "the cultural pressures" shape the jockographer's "representation of personal and private life" (5). Hence, the key subjects in a jockography "body, childhood, and play" are "cultural constructions" (5). Reflecting a similar stance, Matt Taylor, Professor at the International Centre for Sport History and Culture, De Monfort University, in his article, "From Source to Subject: Sport, History and Autobiography" (2008) states that post-war sports autobiographies can be read as historical and cultural texts that record "social memory" (470). *Butterfly* is one such "active text" (470) that, according to Taylor, is "capable of producing reality" and has the "power to shape readers' perception of the world in which they live" (470).

In the narrative, one could see the narrator's cultural notions of femininity inscribed. Mardini's representation of modern Islamic women is different from the traditional notions of fragile womanhood. She projects a modern progressive version of female identity through the illustration of her life as a sports icon. She bravely sought asylum in Germany, as she did not wish to lead a normative life inside the rigid societal rules for women in Syria. Through her professional achievements in sports, along with her role as a refugee rights advocate and goodwill ambassador for UNHCR, she displayed her capability of handling multiple roles. Her ability to bring a global perspective to the refugee issues, having lived in different cultures, enabled the international agencies to leverage the right decisions on refugee rights violations, such as the issues related to border crossing, refugee camps and unlawful fingerprinting of refugees.

Pipkin's observations regarding the sports memoirs also point out that it is important to understand any "defining cultural trait," the athlete embodies (5). The Syrian's collective resistance towards dominance and their resilience in the face of adversities is reflected in Mardini's character. Her determination not only to survive but also to thrive in an alien country turns fruitful because of the traits she possesses. She also embodies the Syrian cultural values that foreground family. It is evident in her relationship with the family, especially her sister. Though the sisters go through different stages of agreement and disagreements in their relationship as siblings, they stand by each other whenever the other is in need. Her parents were supportive of her Olympic dream by allowing her to escape and find asylum in Germany and later following her to the new country, regardless of their comfort.

Mardini's narrative is framed as a Western archetypal heroic story that follows the pattern of fall, recovery and triumph. The war and conflict in Syria, followed by the resettlement and retraining in Germany to become an Olympian, mark the significant narrative junctures. The protagonists in such stories will highlight great power to overcome obstacles in their quest to find the meaning and purpose of life. They represent the common good and virtues in humanity and will always stand for the truth he/she believes. This also applies valid when matched with Mardini's characteristics as portrayed in the memoir. Instead of emphasizing Olympics participation as her individual achievement, she projects it as a collective accomplishment of refugees all around the world. This point towards her roots in community culture followed in Syria that gave her the ability to be thankful to the support extended by Syrian refugees caught at the camps, war-zones or host countries, looking for hope and to the team of swimming coaches for Olympics Sven and Ariel. Mardini is a true sports person who do not engage in sports for "utilitarian ends"

(Pipkin 22) like money and fame but for “self-expression” and “self-fulfillment” (22). She can “keep alive feelings of pure joy” (22) whenever she is in the pool, stroking her way ahead just the way it was when she was a child (23). The memoir is thus the celebration of her “love of the game” (22) that began in her childhood, which is evident from her words that the opportunity to swim in the Olympics is a “wonderful reality”, “gift to my six-year-old self: young and determined and idealistic” (*Butterfly* 273).

Pipkin points out that “the athlete constructs an identity through his or her body” (45). He says that an athlete’s body is the “center of his/her existence” (46). For Mardini, her body was a tool of expression. As an athlete, she could listen to her body and understand whether it is capable of performing or expressing itself. This was the reason for her doubt about victory in the matches she participated in after a long gap in training due to the refugee predicament. Mardini talks about the muscle memory that always aids her in performing well. While swimming, she connects with her inner spirit and escapes the “divorce between thought and feeling” that helps her to become her “child-self” that is “vital and dynamic” (26).

In the memoir, Mardini expresses her opinions on issues she faced in Germany as a newcomer. Though she knows that she bears the pressure of expressing gratitude towards the host country that granted her asylum, she reveals the initial confusion among refugees like her sister about the life they expected in Germany. She confesses that it was different from the idealised versions found in media representations. The life offered to them was difficult with the limited resources and the uncertainty in the authorities’ decision to grant them asylum or to retract it. The description of the thrilling survival journey of the Syrian refugees from the Syrian border to Germany, offering intrigue and suspense through the characters she meets on the road, the vivid

descriptions of her home in Syria and the landscapes she crosses during the journey have made the memoir all the more dramatic. She is also candid about her doubts, aspirations and visions, making her story resonate with the readers, especially the younger generation.

According to Smith and Watson, many of the athletes shape their narratives in such a way as to bring an effect of awe and inspiration in readers. The athletes are usually portrayed as heroic figures who hold "aspiration to transcend individual limits" (164). *Butterfly* is crafted in such a way that it provides moral and ethical lessons that resonate with the universal sentiments and aspirations. Mardini's commitment to creating awareness about the refugee crisis is evident throughout the memoir. Even while training for the Olympics, she was determined to spread her message by allotting time to speak to the media. The message requesting the world to treat them as humans and that through their lives they would inspire the world (*Butterfly* 269) is repeated several times in the memoir to reinforce the essence of it to the readers. One could see Mardini uncertain about the result in the Olympics as she knew her limitations, but clear about the particulars she wanted to convey. She blocks the possible allegation that the opportunity given to the refugee team was a charitable act by informing the readers that her mission was not the medal but the message.

According to Matt Taylor, jockographies are usually modelled as a "golden success story" or "ups and downs" narrative (479), the former "structured as a standard chronological progression through life and career" in which "the triumphant moment tends to act as both preface and climax of the book" (479) and the latter "characterized by oscillation between success and failure but without victorious conclusion" (479). However, as *Butterfly* is a text written reflecting the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, it is defined not merely by the stories of "moral development and

professional achievement" (480) of Mardini, but also by the dark realities war brings into the public and private spheres. It adopts the familiar pattern followed by the post-war sporting autobiographies beginning with "family background, childhood, and schooling, then develop a career in sport in early adulthood" (Taylor 481). Generally, such narratives focus on the "public activities and achievements of the author," (481) providing only limited space for the private life and relations. Whereas in the *Butterfly*, the private serves a "public purpose, with family life portrayed as providing the secure emotional platform" upon which Mardini builds her professional achievements. As the author was "relatively young, midway through a successful career," the memoir can also be described as a "career narrative," rather than a life story (Taylor 481-482).

Narrative Style and Language

The text follows a first-person narrative in chronological order of events from Mardini's childhood to her triumph as a refugee athlete at the age of 18. As the subtitle of the work, 'From Refugee to Olympian, My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph' implies, it contains three major parts significant in the life of the author. The author sets the scene for the upcoming crisis of refugees in the Aegean Sea in the preface while establishing herself as a refugee and a swimmer. The introductory chapters discuss her peaceful life before the war in Syria, including her early inspirations and entry into sports. It provides details of the uprising from the perspective of a teenager who is informed about it through her peers and social media. The author does not give prominence to the statistical figures rather puts down her subjective take on the issues happening around her. The tone in the narrative changes with the changing circumstances. Though the narrator begins with a positive tone, it soon changes to pessimism and scepticism, indicating the intrusion of chaos and

confusion in her life. The narrative gradually progresses to highlight the author's optimism and hope with the change of circumstances.

Unlike other jockographies that record the "post-retirement victory laps," (Curtis) the narrative contains only the "echoing green in an athlete's life" (Curtis) that is, the journey towards success and glory. The narrative stops with the subject's victory and remains incomplete with the scope for a sequel. As the author is young, there are fewer introspective insights that the author can provide the readers regarding her own life. However, the readers gain knowledge about the tricks and techniques in swimming from basics to professional, accounts of her training regimen and mental preparation, like visualisation in detail. The readers are introduced to the essential lifestyle of a swimmer and the struggles they face in balancing personal and professional life. She also briefs about the risk of injuries for athletes and the need to be mindful of it as it can put an end to their career. She could navigate through the two facets of her identity, refugeehood and athleticism, which may seem incompatible, successfully by willingly accepting the former as she is convinced that it is not a derogatory term but a name that indicates ordinary people who thrive in extraordinary situations.

As seen typically in jockographies, the author does not use literary adornments. The language is simple, informal and straightforward, intelligible to the majority of the readers. The text is careful not to patronise the readers as someone with no knowledge of sports. Instead, they are treated as companions with whom the author shares her experiences, giving the speech a natural tone. The memoir provides a realistic recording of the events, not deceiving the readers with false data. The memoir contains no dull areas that can imperil the attention of the readers. The author arranges the events in such a way that it keeps the excitement going until the end just

like watching a sports competition. Despite repeating the message of hope several times, it does not get a superfluous tone as the author explains its significance each time.

As a jockographer, Mardini prioritises action over reflection, a characteristic quality usually found in sports personalities. She uses the tactics of psychologically distancing herself from the emotional detriments that the outside environment can potentially have on her and exhibits practicality, leadership quality, detachment and determination to continue with life. Thus, she guards her narrative from being oversentimental, which creates a feeling of commiseration in the minds of readers. Instead, she intends to ignite them with motivation to fight and survive the ordeals of life, exemplifying the journey of refugees like her.

The text uses photographs that capture the moments connected with Mardini's refugee journey. It not only functions as visual evidences that document historical incidents described in the narrative, but also acts as a narrative tool aimed at evoking empathy in readers by visually representing the refugee plight. The photographs are strategically placed between the pages of the twelfth chapter, where Mardini narrates her escape through Hungary. The placing of photographs at this juncture must be a conscious act by the writer and editor, inviting the readers to pause, reflect and engage with the narrative on a deeper level. There are only two photos of Mardini of the pre-war period, which she claims to have "survived" during her escape. The lack of photos not only represents refugees' loss of materials and physical reminders of their former lives during displacement, but also their connection with the homeland, which was abruptly cut off due to war. The photos of Mardini's accomplishments, including the ones with eminent personalities like former American President Barack Obama, Pope Francis, and Queen Rania of Jordan, serve as tangible proof of Mardini's

success despite being a refugee. These photos also serve to redefine the refugee identity, challenge stereotypes and resonate the message of hope, which is the central objective of the narrative.

The act of swimming is highlighted as both a literal and a symbolic means of survival. In the course of the narrative, it becomes both a therapy for the narrator and a meditative practice to escape from the trauma of war and violence for the narrator. The Dutch psychiatrist, Bessel Van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014) states that controlled moments in sports counteract the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of trauma. The control over the physical moments of swimming gives her relieves her from the effect of the chaos of war. It is also portrayed as a detachment from the outside world. The style of swimming, with its repeated strokes and rhythm, is also reflected in the narrative pattern. The message that Mardini intends to convey is repeated several times in the text, emphasising its importance as a central motif of the text. The pace of storytelling is smooth and controlled while narrating the pre-war phase of her life, each chapter transitioning to the other like a swimmer moving ahead in the water with each stroke. Just like the sudden bursts of speed and motion especially during the final sprint while swimming, the narrative tone shifts to urgency with short sentences and vivid imagery while describing the escape journey crossing borders. For example, in one of the moments of escape, Mardini says, "My eyes flick open. My Muscles twinge as I shift onto my side…We made it across the barrier, across the sea. We're in Europe. And we're alive" (*Butterfly* 129). This narrative structure makes the text not just a tale about a swimmer but a discourse that impersonates sports itself.

The text is co-written with Josie Le Blond, a member of UNHCR who works for the cause of the refugees. According to Pipkin, the co-author or the ghost-writer is

one of the major factors in determining what the essence of the text as the author is a professional athlete and does not engage completely in the process of creating the text. They help the athletes "put their lives into context and perspective" (Pipkin 11). Thus, choosing the right collaborator is important for a jockographer. It is indisputable that the co-author of *Butterfly* has done justice to the cause Mardini stands for. Blond courageously breaks the boundaries of a sports narrative to inculcate the refugee experience of the author. She does not sensationalise any events that could tarnish the image of Mardini and carefully wraps Mardini's opinions on controversial topics with diplomacy.

Summation

Yusra Mardini remoulds the genre of jockography to create a hybrid genre of writing that combines dual perspectives on refugeefication and athleticism, two aspects of her identity. She reestablishes her identity as a refugee jockographer, an empowered version of her self, claiming agency. She saves her narrative from being a shallow and superficial rendition of the course of action related to her life as an athlete alone, by etching out the experiences of refugeefication on individual and collective levels. She becomes the voice of the silenced Syrian women refugees and athletes who are oppressed by the larger social system. She speaks with conviction while pointing out the refugee athletes' predicaments and persuades the readers to reconsider the oversimplified perception of refugees as passive and vulnerable. She challenges the stereotypical understanding of Muslim women as unassertive and obsequious by demonstrating her spirit and revolutionary vigour in fighting subjugation.

Sports in the narrative serve both thematic and narrative purposes. It is a means of integration into the host country and a form of meditation used by the author

to cure the psychological wounds. It also acts as a metaphor that stands for her struggle and perseverance. The butterfly stroke, which in itself is a demanding and difficult style of swimming, symbolises the physical power and emotional potency of Mardini. Rather than succumbing to the negative aspects of her refugee status, she embraces it and makes it her strength, portraying it as a factor that gave her purpose to progress and succeed in life. Thus, through the exemplification of her own life, she establishes the image of Syrian refugees as ones who are empowered. Her choice of storytelling, that is, amalgamating both sports and refugee discourses, enables her to position her self as a motivational figure and the refugee journey as a transformative one rather than an unfortunate event. She inspires readers to overcome adversities through consistent effort and thereby expands the readability and marketability of her narrative.

Chapter V

“Nothing but the Truth”: Analysing the Politics of Witnessing and Narrative Activism in *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek

Introduction

War disrupts a nation’s cultural, social and geographical spheres, resulting in a massive humanitarian crisis. It creates a unique condition where people who are affected by it unify and in collective, make sense of their predicament and integrate it into their group’s identity. The quintessential hero that emerges from the warfront becomes the central figure in the war narratives. His/her individual achievements are remembered and celebrated in history and literature. However, the presence of those others who suffered, like the soldiers who fought, the survivors of bombing or the volunteers who aided the wounded, remains forgotten. There is a tendency to essentialize their experiences and homogenise their diverse characteristics in mainstream narratives. Reconstructing history by inculcating distinctive voices of the marginalised can be a challenging task for the writers who choose to do it. Such pragmatic presentations are scripted in non-fictional accounts of the survivors. The communal adherence and resistance proclivity, the text subsumes, makes it a counter-hegemonic discourse, emblematizing the oppressed.

Samar Yazbek, a Syrian author and journalist, portrays the epic heroism of the unsung populace that survived the civil war in Syria in the memoir *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*. Yazbek flew to Paris following her banishment by the Syrian Government due to the anti-Assad sentiments in her reportage. To continue her role in the revolution that aimed at bringing down the regime from power and establishing democracy, she crosses the Turkish-Syrian

border to re-enter Syria. Yazbek, in one of her interviews, which was published in The *New York Times*, reveals that the decision to escape from Syria to France was taken as she was convinced that the safety of her daughter is jeopardized due to her political stand. Yazbek circumspectly veils her biographical details including her orientation, bearing and kindred in careful camouflage in the narration, apprehensive of the possible repercussions. Yazbek was born into an influential Alawite family but was unconventional in her approach to the conservative order her community followed. The iconoclastic ideology and the alliance with the non-Alawite communities influenced her to be part of the revolutionary movement in Syria led by the rebels.

The chapter aims to establish the narrative as a *testimonio*. It analyses Yazbek's role as a witness in narrating the experiences of war and displacement, representing the marginalised Syrians. This witnessing act is addressed to "other, real or imagined, with the possibility of response" (Smith and Watson 285). The *testimonio* goes beyond the description of trauma to suggest a "more humane, ethically informed future" (286). The narrative is not merely a personal story but a testimony that critiques larger social and cultural forces. Through the act of narrating the traumatic events, Yazbek intends to claim agency and affirms the "individual self in a collective mode" (282).

Testimonio

The exigency for the production of literary works by the subaltern groups was instigated by the inadequate and injudicious representation of these subjects in the mainstream discourses. The true stories of the struggle and survival can be brought out only when the oppressed speak directly to the listening public. Their narratives can rewrite history and rectify the fabrication and falsification of their image. As the narrator is part of the community, which he/she is speaking about, the text is surmised as authentic. These texts do not aim to reverse the knowledge embedded in public

consciousness but create awareness (Said 20). It is part of the pedagogical strategy by the writers to make the readers cognizant of the power politics, exhorting them to react.

Testimonio is a document that reveals the act of oppression as perceived by the victim. As the name suggests, a work of *testimonio* is the deposition of truth backed by evidence by the witness, as in a court of law. John Beverley, in his work, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004) describes *testimonio* as a "non-fictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative" (33). It is styled as "neo-picaresque" (Beverley 33) in its portrayal of the "situation of the narration" and the act of storytelling by the hero. But in content, *testimonios* express real events, unlike the fictionalised tales in the picaresque novels. In both genres, one could see a "powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject" (Beverley 34).

The narrator of *testimonio* testifies in first-person, "the problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives," where the situation "must be representative of a social class or group" (Beverley 33). This situation of narration must "involve an urgency to communicate" (32) the issues of "repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself' (32). It campaigns for social justice and "demands recognition, advocacy, responsibility and accountability" (Whitlock 203). These texts are situated at the margins of literature (Barnet 31) as they substantiate the subaltern reality and reinforce their movements of liberation. The function of a testimonial writer is similar to an epic hero (Beverley 33) who enters into a battle with the common enemy to save humanity. A testimonial narrator fights for the rights of the oppressed group in a real-life situation where the issue has not come to a satisfactory end. In a *testimonio,* the narrator or the "I" (34) is the voice of a person who speaks to the readers in direct address, demanding to be "recognized" and wants to "stake a claim" on their attention (34). *Testimonio* is

essentially democratic in its essence and egalitarian in its approach. It gives voice to the previously voiceless, the "collective popular-democratic subject" (36) or the people who are "excluded from direct literary expression" (35).

The history of *testimonio* can be traced back to the oral narratives of the early settlers of America. It acquired a written form through the Latin American slave narratives of the 1960s, like *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, the life story of Esteban Montejo. The work records the interview Miguel Barnet, a Cuban ethnographer, conducted with the Cuban plantation worker-fugitive Montejo, which was published in Spanish in 1966. The narrative style and ethnographic strategy employed by Barnet paved the way for the formation of *testimonios*. The genre acquired perfection and independent literary status through Latin American women's autobiographies that emerged out of the revolutionary space, like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), the autobiography of Guatemalan activist Menchú, who rewrote the social history of her indigenous community. The work was part of the political activism and resistance movement against colonial exploitation.

A *testimonio* achieves its fulfilment when it can trigger the readers' emotions and persuade them to act (Smith and Watson 282). They are entrusted with the role of secondary witnesses to the testimonies of historical trauma. As opposed to Freud's "empathetic listener" (Sutherland 96) who aids the narrator in the mourning process and healing, the listeners of *testimonio* are supposed to be actively responsive to the narrator's disclosure, claiming solidarity. Typically, the narrator writes in the midst of the struggle, which has not achieved its end. Hence, more than the outpouring of memories as in a typical autobiography, *testimonio* is structured as a non-fictional performative documentary mode narrative, ensuring the participation of the readers through direct addressing.

According to Beverley, a *testimonio* performs two main functions: first, is to provides a witness account to the group's oppression, and second, is to call for action from the readers. Based on Beverley's observation, the narrator in *The Crossing* navigates through the roles of a witness/observer and an activist/participant to perform the two functions. By acting as a witness, Yazbek provides evidence or proof of the acts of oppression, names the perpetrators and demands justice for it. Yazbek's role as an activist is to trigger reader's emotions not only to create empathy in them, but also to invite them to act for a collective cause.

Role as a Witness/Observant

Yazbek in *The Crossing* uses a schematic rendering of the events she encountered through the act of witnessing. When a writer speaks as a witness in his/her narrative, he/she performs an act similar to the witness's testimony in the court of law. Through this form of narration, the writer converts her text into a historical document that records the evidence of injustice a group faced at a given point in time. Anne Cubilié in *Women Witnessing Terror* defines it as a "complex political position" (202) that intervenes in the "totalitarian discourses" that have overpowered them as falsely claiming to be authentic history. She adds that witnessing is an "emerged performative act" where the spectator and object actively participate in making meaning (202).

H. Engdahl defines a witness as the one who was present at the event, saw it and could recall and tell other people about it (3). Yazbek's intention in crossing the border into Syria was to witness the chaos firsthand and convey it to readers as a journalist. She presents the distinct voices of Syrians through an objective rendition of events to maintain the credibility of the stories. Consequently, Yazbek builds trust with the readers whom she believes are misled by the media-circulated stories on

refugees and their plight. She narrates the incidents with the names of people and places accurately and reveals her political stand and other intentions in writing the memoir, thereby adding credibility to the text.

During her return, she witnesses her homeland transformed completely from what it was when she left. She fears that it might never recover from this tragic condition. She acquires a greater understanding of the people's issues through her visits. She tries to project the indifference of the government towards the pain and suffering of the ordinary people. Yazbek seems to be affected by the destruction of the historical monuments that gave meaning to people's cultural identity, lamenting the ignorance of the religious extremist groups. She drifts from her objective to subjective slants multiple times, pointing to the inconsistency in the mode of narration. The discontinuity of events and the invariable pauses in the text produce a lack of coherence that matches well with the shattered condition of Syria and the fragmented identities of the narrator. She introduces the readers to women from different sections of society, who have had varied degrees of loss in the war. While some of them were identified with their real names and backgrounds, others were deliberately portrayed anonymously in the text, pointing again to the incongruous narration.

By presenting herself as a witness, Yazbek claims to give out the truth of the matter on which the readers are invited to judge and proclaim a verdict. In the narration of the events, one could see that Yazbek intermingles with the victims to create a link of trust with them and provides a safe space where they could open up to her. She acts as a link between the Syrians caught in war and the outside world. She becomes a secondary witness while narrating the tales of other women, making it similar to hearsay in court. She grants "credence to the other's words" (Engdahl 3)

and questions those who have given out a completely different version of the happenings.

The war-trauma narratives are fragmentary and incomplete. The author is pessimistic, indecisive at times, intransigent, and optimistic at other times in the text. She does not try to achieve coherence and embraces the fragmentary nature of everything she is witnessing around her. She refutes the possibility of building a complete narrative and providing solid truths while narrating trauma. Her witnessing becomes subjective at times and fails to objectively correlate the events, as she cannot maintain a "journalistic distance" (Cubilié 204) that could help her view the victims of war as mere bodies. Instead, she feels rage and resentment towards the regime and empathises with the Syrians. She classifies the regime as 'them' and Syrians as 'us', declaring her solidarity with the war victims.

Yazbek shows the readers the actual war and its consequences on people. Through her narration, one could decipher the violent effect of war on the social life of the civilians. She makes the readers witness the everyday life of civilians who lead uncertain lives with fear. One can understand that the Syrians no longer lead a normal life. They confront death daily and cannot help each other due to the shortage of resources. They made the nearby mosques their shelters, as their homes were destroyed and were forced to be armed always to defend themselves. Women were worried that their children were growing up witnessing the barbaric scenes. Yazbek notes, "They didn't think about any big issues, they weren't interested in understanding the military situation or the political context; they had no space to think. All they could do was struggle to survive" (*The Crossing* 131). She captures their helpless condition, pointing to the readers' attention that they need help from the outside.

Anne Cubilié propounds that witnessing is not a "voyeuristic act" (203). It involves active participation of the viewer in witnessing the event or the object and then utilising the power of language to "effect change" (203). The writer must also be conscious of the ethical aspects while recording the events, considering the privacy and dignity of the subjects. The "ethically compromised" position (204) Yazbek takes up, being a witness, is to maintain the authenticity of the narrative. She witnesses the violence, bloodshed, the abuse, Syrians go through, speaking on their behalf, encapsulating their experiences.

Expression of Collective Trauma

Epistemologically, the knowledge proffered by the autobiographical spaces is characterised by the convergence of truth and belief as possessed by the author. It encompasses concrete evidence and abstract conceptualisations or generalisations, balanced out to provide a vivid portrayal of life. What makes *testimonio* different from an autobiography is the narrator's objective reflection on the life events with political implications. The testimonial narrative foregrounds the shared sensibility of a coterie and de-emphasises the personal perspective.

According to John Beverley, in *testimonio*, the author affirms the "individual self in collective mode" (35). The narrator speaks on a "problematic collective social situation" that represents a "social class or group" (Beverley 33) to which he/she either belongs or declares solidarity with. Here, the narrator of the text, Yazbek, speaks on behalf of the Syrians who suffer violence and displacement due to the civil war in Syria. Through the narrative, she represents the social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual disintegration of Syria due to the repercussions of war, the physical and psychological effect it had on what Beverley calls the "multitude" or the citizens (8) and the resistance enacted by the collective against the oppression.

The text delves into narrating the memories that represent the collective traumatic experiences of individuals, families and Syrian society. Collective trauma is a complex concept that interweaves intricate stories and contentious perspectives emerging out of the survivors' perceptions. The narrator chose witnessing as a style of expression, as it is a technique that can encompass the convolutions of varied emotional responses. The psychoanalysts, Ursula Koenig and Riemann, suggest that collective trauma must be analysed at two different levels, which are the "identity group level" (8) and the "society level" (8). Identity group level refers to the "traumatization" (8) that occurs among groups marked by age, class, caste, religion and ethnicity (8) while society level refers to the effect of trauma on societies, the unity among the members and the interaction with other societies. Yazbek narrates these events in a matter-of-fact style, providing the information without engaging in personal interpretations, allowing them to speak for themselves. She thereby tries to increase the 'truth effect' of her narration, creating a simulation of the real in her text.

i. Identity group level

Yazbek speaks on how the violence in the conflict affected two groups, women and men in Syria, who participated in the war in direct and indirect ways.

Women in Syria

Yazbek portrays the plight of different groups that suffered in the war, among which the trauma of women is given more textual space. The experience of women caught in war is varied and complex. War is generally perceived as a man's game where women serve as mere "victims, spectators, or prizes" (D'Amico 119). *The Crossing* explores the role of women who participated in the Civil War in varied ways. When Yazbek speaks about her experience in war, inculcating the voices of

other women, she “reclaim[s] an erased identity” to “claim an “authentic voice”” (D’Amico 119) and breaks the stereotypical representation of women, seen in typical war narratives dominated by the masculine/phallo-centric perspectives. While men fight in war with their presence in the forefront, women mark their participation from the background. Women exhibit resistance in multiple ways during the war. They survive the violence, protect their children, actively participate in the protest, engage in humanitarian aid and may take an extra step to document the catastrophic events and human rights violations as stories from collective corners of victimhood.

Yazbek introduces the readers to two kinds of women participating in the war, the traditionalists and the revolutionaries. The traditionalists support neither the regime nor the non-conformist rebels. Their political stand is neutral as they do not engage in the law-making process and have no proper political representation. They are what literary critic Spivak calls subalterns in their true essence. They are the ones who are most affected by the war, as its ultimate result does not change their existing social condition. They are victims who accept the plight as their fate and stay in Syria performing the conservative feminine roles. To Yazbek’s surprise, she witnessed these women continue to keep up with the social, religious and moral standards that were imposed on them before the war. They are afraid to embrace a new lifestyle that would let them decide and design the pattern of their lives, including their duties and responsibilities. They are doubly oppressed by the patriarchal and the political system. Yazbek refers to one such woman named Oum Mustafa, whom she meets in the underground cave of the Rabia village, where people sought safety from bombing. She is the second wife of her husband, who lives with his first wife and children in the opposite cave. She is pregnant with her ninth child and eats only one meal a day. Yazbek describes her children as barefoot with swollen stomachs, pale skin and

poorly clothed. Her daughter, who was sixteen years old, lost both her legs in a bombing. Women like Mustafa were helpless but felt responsible for the children's miserable condition.

Women managed with the limited resources available to them, maintaining their dilapidated shelters. They believed that Syria belonged to them and were not ready to give up the life they were familiar with. Yazbek is surprised at the sight of neatly kept households of Syrian women and the aroma of freshly cooked meals amidst the dust-filled air. It is seen that many women Yazbek met, courageously took up the central role in protecting the children from the threats of sexual abuse from the extremist groups by hiding them in the underground shelters. She also talks about mothers like Manal, her host Maysara's wife, who is psychologically affected due to the fear and anxiety of living amidst the violence. Yazbek argues that these women also participate in the war by maintaining their lifestyle. They continue with their everyday duties as wife and mother amidst the war. Though they are against the war, violence and destruction, they understand the need for fighting to defeat the regime. They are not ready to alter their ideologies and pretend to support the regime despite the threat. Though the regime could kill people, it could not destroy the revolutionary vigour and their yearning for the political transformation of Syria.

The traditionalists did not express their emotions explicitly. They are aware of the injustice meted on them and their loved ones. They also witness death routinely. Their muted state is the result of the helpless condition they are in. They are dragged into the crisis without their consent and made to suffer for no reason. Yazbek reveals that whatever the result of the war may be, these women will be the ones who will have actual losses rather than the two powerful sides fighting in the war. They cannot enjoy the victory on either side, nor can they lament the loss. They are caught in a

helpless state of existence where their presence is not valued. Yazbek could relate to their silence as she also chose the same unwillingly. She philosophically reflects on it, "Silence is an opportunity to give meaning to the things around us, to watch and reflect. It gives things the chance to express themselves; even if it is not without ambiguity, silence often creates the space for meaning to emerge" (*The Crossing* 49).

Though there is a popular opinion that war is a great equaliser, in Syria, it was not. Gender inequality and patriarchal norms still prevailed. Women were restricted from enjoying the social life and intermingling with men outside their community. Yazbek, too, had to abide by such pre-established norms during her visits to the battalion groups. Men and women sat in different rooms while having food. Women had to give up their jobs and take care of the chores at home when the war started. Yazbek's intention to start self-sustainable centres in Syria is based on her understanding that women trapped in the conflict of war should be first liberated from the repressive system. Through the New Woman Centres, she set the first step to transformation, empowering women at educational and economic levels.

The second category of women Yazbek discusses in the text is the one who actively participates in the war, not as militants but as volunteers/activists like Razan, who returned to Syria to restart her work for the revolution in the liberated areas. Activists like her express their opinions in public and extend their service to the rebels. They are professionals who actively show their strength as leaders and decision makers. They do not let the adversities the war brought into their lives affect their will. Like Yazbek, they aspire to contribute to rebuilding Syria into a new nation, expecting political reinstatement after the war. Yazbek, after returning to Syria, found women who share similar interests to Montaha and her sister Diaa, who, in their capacities, work to bring social stability. When Montaha provided shelter for

fifteen women and children, Diaa opened a temporary school to educate children and create networks of women who were able to teach these children.

Militants/Men in War

Literature has witnessed the creation of unforgettable war heroes at various periods of history. Historically, men were considered the violent gender, as masculinity was interpreted as ambitious, arrogant and strong. They were more likely to be “xenophobic” and “ethnocentric” than women and could “dehumanize outsiders” and “cooperate against external threats” (Ferguson S112). Men felt a pressure to live up to the expectations of maintaining the masculine role when they are called to participate in war. Taking into consideration the ancient cultural framework of war, there has always been a gender-segregation in war-related roles for men and women. War was considered a “male practice” and the glory it brought to the male fighters was enormous; it lasted for generations.

Yazbek thinks that the effect of war on men is a matter of importance as much as it is on women. Her portrayal of male militants who fight in the Syrian civil war diverges from the conventional war-hero stereotypes and reveals the actuality of what men who participate in war go through. Unlike women, men in Syria had to choose either to be a militant who fight on either side of the revolution or escape Syria to protect themselves and their families. The militants whom Yazbek introduces in the narratives are the ones who have joined the rebel group that fights for the cause of the revolution or the military defectors who left the regime’s army. Yazbek notices certain similar characteristics in them. They still followed the conventional system that provides gender roles to men and women. She remembers that when she was trying to cross the border, she was the only female in the group. She was expected to

"spell trouble and slow progress" (*The Crossing* 49) by the trafficker, as they could not believe that a woman had the physical capability like men.

Yazbek introduces the readers to men who do not try to fit into the masculine mould of courage and bravery and discloses their vulnerable side. Young rebel fighter Ahmed reveals that he fights because he has no other choice. Like other fighters, he feels like a "chess piece" or a "pawn" (*The Crossing* 149), under the control of someone else. He wishes to lead an ordinary life with his wife and children without getting involved in war and homicide. Others like Abu Nasser took up arms as part of his *jihad*, his "struggle for the sake of God" (149). Men like him were indoctrinated on the glorious martyrdom they would receive after killing and dying for their religious beliefs. Contrastingly, there were also men like the ISIS fighters, *Shabiha* or the secret police who were aggressive and violent. According to Yazbek, they lacked humanity as they killed and tortured people for pleasure.

Ordinary men like Abu Ibrahim and Maysara, who are Yazbek's hosts while visiting Syria, live with their families in their homes. They are unarmed and strive to protect their extended families living in the house when there is bombing and shelling. Yazbek notices that they send their wives and children to the underground shelter while they stay upstairs with the elderly in the house, courageously ready to face the ramifications. During the course of the events, it is seen that they escape with their family to Turkey as they were convinced that they could no longer protect their family in the escalating violence.

The narrator observes that while men's suffering is more visible, women's suffering is often unnoticed. They endure gender-based violence and patriarchal oppression while exposed to the threats of displacement and detention. Women who participate in the revolution also support their families, taking up multiple

responsibilities. Yazbek's portrayal of the war experiences of both men and women is contrasting. It can be observed that while men are involved in direct violence, women's suffering is internalised and invisible. By amplifying women's suffering, Yazbek makes her work a feminist testimony that resists the erasure of their experiences from history.

ii. Society-level

A society consists of a group of individuals who live in a specific geographical area, whose patterns of interactions constitute their relationship with each other and the outside world. These people also share the same political authority and experience the same cultural expectations, social hierarchies, and set of values that may be in contestation, conventions and codes of conduct. Marvin Harris, in his article titled "Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture" (1979) categorises social phenomena into "infrastructure, structure and superstructure" (Fergusson S114). Infrastructure covers the "demography," "physical environment," "technology" and "associated labor" (S114). Structure is "patterned social life" including "economics, social organization from kinship to class, and politics" (S115) and superstructure encompasses "belief and motivational systems" (S115).

In order to understand the impact of war on Syrian society, it is important to bring to the discussion the site of trauma and the nature of the society the author has lived and witnessed later in her return. Syria has a multi-cultural population that is in constant conflict about their status, position and acceptance in the public sphere. The majority is comprised of Sunni Muslims, while the Alawites, Christians and Kurds are the minorities. Though the number is less, Alawites are the most powerful in the social hierarchy as they hold the political power in Syria. Politically, Syria is under

the hegemonic dominance of the Ba'ath Party of the Alawites and its secret police. Socially, it adheres to the traditional values rooted in patriarchy.

The war in Syria affected the nationalistic ideals held by the public. They were bifurcated into anti-Assads and pro-Assads based on their political disposition. The idea of nationhood is different for the two groups. The anti-Assads wish to enjoy sovereignty and independence while valuing their national identity and holding loyalty and devotion towards the nation. With the beginning of the civil war, a sense of unity among the anti-Assad group emerged. They rejected the nationalistic ideology put forward by the regime and instead believed in forming a nation that allowed collective participation of the citizens in all spheres. They express loyalty and devotion to their home country, which they intend to rebuild in the future after the success of the revolution.

i. Infrastructure

During the bombings, the infrastructure of the country was affected considerably. Not only people's residences but also schools, hospitals and trade centres were destroyed, culminating in the damage of entire cities and towns. Yazbek witnesses places like Saraqeb, Homs, Damascus and Aleppo turned into a pile of rubble. The daily life of the citizens was hampered, as they could not carry on their routine work. The educational system was completely shut down, and there was no scope for leisure or entertainment for children. It created a psychological impact as they were engulfed with fear and anxiety, turning their active lives into torpid ones.

Marija Kulisic and Mirosslav Tudman, in the article "Monument as a Form of Collective Memory and Public Knowledge," state that historical monuments are "forms of collective memory and well-organised sets of messages that format public knowledge" (125) and targeting the cultural heritage is an attack on the communities

who consider them an essential part of their unique identity. The demolition of monuments also points to the breakdown of a country as a unified nation. It disrupts the continuity of collective memory, sense of the past and connection with the nation's history. They also postulate that collective cultural memory unites the people of a nation even though they belong to different social, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, its destruction causes a profound sense of loss and displacement.

Yazbek shows concern over the destruction of historical and religious monuments in Syria that were crucial to their cultural identity. She views it as the loss of their heritage that served as a link between Syria's past and present. It represented the country's ancient history that could educate future generations. According to Yazbek, these sites were deliberately attacked to tear down the cultural fabric in Syria and attack the shared heritage and cultural memory of the ethnic communities and thereby make them vulnerable. This loss caused them collective trauma due to their guilt of not protecting the sites from destruction and their awareness of the inability to reconstruct the site. Yazbek laments over it, for she considers it not only as a personal loss but also as a larger fragmentation and disintegration of her nation's identity and history.

The loss of one's shelter is also the loss of one's stability and security in life. The regime's bombing not only aimed at destroying the physical structures but also people's will to continue fighting against it. It affected the emotional sense of belonging to physical space that gave them stability. It disrupted cultural ties, the day-to-day life and their professions, causing disorientation in their personal well-being, creating fear and anxiety and breaking their belief in any chance of returning to Syria as they realised that the damage caused is irreparable.

ii. Structure

Structure in war determines "if and how scarcity develops into a casus belli, how allies and enemies are defined, and the processes leading to and through the war" (Fergusson S115). The memoir provides detailed descriptions of how war has torn the social fabric of Syria. The educational system in Syria came to a standstill as schools and universities were destroyed, making it impossible for students to continue their education. As a result, youngsters became unemployed and chose to work in the military to earn a living. Women who already did not enjoy an active social life were completely confined to their houses or the underground shelters with their children. Men were not allowed to continue with their professions, as they faced threats of bombing in the buildings where they worked. They were also always under the radar of the regime, disabling them from gathering and socialising.

As the economic system also collapsed, people in Syria had to look for odd jobs that did not fit their educational qualifications and expertise, leading them to be sceptical of the future. Yazbek notices that there was a scarcity of food, water, electricity and other necessary resources, which led to the flourishing of black markets that sold products at high costs. Due to the drastic loss of life, there occurred a shortage of labour force, leading to the deterioration of productivity. It also increased the number of women and children seeking jobs and occupying positions that were previously prohibited to them. Thus, there was a shift in the social roles.

When war hit Syria, people were displaced, infrastructure was destroyed, and there was economic downfall. The major change it brought about was the political polarisation among the majority and minority groups, leading to sectarian tensions and a lack of trust. The ethnic groups in Syria that lived in constant conflict had to choose between the regime and the rebels during the war. The polarisation was

encouraged by the regime, as it liked to give out a message to the opposition that surrendering to its rule was the only way to escape death and destruction. They were given only two options to continue in Syria, namely, supporting Assad or escaping Syria and living as refugees. Yazbek also notes that those refugees who escaped found it difficult to integrate into the new cultural fabric of a new nation. They were trapped in a liminal space in the refugee camps, confused and uncertain about their future.

As the political stability was lost, extremist groups entered and thrived in Syria, imposing strict rules on the citizens. *Fatwas* were imposed on those who went against such groups. People were oppressed from all corners. They became confused as to whom they should seek help from and against whom they should fight. The psycho-social issues also included people becoming ill at a young age, children becoming mute because of the mental shock, and young girls having hormonal imbalances that affected their health. Parents were afraid that their children were being raised in a hazardous environment. Therefore, there occurred a mass migration of people to the neighbouring country, Turkey and from there to European countries.

iii. Superstructure

The superstructure comprises the belief system in the society, both ideological and symbolic. In Syria, there was a religious revival among the populace with the progression of the war. Yazbek remembers that this transformation was the result of the arrival and setting up of the religious extremist groups that wanted to "build an Islamic Caliphate as a response to the excessive violence of the regime" (*The Crossing* 148 -149). People were convinced by the doctrine put forward by such groups that they would at least "be blessed in the life hereafter" (149), replacing their *Sufi*-like mentality or religious moderation with a *Salafist* one or "militancy and religious extremism" (149). They also counted on their children to carry forward their

mission in future. Thus, religion, which was a “social entity”, was altered to a “political one” in Syria (149). This significant conversion led to the “negation of civilian life” as “religion took control over the legal and the state” limiting the secular rights of people (149).

It is construed that Yazbek, like other ordinary citizens, did not prefer extremism in the functioning of society. She fears that the reluctance of people to work together for the sake of civil society will lead to the “total disintegration” of Syrian culture (*The Crossing* 150). Yazbek, who respects and believes in Islam, disdains the oppressive measures of the *jihadist* military battalions in the name of religion. She says that they were foreigners who crept into their land and exercised a monopoly over their social and religious rights inequitably. She contemptuously disregards the murdering of people whom the *jihadists* consider infidels and labels them as evil.

As per Joseph Henrich and others’ findings in the essay “War increases religiosity,” war strengthens people’s faith and adherence to religious order. The belief system evolves in such a way as to “specifically exploit the psychological states created by uncertainty and existential threats” (Henrich and others). From the narrative, it is clear that the war has not affected people’s faith in God. They believed that God would impart justice on them and whatever was happening was according to God’s will. They were too afraid to question God’s action. The women whom Yazbek meets in the basement chanted prayers during the shelling. According to Yazbek, it gave them the strength to witness the violence and death happening around them. It led them to seek “social connections” that enabled them to understand the other’s needs and “mutually aid” them during the time of crisis (Henrich and others).

Collective Identity

Yazbek's memoir comprises multiple voices of the displaced war victims of Syria, regarding a common concern. The Syrians collectively experienced violence, death and displacement due to the civil war. The collective experience of trauma provoked them to identify with each other, dissolving the communal differences and fostering cooperation and understanding. The narrator's representation of the traumatic memory indicates signs of a collective subjectivity, i.e. the narrative inculcates the shared view of war and refugeefication of Syrians as a whole rather than an individual interpretation. She entrusts herself with the role of a journalist/documentary writer who records the events with authenticity, reflecting on reality without any trace of fiction. One could see that the memoir is scripted without any literary ornamentations while preserving its journalistic report quality. The author expects a serious reading of her text as an alternate history highlighting the subordinate voices, which is evident from her purposeful act of covering up the tales of her personal life, unlike typical memoirs. The events narrated are to be perceived as genuine commentary from a witness who speaks the truth of the situation to the readers who are entrusted with the role of judges. According to Gilad Hirschberger, the reason why the narrators choose to be part of the collective is that the collective is a "symbolic structure that is greater and more enduring than the physical self" (7) that can survive over time.

Yazbek creates an "authentic documentation of the lives of "others" (Smith and Watson 157) to preserve collective memory and restrict its erasure from history. She performs the role of an ethnographer who is a "culturally bound observer" (157) who simultaneously functions as both a "cultural insider" and a "cultural observer" (158). She produces a "collectivized life story," which is a collage of stories and

experiences “randomly picked,” juxtaposing the past and the present “seeping back and forth…in a recursive dance” (158). She includes multiple modes of knowing like “oral histories, critical analysis and poetic engagement with metaphors of history and factoids,” (159) “shuttling between discourses of critical ethnography and first-person witnessing” (159). She thus engages in identity politics on behalf of victims to rectify the collective image of Syrians falsely represented in the dominant discourses.

Role as an Activist/Participant

According to John Beverley, *testimonio* views “literature as a form of social action” (84). It represents a “new sort of aesthetic agency in political struggles” (61). *Testimonio*, he adds, is a “literary form of revolutionary activism” (61) where the protagonist is caught in a struggle to reclaim human rights and initiate “social and cultural transformation” (61). The peculiarity of *testimonio* that makes it different from other forms of life narratives is that it not only encompasses recollections and reinterpretations of the past, but also takes it a step further by inviting the audience to be part of the social reform the writer is engaged in. Thus, the *testimonio* writer is involved in narrative activism.

Activism is a strenuous, often passionate act or campaign that seeks change in social, cultural or political spheres. It uses effective methods after analysing the problematic issue at hand to formulate methods, put them into action and achieve the end. It also involves the promotion of ideas, intervention on social issues and recommendation of policies. Narrative activism performs all these functions using literature as a tool. The writer uses appropriate narrative tools that evoke a particular kind of emotion in readers, highlighting the incidents of trauma and human rights violations, naming the perpetrators, challenging the dominant discourses and calling for people’s intervention.

Bill Moyers, in his book *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (2001) observes that an activist plays four roles while engaged in activism, which are the roles of citizen, rebel, change agent and reformer. Samar Yazbek performs the first role of a citizen, providing the witness account of the Syrians suffering and the country's devastation caused by the civil war. She acts as a 'rebel' by challenging the dominant mainstream form of narratives through her testimonio. Structurally, the narrative does not follow the traditional storytelling format. It begins in *medias res* or in the middle of an action, where the narrator is seen crossing a barbed wire in the Turkish-Syrian border. This highlights the urgency with which the narrator tries to convey the truth of the situation, resisting the literary or aesthetic conventions. The writer confesses openly to the readers about the fragmented nature of her narration, "Even as I recall these events, it seems impossible to write about them in any kind of sequence that makes sense. There's no way I can narrate this in any kind of order. There's nothing I can do but break up time" (*The Crossing* 14).

The narrative contains a pastiche of personal accounts of Syrians from varied walks of life. The stories are juxtaposed with one another, shifting from the author's personal experiences to those of others, blending the personal and the collective perspectives. The narrative thus highlights the stories of the civilians that are often discarded in the mainstream discourses. One could also note that while choosing the voices of the other to be shared, Yazbek is not biased. She gives equal importance to the experiences of women, men, militants, rebels and children without a hierarchical order. These views are at times complimenting and at other times conflicting with Yazbek's ideologies. Instead of providing her own judgment or view on these opinions, she leaves it for the readers' adjudication. There is also a sudden transition

from the past to the present and vice versa, with flashbacks inserted in between the narrative, disrupting its flow. This uncertain and fragmented nature of the narrative reflects the entrapment and the chaos in the physical world. Goutam Karmakar, in the article titled “Introduction: Literature, Activism and Transformative Learning,” (2004) postulates that translation also supports the narrative activism as “multi-authorship or collaborative literary creation is a method of challenging creative authority” and “singular interpretations” (104). As *The Crossing* is a translated work, with the contribution of the writer, editor and translators, it provides additional layers of meaning and perspectives, disrupting the dominant literary norms.

A ‘change agent’ is someone who works to create and promote alternatives and implement solutions. The agent ensures the participation of the citizens and engages them in acts of resistance, thus countering hegemonic power politics. Yazbek becomes an agent of change as she empowers the marginalised citizens in Syria through her writing, showcasing the women’s role in resisting oppression and rebuilding communities. The ‘New Women Centres’ that Yazbek started metaphorically represent the collective resistance from marginal spaces towards the social and political establishments in Syria. It is a counter-hegemonic construction through which Syrian women reclaimed their agency and dignity. The women who were brought into the centres broke off the traditional ties that had enchained them. They were obedient to the restrictions as they were not aware of the potentialities the outside world offered them. The collectivity they formed resembles a counter-social structure with Utopian qualities, where women helped each other to grow and flourish. The traditionalists transitioned to counter-hegemonic actions only collectively. Thus, in the collaborative environment, they created and took up each

other's purpose to escape patriarchal oppression, empower themselves, and strive for the common goal of engaging in the social struggle for equality.

Narrative activism achieves its end only when the narrator can evoke emotions in the readers that motivate them to take action. Karmakar observes that postcolonial writers especially from the marginalized spaces use their literary works not only as a tool to ascertain their empowered identity, but also to shift the readers' attention to a group's suffering, exposing them to a world of injustice and inequality, and reminding them about the "potential role" they could play to effect "transformative changes" (101). He refers to Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's concept of 'praxis' that suggests that people can come together in dialogue not just to share knowledge but also for action, reflection and transformation. Karmakar establishes that literary activism is based on the assumption that the readers hold the "ability to engage in critical thinking… that involves… careful reading and observation, experience, and reasoning beyond the text" (102).

Samar Yazbek motivates the readers to participate in the collective action for social justice in various ways. She evokes empathy in readers through repeated comparison of pre-war and wartime Syria. For instance, she describes the town of Reyhanli, in Syria, as "once a flourishing place of growth and construction," now a "site of ruin and destruction" (*The Crossing* 44-45). She also reflects on the transformation of Syrians with the war as "lost and displaced (46), caught in the "limbo between life and after-life" (45). These emotive observations are intended to engage the readers in the vivid experiences of war. Yazbek points out the instances of war crimes in Syria where the regime bombs the civilian houses and tortures the innocents. She also critiques the inaction of the international agencies and media that could affect changes in the current political situation in Syria. She reminds the readers

of what the inaction from the responsible corners has brought the country to. She says, “The world merely watches on – apart from embroidering and sensationalizing the contrived spectacle of the war” (272).

The narrator’s belief in ‘praxis’ or the power of people to bring change is evident throughout the narrative. She cites her own actions as examples, like setting up the women's centres, and thereby calls the readers to perform similar actions that can bring change or help the victims of war. John Beverley’s idea that the testimonial writer speaks with a tone of urgency holds here. As the narrator of the memoir, she highlights the need for immediate intervention as things are getting worse in her country. She reminds the readers that Syria cannot be brought back to its original state, as it has already been devastated to the core. So, they must preserve what is remaining, including its people, urgently, so that it wouldn’t be annihilated.

The readers are made secondary witnesses who observe, along with Yazbek, the atrocities of war. They are given the task to read, understand and act. She shares the collective emotions of the Syrians as a confidant and places them in a position where they cannot claim ignorance. She establishes trust with the readers by sharing with them her inner emotions, including her fear, insecurities and helplessness. She also claims that she authentically portrays the suffering of the Syrians, extends solidarity to them and inspires the readers as well to do the same. There is no gender segregation while narrating the plight of the Syrians, insisting that the war affected people from all walks equally. She universalises the suffering by describing it as the “overwhelming proof of humanity’s moral fall from grace” (*The Crossing* 275).

A Tool to Heal

Apart from the acts of witnessing and narrative activism, the text also acts as a narrative tool for speaking for the self to heal from the traumatic wounds of exile and displacement.

Exile

It is important to understand the motive behind Yazbek's return to her home country, disregarding the possible threats to her life. By expressing her unwillingness to let go of her sense of belonging to her country after refugeedom, she reveals the self as part of the collective Syrian conscience that constitutes the essential refugee experience. Edward Said in "Reflections on Exile" defines such a state experienced by the displaced as "exile journey" (145). This condition insists the individuals' "right to refuse to belong" to a "triumphant ideology" (141) of the host country as a means to fix their distorted self. Yazbek finds an alternative way to reestablish her connection with her home country by crossing the border to Syria so that she can physically be in her country. Yazbek is unwilling to acculturate into the new country, as she prefers to preserve the 'syrianness' in her. To justify this act, which can be misconstrued by readers as supercilious, she projects the dissimilarity "eccentrically" (Said 144). She contrasts peaceful Paris with the chaotic present-day Syria while admitting that she prefers the chaos, as silence has become anomalous to her.

Yazbek restricts herself from providing the readers with a glimpse of her life in exile. She finds it difficult to speak about anything other than Syria. She deviates from the usual format of refugee writing that centres on the memories of the writer's past. Her memoir does not encompass the melancholic remembrance of lost home or the estrangement in the host country. Rather than dwelling on the feeling of rootlessness, she discovers the possibility of technology in reestablishing the

connection with her home country. She insists that new-age exiles do not lament the lost land, as they are capable of being digitally present in their country. "…exile no longer entailed such an intense sense of loss of identity as it had before the emergence of the Internet" (*The Crossing* 270).

Yazbek is a "cosmopolitan exile," (Said 139) one who navigates through multiple transnational identities. Unlike other refugees who had to wait for a long period to be granted asylum by the host countries, she was offered shelter in Paris by the French Government even before she decided to flee. She also suits the definition because she was economically capable of resettling in a new country with refugee status and was able to return to Syria whenever she wanted to. Said notes, "Paris may be a capital famous for cosmopolitan exiles, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable "loneliness"" (140). It must be from this loneliness that Yazbek must be trying to escape through her crossings. Therefore, Yazbek's escape from Syria cannot be seen as an escape, but an unwilling, temporary sidestep she took before her return. Psychologically, she is positioned in the "perilous territory of non-belonging" (141) due to her unwillingness to dissociate with the old identity.

Liminal Existence

One could see that Yazbek holds a deep connection with her homeland and struggles to adapt to the new culture of the host country. This inner conflict in her created a feeling of guilt and responsibility towards her home country that she had left behind. She crossed back to Syria to get involved in the revolution and deal with her unfulfilled motives. In addition, her sense of identity is rooted in the culture, language and traditions of her homeland; as a result, she is hesitant to learn French and follow the new traditions. She confesses that she has not tried to acculturate with the hope that she could return and resettle in Syria in the future.

Yazbek's existence as a refugee is in a space of liminality. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* defines this state as an area of threshold or a space of in-betweenness where cultural meanings are created and negotiated. Bhabha states that the postcolonial subjects inhabit a liminal space, situated between polarised identities like black/white and upper/lower. These subjects try to escape from their identity as 'colonized' and move towards the identity of the white man, but have failed to attain it. Thus, they are caught in an in-between state of uncertainty, instability and disorder. This liminal space is an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Easthope 145). Refugees are liminal characters whose existence is not in 'this or that' space but in the precincts and passages of transition between such spaces.

Liminality is reflected at three different levels in the narrative, namely, physical, emotional and narrative. On a physical level, Yazbek is constantly on the move between her home and back to France. Her efforts to resettle in Syria are futile due to the increasing violence and political anarchy in the country. However, as an activist who holds a vision for a rebuilt Syria, Yazbek fails to cut her ties to her home country, as her goal is still unattained. She considers France only as a temporary abode, a shelter to escape the persecution in Syria. She is unable to claim either of these spaces as fully hers. Therefore, Yazbek's existence is on the border between Syria and France, a threshold that embodies her liminality. Secondly, on an emotional level, Yazbek occupies an ambiguous position of being a displaced person and a restored position and as a member of the Alawite community and a rebel or supporter of the non-Alawite community. Her identity does not completely align with any faction. She is caught between despair and hope, feeling a sense of belonging and non-belonging to her home all at once.

On a narrative level, the crossings she makes are symbols of her in-between state as she refuses to detach from her home country while living as a refugee. This condition leads to conflicted loyalties where she feels confused about which country or people she should be obliged to. This dilemma encourages her to cross borders, face dangerous predicaments, claim authority over the physical land and retain the emotional connection with it. As a narrator, Yazbek shifts between her position as an insider, who has intimate knowledge of Syria, can empathise with the citizens there and work towards the success of the revolution, and as an outsider who provides an objective rendition of the events of war she witnesses, addressing the global audience.

Rhetorical Strategies

The American Professor, Kimberley Nance, in her work, *Can Literature Promote Justice?* notices a "methodological folly" (22) that critics commit while analysing *testimonio*s. They consider the testimonial texts as lacking literary quality, as they are born out of urgency and the speaker is usually an ordinary person, not self-conscious about the style and incapable of writing professionally. Thus, they take into consideration only the social and political aspects of the *testimonio,* disregarding the narrative techniques. Nance contends that the "artlessness" (22) in *testimonios* is a strategy intentionally employed by the testimonial writers to convince the readers that it was born out of "immediate memory and emotion" (20). The writers, she adds, are "self-aware" and" mediated" (20). They have "persuasive skills (21) with which they "consciously shape" their self-narrative. The narrative operates with "familiar types and motifs, frame sequences, and formulaic repetition" (21).

As a *testimonio* writer, Yazbek does not deviate from this *modus operandi*. Though she is a literary writer having experience in writing and publishing novels and non-fictional accounts, she skillfully shapes the narrative as a work that was created

due to the exigency to speak of the injustice Syrians are facing due to the war. She produces it with the intention of influencing "the social flow of events" (Nance 20). The narrative is composed of "plain speech" (22) that gives the perception that she wrote it without literary awareness. It provides the point of view of ordinary people in Syria who are helplessly witnessing the cataclysmic course of action that has affected their quotidian lives. These people also value justice so highly that they are ready to question and fight against acts of injustice despite the threats. Yazbek is ready to invest property, time and her life for the cause of social justice in her home country (16). Nance feels that the "textual descriptions of injustice," "under the right circumstances" can motivate action (16). Thus, the text, with its portrayal of the plight of Syrians and their fight for survival, can trigger readers who are caught in similar situations, feel the need to react to ensure that justice is carried out.

Unlike typical *testimonios*, Yazbek's work was published in her mother tongue, Arabic, apart from the translated versions in English and European languages. She evidently wants her writing to circulate in her home country as an act of resistance towards the hegemonic power structures that oppress the reactionary voices. She is aware that publishing in Western languages guarantees wider recognition of the Syrian problems and varied degrees of reactions from responsible quarters.

Testimonios are generally compiled by what Beverley in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004) calls an interlocutor, as the narrators are not professional writers capable of encrypting their oral stories (32). The role of the interlocutor is crucial as it contributes to the "truth effect" (33) of the work. They might interfere and contribute at any or all stages of the production of a *testimonio* from recording, transcription, editing, translating and publishing. They are usually intellectuals,

journalists or writers who empathise with the narrator's condition and are willing to work along with him/her in the effort to bring social justice.

Yazbek is a "collaborative writer" (7) as per Nance's categorisation of *testimonio* writers. She collaborates with the translators Nashwa Gowanlock and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp to recreate her narrative in English. *Testimonios* are compiled by those who need assistance from outside, a professional hand that can understand the cause and empathetically work with the speaker in the development of the testimonial project. Thus, the role of the interlocutor or translator is crucial in a *testimonio*. However, the text hides the presence of these collaborators and presents the ideas as spoken by the primary author. There is also no central character or protagonist in the text. The voice of Yazbek is one among "many contesting voices" (Nance 35). She projects the subaltern voices that are silenced by the dominant powers.

The narrative is what Beverly calls a "polyphonic *testimonio*" (34) made up of the stories of "different participants" (34) in the war. It consists of ordinary men, women and children who are mere victims who do not understand the need for war, militants from different sides who fight aimlessly, rebels who expect to win someday and establish democracy in Syria and activists like Yazbek who work tirelessly to help the victims of war. These stories provide different perspectives on the effect of war. Yazbek provides "powerful textual affirmation" (Beverly 34) through words that confirm, support, uplift and empathise with the victims of war, reassuring their hope for survival. She praises the Syrians, whose perseverance and strength enabled them to claim Syria as their home without escaping to a foreign land and did not give up on their belief in the revolution. They are presented to the readers as liberal, permissive and resilient to the atrocities. She also applauds the great sense of justice they possess, as they continue to fight against the regime without worrying about the end. She seeks

attention and recognition from the readers and shows a desire "not to be silenced or defeated… to impose oneself on an institution of power…from the position of the excluded or the marginal" (Beverly 35).

Lost in Translation?

Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* suggests that though translation is often criticised for its inability to maintain the context and intent of the original text, it is not completely ineffectual. He states that it views the text through different cultural and linguistic lenses and provides multiple layers of interpretation. He calls it a kind of reinterpretation and re-invention that does not depreciate the content of the original text, instead enhancing it by expanding its possibilities, allowing new interpretations. In narratives of the refugees/migrants, it creates hybrid identities that help in fostering global understanding and dialogue. Rushdie also states that translation enables the exchange of ideas and values across linguistic and cultural boundaries and thereby facilitates cross-cultural interaction.

To do justice to the original text and stay true to its real intent, the translators use certain techniques. Nashwa Gowanlock and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, the translators, retain certain words in Arabic without translating them, like '*iftar'* (meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan)*,* '*khimar'* (veil) and '*iddah'* (period of mourning) to preserve the cultural authenticity. Some words like *hijab* and *fatwas* are not translated as these words are commonly used in media and familiar to the international audience. Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, the co-translator of the memoir states in a personal interview that, to ensure that the Arabic words do not disrupt the flow of reading, the translators used what is called 'stealth gloss' - a brief word or two of explanation, subtly inserted along with the Arabic word. For example, *mukhabharat*, the intelligence services, *shabiha*, the secret police and *Nasara*, the Christians.

Additionally, the text also contains an Appendix containing a brief note on the cultural background of Syria, especially the two sects, Alawites and Sunnis and a glossary of the Arabic terms with their meanings attached to the end of the narrative. Retaining the Arabic words is also intended to engage the readers more into the text as they would explore the unfamiliar words and their meaning, and thereby create a collaborative learning situation.

The Middle Eastern background of the translators has also helped in interpreting the cultural references specific to Syria, as used by Yazbek in the text. Working closely with Samar Yazbek has enabled them to save the translation from possible misrepresentations and offensive religious contexts that can lead to readers misunderstanding the context and meaning of the actual text. Translating to English, according to Ahmedzai, has made the text accessible to a wider audience and amplified the plight of marginalised voices of Syria on a global platform. Thus, it can be firmly stated that the work is not 'lost' but 'found' in translation as it contributed to revivifying the revolutionary vigour that could enkindle action and insight.

Deliberative *Testimonio*

Nance categorises three kinds of rhetorical strategies used in *testimonios,* namely "Forensic," "Epideictic" and "Deliberative" (23). Forensic speech asks decision makers or readers to judge past actions as just or unjust and uses the means of "accusation" and "defense" (23). Epideictic is addressed to spectators. It presents actions as noble or shameful and uses the means of "praise" or "blame" (23). The deliberative mode of speech asks decision makers to undertake future action. Its means are "persuasion" and "dissuasion" (Nance 23). *The Crossing* clearly makes use of a deliberative style of rhetoric, as the primary goal of the author is to induce readers to act "in favor of social justice" (Nance 31). Instead of concentrating on

unravelling the truth and denouncing the lies of the past, Yazbek narrates only the present state of affairs and its impact on the Syrians to the readers, expecting future action. The readers are not mere spectators but active witnesses just like the narrator. Instead of addressing the oppressor and blaming them for the issues as in the epideictic model, Yazbek directly addresses the readers who are entrusted with the role of partners with "responsibility for action" (28).

The text does not rely on facts like "specific names, dates, locations, and time" (27) to get at the truth. Yazbek reveals her difficulty in recalling such information accurately. She also does not adhere to the strict chronological order of events. Rather, she frames the story as realistic, recording the events as she remembers them. But it does not affect the credibility of the author as she has already established a rapport with the readers, revealing her true intentions. The trauma Yazbek experienced due to the displacement and loss of home is reflected in the random sequencing of the events in the memoir. She does not prioritise any incidents, and there is no development of characters. Thus, the fragmented memory caused the incoherent arrangement of the events in the narrative. In the memoir, one could see the "interplay between factual and fictional, between aesthetic aspirations to literariness and scientific claims to objectivity," (qtd.in Nance 33) making the concept of truth in the text "far less straightforward than had been assumed" (33).

The deliberative style allows room for admitting the author's limitations, including her doubts and uncertainties. The speakers "admit that they may be wrong, expect that they will not win anytime soon, and suspect at times that they may not win at all" (Nance 38). Though she believes in the cause of the revolution, Yazbek is uncertain about the outcome of the war after her three visits to Syria from Paris. As the country is partially destroyed and people are completely displaced, she realises the

difficulty of reconstructing the country in the future. The people have also lost faith in the revolution as they witnessed the regime's brutality against those who stood against them. However, Yazbek still does not feel that the people's choice to revolt against an oppressive government was wrong. She justifies their decisions and invites the readers "to join them in a Pascalian wager" on the future of their country (Nance 38).

Through self-critiquing and owning up to the errors she has committed, Yazbek continues the radical tradition of deliberative *testimonio*. She feels disappointed for not staying back in Syria and cowardly fleeing to safety when her fellow citizens were fighting to stay alive. She considers this act a craven abdication of her moral duties as a human. Due to this, she was not able to assimilate into the new culture and make Paris her new home. She became caught in a transition state of an insider and an outsider simultaneously. She also confesses her inability to bring a sensible cohesion to the narrative. She discloses that she is "unsettled" by the "recurring vision of dismemberment" (*The Crossing* 43). Because of the dilemma she is caught in, unsure of her future in a foreign country, she prefers to "live nowhere, without borders to define" her (44).

The narrative is a mix of several events without a beginning or an end. The breaks and pauses denote her inability to capture the "sense of foreboding" (*The Crossing* 43) in the eyes of others whom she encounters. The title of the memoir metaphorically indicates Yazbek's state of living in the crossing not able to pass through the psychological border of the refugeedom and accept the life the host country has offered her. She has built a psychological wall that prevents her psyche from going out of Syria despite her physical absence.

The "profound skepticism" and "self-criticism" in the text are paired with its opposites "dedication and faith" (Nance 38) at times. Yazbek's faith in the revolution

and her determination to bring women forward to empower them with essential skills needed to survive unveil the optimistic traces in the narrative. This assemblage of inconsistent claims is a "rhetorical move" (Nance 37) typical of deliberative texts. The writer is "insistent and candid in acknowledging errors, contradiction, and dissent" within her own ranks (Nance 36). She includes in the memoir different truth claims, often contesting, from distinct corners with the intention of providing the readers the opportunity to interpret and judge from their own perspective. Thus, the narrative expects from the readers more "critical thinking and action" (Nance 38) than passive reaction.

Summation

The text is the author's effort to provide an authentic picture of war-torn Syria for the readers to understand. She invites them to be part of the crisis, empathise with the victims and take action against injustice. According to George Yudice, this provides an "ideological satisfaction" to the author whose "pragmatic intervention" (18) could rewrite the events to be made part of the history and save the entire community from misinterpretations arising from the false portrayals in the mainstream hegemonic discourses. Focusing on collectivity and not individuality, Yazbek establishes her solidarity with the war-affected Syrians and becomes an agent of their experience rather than a representative. She renounces her affiliations with the powerful Alawite community to embrace the subaltern position and be part of the shared scheme to overthrow the tyrannical rule of the regime.

The narrator establishes her identity as a '*testimonialista*,' a term used by George Yudice to refer to the narrator of a testimonio, who exposes the oppressive acts of the Assad's regime through her narrative space and claims agency and power. She takes up the role of a first-hand eyewitness who testifies to the realities she encounters during her

visits to Syria. Through discursive re-enactment of war and violence, the text calls the readers into action, expecting them to interfere in the revolution that aims at thwarting the oppression of Syrians and ensuring their empowerment. She focuses on both the sites of trauma and the interpretation of the traumatic events. The text assumes the readers as secondary witnesses who "feel an ethical imperative to read and circulate" (Smith and Watson 286) the stories of the oppressed and as sympathetic listeners who are willing to help the writer from the "psychic isolation that traumatic experience produces" (286).

Unwilling to acculturate into France and unable to return and resettle in Syria, Yazbek is caught in a state of dilemma and psychologically exists in a liminal space. Her crossings symbolise this liminality or the in-between state she is in. She navigates between the dual identities of being an insider and an outsider while visiting Syria. The 'crossing' in the title not only indicates Yazbek's crossing of the Syrian border but the perilous journey of Syrians as a collective who cross international boundaries to save their lives. The crossing is also an act through which Yazbek rejects the authority and control of the regime over her that restricts her freedom of speech. She visits Syria to witness and record what she witnesses, thereby breaking the silence and resisting the subjugation. Thus, the return to Syria for Yazbek also ensures empowerment, agency and social justice.

Chapter VI

Summation

The Syrian refugee narratives enact a complex politics of narrating witness to violence, radical suffering under a tyrannical regime and displacement from the home country. These texts are projects that capture and preserve the memories of the historical struggles "to relocate and make a life abound," advocating "compassion and resettlement across borders" (Smith and Watson 254). They raise complex questions about identity, trauma and visibility and call attention to the constraints of institutional settings, power politics and protocols that subjugate the refugee populace. These stories "intervene in the public sphere, contesting social norms, exposing the fictions of official history, and promoting resistance beyond the provenance of the story within and beyond the borders of the nation" (Schaffer and Smith 4).

The four life narratives analysed in this thesis namely, *Dear World* written by Bana Alabed, a child refugee, *The Girl from Aleppo* by Nujeen Mustafa, a disabled refugee, *Butterfly* by Yusra Mardini, a refugee athlete and *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek, a refugee returnee, are the ones produced by Syrian women who were displaced from their home countries due to the internal conflicts in Syria and the civil war that began in 2011. The works were written while they were resettling in the host country, uncertain about the future and published between the years 2015 to 2018. Thus, their stories are significant segments of the unfinished history of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter two of the thesis titled "Personal as Political: Examining Activism and Advocacy in Bana Alabed's *Dear World*" exemplifies Bana's memoir as an

autobiographical manifesto, drawing on Sidonie Smith's six concepts of women's manifesto writing outlined in "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics" and establishes that the identity she tries to project is that of a manifesto maker, one who asserts her empowered self and demands global accountability for the Syrian conflict. This chapter also highlights Alabed's agency in shaping global refugee discourse while disrupting adult-centred refugee narratives. As a typical autobiographical manifesto, the text deviates from the traditional mode of storytelling by bringing in multiple perspectives on war and displacement and thereby contests the sovereignty of the dominant hegemonic discourses. It also brings to light the Syrian war victims' marginalised experiences and announces publicly the political undertones of their private experiences. The narrators perform their non-conformist identities deviating from the fixed identifications of women, mother and child to that of activists, spokespersons and agents who speak for the collective victims of the war and envision a future for a rebuilt Syria.

The third chapter, titled "Beyond Trauma: Disability, Displacement and Human Rights in Nujeen Mustafa's *The Girl from Aleppo"* establishes the memoir as a human rights narrative as theorised by Schaffer and Smith in the work *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition.* By projecting the trauma faced by her as a disabled person and a refugee, the writer points to the human rights violation that serves to elicit empathy, mobilize action and recommends inclusion of the marginalised subjects. It is discerned that the identity Mustafa tries to project is that of a human rights activist who directs the reader's attention to the failure of the social system to address the particular needs of the disabled and refugees as denial of basic human rights. She reclaims control over how her story is told and understood by refusing the refugee label and actively shaping her unique identity as an advocate of

human rights. She highlights the shared humanity with readers by requesting them to consider her as a human and not as a "statistical figure or number" (Mustafa).

The fourth chapter, titled "From Refugee to Rings: Examining Resistance and Resilience in Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly*" argues that Mardini's text is a refugee jockography borrowing from James W. Pipkin's theoretical notions on jockographies proposed in his work *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies*. The chapter establishes that the text reconfigures the genre of jockography to inculcate both the athletic and refugee experiences of the narrator and thereby moulds it into a hybrid mode of storytelling. It takes into consideration three stages of jockography as proposed by Pipkin and analyses how the narrator alters each of these stages to trace the trajectory of her athletic journey disrupted by the Syrian civil war and refugeefication while presenting a gendered criticism on the cultural marginalisation and normative ideologies, providing a social commentary. Through this style of writing, Mardini projects her identity to that of a refugee jockographer who speaks for the collective concerns of the Syrian refugees whose dreams and aspirations are impaired by the war and displacement.

The fifth chapter titled "Nothing but the Truth": Analysing the Politics of Witnessing and Narrative Activism in *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek attempts to prove that Yazbek's memoir acts as a *testimonio* that provides a firsthand eye witness account on the plight of Syrians caught in the violence of the civil war with the theoretical backing of John Beverley's postulations on the nature of testimonio presented in his work *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. The chapter analyses Yazbek's roles as a witness who returns to Syria to record the factual information of the devastation in her country and as an activist who attempts to bring change to the existing condition of Syrians by calling for intervention by the readers through her

narrative. The identity she puts forth is that of a *testimonialista*, one who speaks for the collective marginalised group and empowers them through her actions. In this regard, her text is found to be revolutionary and transgressive, challenging the oppressive powers that try to subvert the voices from the margins.

The autobiographies of Syrian refugee women transcend the traditional functions of autobiographies as a tool of reminiscence to that of a medium of identity reconstruction, resistance and activism. Through reframing history and recollecting trauma, these narratives highlight the marginalised experiences of an oppressed collective and challenge the stereotyped representations in dominant hegemonic discourses. The study utilises autobiographical theories propounded by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, to recognise the autobiographical narrative frameworks of the texts, and it argues that these frameworks indeed shape the writers' identities.

Identity Reconstruction

The memoirs engage with different autobiographical genres that shape how each author reimagines their identity. Bana Alabed, by employing the manifesto format, reconstructs her identity as an engaged, politically aware individual, demonstrating that refugee children can be active participants in shaping their futures. Through the human rights narrative, Mustafa re-establishes her identity not just as a refugee, but as a disability rights advocate, challenging multiple layers of marginalisation. Through refugee jockography, Mardini proves that her identity goes beyond victimhood, demonstrating that being a refugee does not limit personal ambition or success. Using testimonio, Yazbek confronts her dual existence of being a witness (insider) and an activist (participant), moving in and out of Syria, but emerges

as a revolutionary figure who raises her voice for the Syrian war victims to whom she claims solidarity.

By narrating their individual stories, the writers act for a common cause that is rooted in larger human merit. However, the narrators have used different means to achieve their ends. Alabed declares and reaffirms, Mustafa exposes and questions, Mardini motivates and challenges, while Yazbek performs and persuades. Although in these narratives, the individual experiences are in focus, they are designed to reflect the broader themes of social, cultural and political issues of the refugees. It can be construed that the intention of the writers plays a crucial role in constructing their narratives, especially what they chose to emphasise and the larger messages they intend to convey.

From the analysis of the four texts, it is understood that the writers want to project to their readers what they are beyond the 'refugee' title. Their relation with this status is found problematic as they are seen accepting it, rejecting it or being indifferent towards it at different junctures in their narratives, pointing towards the contradictoriness in the texts. For instance, Nujeen Mustafa is completely intolerant of the 'refugee' label conferred on her, as she believes it dehumanises her. She expresses her dissatisfaction with addressing the Syrians as statistical data or numbers while insisting on viewing them as humans. However, Mustafa's attitude towards the state of refugeefication is different. She describes it as an adventurous journey to be retold to future generations. For her, the escape from Syria was also an escape from conformity to the four walls of her house and the conservative thinking and practices, which are part of the Syrian cultural fabric.

Contrary to this, Yusra Mardini accepts and affirms her refugee identity by providing an altered definition to it. Instead, as a victim, she recommends viewing

refugees as empowered individuals who survived hardships through their extraordinary willpower, courage and resilience. But she portrays the refugee journey of crossing international borders as tormenting and horrifying. Unlike Mustafa and Mardini, Samar Yazbek does not identify herself as a refugee in her *testimonio*. She presents herself as a Syrian who is displaced, trying to find a way back. For her, it is a temporary state. Bana Alabed and Fatemah Alabed seem to be indifferent towards the label 'refugee'. The refugee issue is not projected as the primary motif in their narrative. The writers implicitly refer to their refugee status, but do not seem to accept or reject it.

Resistance

Apart from dealing with the questions of identity, the four autobiographical genres enable the writers to enact resistance. They reject the conventional modes of storytelling by bringing in unconventional, often transgressive styles of narration. For instance, the manifesto by Alabed brings in dual voices of mother and daughter, simultaneously providing dual perspectives on war. The narrators resist the culturally sanctioned identities; Fatemah, by making motherhood a tool of activism and Bana, by challenging the dominant myths of childhood. The human rights narrative by Mustafa highlights the traumatic experiences that are marginalised in the mainstream discourses. The text also disrupts the ableist perceptions that consider disability as a limitation by exemplifying Mustafa's transformation as an advocate and activist after refugeefication. The refugee jockography by Mardini challenges the conventional narrative modes by blending multiple genres of refugee narrative with sports writing to bring out the two aspects of the writer's identity. Yazbek's *testimonio* similarly follows a non-linear patter of moving back and forth between different time lines to provide a pastiche of fragmented memories. Thus, it can be construed these texts

reframe the discourse on forced migration by resisting the structured storytelling found in Western discourses on displacement.

The four texts challenge the authority of a single author who focuses on narrating his/her personal story, typically seen in the hegemonic discourses by engaging in a "life-narrative project of communal self-representation" (Smith and Watson 177). Their narratives have a collective dimension to them, be it collective identities or collective remembering; they all make "testimonial calls on behalf of the collectivity" of Syrians and "conform individual narratives to a "master" script in ways that erase their particular differences" (293). The autobiographical genres taken up by the writers are essentially narrative styles that support and enable the representation of identity as collective. Be it *testimonio*, rights narrative, manifesto or refugee jockography, all of these narrative modes emphasise the voices of the marginalised groups and provide power to the agent who speaks on their behalf.

The usual narrative pattern found in Syrian refugee narratives is war-flight-resettlement, the three important stages in the Syrian refugees' escape journey. The works taken up for study follow this pattern, except for *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek. This testimonial writing is a fragment of memory that constitutes her experiences of returning to Syria on three different occasions. Unlike the other three narratives that begin with the writers' reminiscence on pre-war Syria and their undisturbed lives in it, Yazbek's memoir begins in the midst of chaos, both internal and external, that corresponds to the mental turmoil of the narrator and the anarchic condition in the country. The linear pattern of the journey from home country to host country is replaced with the return from host country to home country and back. She provides a layered narrative with multiple timelines where past and present intersect. Most prominently, the memoir as a *testimonio* differs from other narratives as a

collective tale where the focus is on the distinct voices of the victims of the regime's oppression and not the personal story of the author.

Noticeably, Yazbek's text also deviates from the normative structure, as it does not include photographs for its illustrative or referential purposes. The story is narrated verbally without the help of other mediums, which depicts a dissonant story that could be read against the narrated story. Unlike the other writers, she encourages the readers to visualise the story narrated by her. It could be because of the fact that Yazbek is a professional writer and can bring emotional depth to the narration through her literary prowess. It also enables the writer to protect the identities of those people and places she encountered and can avoid the risks of retaliation from the regime.

Narrative Activism

The Syrian refugee women narratives deviate from the dominant patterns found in the refugee/migrant narratives in its objective to carry out activism through the act of writing. This can be seen as a third function in addition to its other two purposes, which are identity reconstruction and resistance. Apart from the refugee ordeal, the narratives have attempted to reinforce "the heroism of the single individual saying "no" to power and resisting a regime with integrity and purpose" (Smith and Watson 293). All four texts have brought out the reasons for the subjugation of the refugees and have identified the regime as the perpetrator. In detail, they describe the political oppression, persecution, social and economic repression and the overall systemic injustices. They have humanised the refugee crisis through their personal tales that encourage the readers to see the refugees as individuals like them with the same emotions, desires, dreams and hopes. They counteract the dehumanising labels on refugees found in the dominant discourses, including media platforms, by reinventing new definitions for them and engaging in in-depth discussions on the

complex refugee experiences. They prove that no label can capture the entirety of their experience and potential. They invite the readers to participate in their struggle for justice. *Dear World* by Bana Alabed lists certain recommendations that can be implemented by the readers for the betterment of the refugee crisis in their country. Similarly, Mardini's memoir recommends perceiving refugees as ordinary people with dignity. Thus, by questioning, challenging, asserting, amplifying and calling the readers for action and intervention, the texts become a space of narrative activism.

The overarching aspect of protestation against oppression is visible in all the narratives. The narrators denounce their marginalised positioning and are seen soliciting support and solidarity from the readers for an imminent political strife. The narratives are evoked in such a way that they move the readers empathetically. These texts are inherently political as they confront the issues related to borders, policies, rights, and comment on the oppressive actions by the perpetrators. The study establishes that their writing is an extension of the revolutionary movement by the Syrian refugee women in fighting back the regime's oppressive measures to silence them, as it has enabled them to find voice, initiate dialogue, share ideas, extend solidarity and claim agency.

Collaborative Writing

The three memoirs *Dear World*, *Butterfly* and *The Girl from Aleppo* are collaborative life writings where the writers have sought the help from an editor who also acts as an investigator and therefore interviews and assembles a narrative. The editors Christine Pride, Christina Lamb and Josie Le Blond are of American and European origins with no Syrian background. Veterans in their field, these editors have played a crucial role in shaping these narratives to cater to the expectations of a global audience. The three narratives portray the narrators as heroes who survived

hardships and thrived in their lives as refugees. These stories prioritise triumph and personal transformation, not just trauma, whereas in Yazbek's work, trauma gains prominence over triumph and personal transformation. This can be seen as a strategy by the editors for such stories are more marketable among readers of all backgrounds and ages. Yazbek's narrative concentrates on bringing out the uncomfortable and complex traumatic experiences of the Syrians who suffered in the civil war and does not indulge in exploring the part of the author's life after resettlement. Yazbek is explicit about her criticism of Western policies and ambivalent about her decision to leave Syria. Thus, her work focuses more on the adherence to authenticity, whereas the other three works alleviate certain perspectives to suit the audience's preferences without completely digressing from the real issues. The editors balance the authors' authentic voices with an eye towards accessibility and appeal. Though there are obvious cultural gaps between the editors and narrators, it is evident that the editors have tried to amplify the voices of the narrators, staying true to their intentions and culturally unique experiences.

Conflicted Loyalty and the Concept of Home

The research establishes that the writers exhibit multiple allegiances with their home country. They are torn between loyalty to their home country and the necessity to adapt to the new culture in the host country. This mental conflict creates a sense of guilt in them for having secured a safe life when other Syrians are still trapped in the war zone. They are pressurised to express their gratitude towards the new country that granted them asylum, in different ways, while experiencing a sense of responsibility to their homeland and an urge to go back there. Evidently, Samar Yazbek experiences this conflict of multiple allegiances as she struggles to find a connection with the host country, France. For Yazbek, Syria is still her home and exile in France is just a

temporary state of transition. Because of the guilt of leaving Syria when the country and its people were in danger, she was incapable of acculturating into the new culture and hesitant in learning the new language, French. The crossings through the Turkey-Syria border represent not only the physical movement but also have symbolic underpinnings. Each crossing is an emotional transformation for Yazbek, where she changes from a mere refugee to a social reformer and a human rights exponent. With each crossing, her mental trauma is intensified as she witnesses the degradation of her nation but continues her visit to remain connected to her culture, language and people. She admits to 'live in borders' a metaphorical expression that indicates her state of ambivalence and in-betweenness and a feeling of belonging to somewhere and nowhere simultaneously.

The writers Mardini and Mustafa are successful in developing new allegiance with the host country as they both received support, opportunities and safety in Germany. Mardini, with her involvement in sports and with the Refugee Olympic Team and Mustafa, by assuming the role of a spokesperson for German political policies on refugees, helped build this connection. Bana and Fatemah Alabed, who belong to two different generations, have different perceptions of home and host countries. Bana, as a child, is content to have shifted to a safe place where she could lead a normal childhood of going to school and playing with friends. She feels an instant connection to Turkey and adapts quickly to the new culture, whereas Fatemah, as an adult, struggles to let go of her connection with her roots in Syria and holds a desire to return and rebuild Syria.

The new allegiances have attached new dimensions to their sense of belonging and produced a blend of identities. It has also altered their concept of home. The narratives try to re-establish the writers' connection with their homes in varied ways.

In *Butterfly*, ‘home’ is a site of fear and conflict. Mardini embraces Germany as her new home, as it provides her protection from danger and a possibility for progress. Nujeen Mustafa redefines her understanding of home after her resettlement in Germany, as she finds herself torn between the two worlds, no longer physically present in Syria and has not fully integrated into Germany. For Mustafa, the new concept of home is the blend of both home and the host country that allows her to identify with both the places and incorporate elements of both cultures to form a hybrid identity. On the other hand, Bana and Fatemah find their home in the memories of pre-war Syria that they idealise in the text as a place of safety and prosperity. Even when Syria is destroyed physically by the conflict, they envision a reconstructed Syria in the future that will offer peace, safety and belonging for the displaced. This idealised version of a future emerges from the writers’ hope or dream of returning to the transformed homeland. For them, the concept of home is less a specific location and more a hope, a vision of a place where they feel complete, connected and content. For the four writers, though the home is physically lost, it lives on as a source of aspiration, identity and vigour.

Solutions

Though the thesis has examined the intricate dynamics of identity, trauma and positionality of Syrian refugees within the contexts of literature and narratology, in order to achieve an overarching view of the refugee issue under consideration and set a seal on it, it is indispensable to determine and suggest resolutions to it. The four refugee memoirs provide certain recommendations that could be taken into consideration by the readers to contribute to refugee integration. Bana Alabed reminds readers that it is the duty of every global citizen to help one another when there is a problem. She provides them with certain practical ideas, like donating money to the

NGOs or speaking on behalf of the refugees to the government or expressing a welcoming attitude to those who seek refuge in their country, as ways to help them.

Yusra Mardini enlightens the readers with the need to treat refugees with humanity, as ordinary people who had a normal life. She suggests that the refugees be given opportunities to grow and prosper so that they can prove their worth. Nujeen Mustafa seeks the help of powerful people around the world, like former American President Barack Obama and former Prime Minister of the UK, Theresa May, to take action to save the lives of the Syrians by intervening in the illegal actions of the regime. Like Mardini, she believes that accepting refugees to a country like Germany will boost its economy and resolve the manpower issue. She assures the host countries that granting asylum to skilled and educated refugees will not only fulfil the humanitarian cause but also enhance the overall development of the country. Samar Yazbek believes that modern technology has transformed the meaning of exile in the contemporary world, and the places that the refugees left behind are made accessible to them through the internet. It does not bring the pain of loss with the same intensity as before. She does not suggest any remedies for the issues in Syria, as it has deep-rooted causes. However, all the writers express sanguine in believing that Syrians will be able to reclaim their country to its former glory in the future.

UNHCR provides three durable solutions for the betterment of the refugee crisis that enable them to live as citizens instead of refugees for all their lives. It includes “Voluntary repatriation,” “Resettlement” and “Local Integration” (UNHCR 2). Voluntary repatriation is the process by which refugees return to their homeland when the situation that pushed them out of their country has stabilised. However, it needs the political support from the authorities in the host countries to ensure that the returnees find safe and sustainable reintegration. The second solution, resettlement,

involves transferring the refugees to a third country when their home country is uninhabitable, and the host country refuses to grant them permanent residence. This new country should have adequate resources to accommodate the newcomers and must be ready to give them citizenship. The refugees can also opt for "Complementary Pathways" like "Humanitarian visas," "Community sponsorship," "Family reunification," "Work visas" and "Education programmes" as means to find protection in a third country, as it guarantees "safe and regulated avenues that complement resettlement" (UNHCR 5). When the first two solutions are not feasible, refugees can attempt to integrate locally into the host country community. It is an alternative to living in refugee camps. It would eventually help them attain the nationality of the host country, provided there are provisions to ensure their basic rights like work, education, mobility and access to necessary services. If efficiently utilised, these solutions can offer long-term relief to the humanitarian crisis.

Through the act of narration, the four refugee writers assess their newer identities and affiliations and call for a revolutionary and confrontational reform in their marginalised positioning. The in-depth study of their stories proves that they are not simple recollections of the historical events that led to their refugeefication, but are carefully crafted scripts that fit into complex political, social and cultural frameworks of storytelling. The stories emphasise shared human experiences that encompass first-hand accounts of displacement, loss and resilience, in an effort to reclaim agency and to re-establish their identities beyond the refugee status. The act of narration aids in preserving personal and collective memories and serves as a tool for healing traumatic wounds. These texts are inherently political as they confront the issues related to borders, policies, rights, and comment on the oppressive actions by the perpetrators.

The four autobiographies offer alternative perspectives to the refugee stories that foster empathy and understanding. Through distinct narrative techniques, they voice their experiences of war, displacement and resettlement. Adapting different frameworks has enabled them to assert their unique identities, claim agencies, shatter stereotypes and bear witness to both personal and collective trauma. The self-awareness the authors acquire through the process of narration consecutively enables the readers to gain a clear perception of refugees and understand the multi-layered and divergent nature of the state of refugitude.

The writers have attempted to challenge the dominant discourses that homogenise their experiences and confer them with wrong and undignified labels. Through their works, they advocate for the rights of refugees and call for necessary action that creates pathways from awareness to change or from individual understanding to wider socio-political impact. Amplifying the voices of these refugee writers through broader platforms and integrating their inferences into the refugee policies can transform their texts into tools of collective healing and social transformation. The study, therefore, underscores the role of storytelling by the displaced in bridging the cultural divides and advancing global understanding. Furthermore, it throws light on the potential of the autobiographical genre to go beyond its status as a literary work of self-expression to that of a catalyst of social change by inspiring action, advocacy and awareness.

Chapter VII

Limitations and Further Scope for Study

As the study is predominantly on the works of women refugee writers, its focus is limited to female experiences only. The refugee experiences of male autobiographers and individuals belonging to other marginalised genders have been overlooked. The selected narratives were published from the year 2015 to 2018, so the study only provides an analysis of the refugee experiences of this particular timeframe. It fails to capture the evolutionary characteristics of the Syrian women's autobiographical writing. The study cannot claim to capture the voices of the marginalised refugees in its full spectrum, as it focuses on the works of the women writers who have access to publishing platforms and have resettled to a host country that provides them resources to restart their lives. The study has also chosen a translated work that possibly could affect the study of the authentic refugee experience due to editorial mediation and loss of cultural specificities.

The study solely relies on the genre of life writing/autobiographies and its theories to analyse the identity transition of the refugee writers. It has not brought to its purview other genres like novels, short stories and poems written by Syrian refugee women. As the study adopts a qualitative approach, the findings are determined by the researcher's subjective positionality and selected methodologies. A combined method of analysis, with qualitative and quantitative methods including statistical data and surveys would enhance the understanding of the refugee predicaments.

To mitigate the limitations of the present study, future studies in refugee writing can work on comparative studies of refugee writing by men and women, focusing on the intersections of gendered aspects of the refugee experience. The

Syrian refugee women's narratives can be compared with the refugee women's writing from other cultural backgrounds, like Palestinian, Rohingya, Vietnamese and Sudanese, to explore the influence of socio-cultural factors in shaping refugee experience and representation of trauma. Historical comparisons can also be made by selecting works written by holocaust survivors and post-colonial migrants. A different approach to the area could concentrate on translation studies, as many of these writings have been translated, to bring out the nuances concerning translation within refugee writing.

There can be studies conducted on the potentialities of different mediums of expression, like digital, online or social media platforms, films and documentaries, to document the refugee experiences and call the readers into action or a multi-disciplinary approach analysing different genres of refugee writing. Future research could also track the themes of the evolution of identity in refugee narratives over longer periods, taking into consideration both pre- and post-resettlement experiences.

Other qualitative literary methodologies can be adopted by the researchers, like the use of theories like post-modern, psychoanalytical and spatial to evaluate the refugee experiences. They can also analyse the refugee writings within the broader frameworks of post-colonialism to examine how these works comment on Western interpretations and interventions. The intersectional approach to refugee narratives across cultures or nationalities can be used to examine how the narrative styles adopted by the writers are influenced by factors like ethnicity, education and class.

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Appendix A

Interview conducted with Nujeen Mustafa, the author of *The Girl from Aleppo*

(Through e-mail correspondence on 30 Jan 2025)

Question 1: What inspired you to write your memoir?

Answer: I've always been a fan of history and loved watching documentaries and reading books about it. What I have noticed is that what is often talked about when global conflicts of the past have been discussed are the politicians military personnel and diplomats but not the people not the victims they turn into a statistic a number that is mentioned once or twice. But those were not numbers, those people they had lives and dreams which was taken away by war. And I didn't want to turn into a number I wanted the general public to remember that the victims of wars are people and not nameless, faceless numbers.

I wrote the book because I wanted to share what it was like to be a refugee, to be a person with disability in a country like Syria and to be a Kurd, I wanted to share the different parts of my identity with the audience and hopefully help change how these groups of people are perceived.

Question 2: What is the message you hoped to convey to the global readers?

Answer: My hope through the memoir was to show that even though we speak different languages, dress differently have different beliefs. I hoped to get the message across that different was not dangerous, that we had a lot more common than the media would like the rest of the world to believe. That we have common goals, of safety, security, success and prosperity for all countries and children. And that Refugees did not leave their homes and countries and everything they know behind because they wanted to but because they had to.

Question 3: What role did your family play?

Answer: My family Played great role in shaping who I am today I will always be grateful for their support and for their belief in me. My family was adamant about me being educated at home even though I could not go to school. They were adamant about minimising the effect that my disability would have on my life. I was never treated as someone who was less than anybody else. Their presence and support contributed a lot to my self-confidence. I was never treated as a victim of circumstances well I was trying to make the best of every situation. And the war and journey to Germany, solidified the bond that I have with my family even more and my belief in the fact that with their support I could achieve everything.

Question 4: Can you share your thoughts on the human rights violations on Syrian refugees crossing borders?

Answer: They are deeply saddening and depressing because they are a symptom of the fact that governments are afraid of refugees, that refugees are seen as danger, a problem that needs a solution, not a resource, not a benefit to the host country. This is what refugees all around the world fight against. The fear, the stigma, the discrimination. Every refugee feels the pressure to prove himself in the new host country, to prove that he is a good guest. Because whenever something bad happens refugees are one of the first groups to be blamed. It is a mutual responsibility of both parties to eliminate barriers and try to get closer to each other, and understand each other better. I think that both parties should understand that we have a lot in common and that our differences are not something that is scary but is something that is to be celebrated and cherished and all of us have something to offer.

Question 5: What is your opinion on Germany as a host country?

Answer: Germany overall has been a positive example as a hosting country. I believe that the mind-set has shifted and that government and the public are more reserved in

their welcoming of refugees compared to 2015.Germany remains a positive example of a hosting country for refugees in terms of reception and integration.

Question 6: What is your vision for Syria and its future?

Answer: I hope that it will become my country acceptance and peaceful unity between all of its components. Welcoming and accepting of everyone. A country that belongs to its people and its people alone, no longer in the prison of dictatorship, injustice, inequality and cruelty.

Appendix B

Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp's answers to Sree Lakshmi's questions about co-translating The Crossing, by Samar Yazbek (The answers have been jointly sent by Nashwa Gowanlock and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp from Kemp's email id on 24 December 2024)

1. How did you handle the cultural nuances or expressions that might not have a direct equivalent in English?

This is a challenge in every translation, and especially working on political or historical texts where there are so many potentially unfamiliar names and cultural references. Even many basic naming conventions (like Abu and Umm) and Islamic phrases are potentially unfamiliar to some of the book's audience, as I believe the editors wanted this to be accessible to a non-expert, non-academic audience, to readers curious to find out more about the Syrian revolution and civil war, and from women's perspective.

In general, as a translator, I think it's important to keep some Arabic expressions or words in the translation, with what translators sometimes call a 'stealth gloss' - a brief word or two of explanation, inserted subtly so that it doesn't disrupt the flow of the sentence. One example I spotted flicking through:

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"'*Wallahi*, by God, you are like my sister,' he said turning to me…"

Flicking through I can see we kept the occasional Arabic word in the text but not so many that it would be difficult for readers without any prior knowledge of the region. I seem to remember discussions about whether to refer to *Daesh* as Daesh or as ISIS, and I think we kept a spreadsheet of translation decisions so we could keep track of names and terms for consistency.

I think it's important to note that as translators, Nashwa and I made some decisions alone, but a lot of it was discussed with the editors, and in principle it is important that questions affecting style and accessibility are a discussion between translators and editors.

2. Were there parts of the memoir that were particularly difficult to translate due to their emotional intensity or graphic detail?

Yes, definitely. I was brought to tears while translating, and I certainly remember the emotional difficulty of coming back to edit and reread the translation. Perhaps sometimes when you read a difficult or emotionally demanding text, there is a feeling of catharsis at the end, like you've shared a moment of another person's difficult life, but you are lucky enough to be able to put it behind you and move on. But when translating, you live inside a text very intensely and for a very long time - perhaps 2 or 3 rounds of edits even after submitting the first translation. I remember finding the rounds of edits very intense and being torn between wanting to move on and read something more cheerful, and feeling a deep responsibility to check the editors' edits closely, and re-read the edited translation each time until we were content that the text really was true to Samar's intention.

I needed to take a break from translation afterwards and much as I would have liked to work more on Syrian political texts, it was a while before I felt ready to. I was delighted when I had the opportunity soon after to translate a children's book about Syrian refugees and to engage with and amplify the experiences of war and being a refugee through other means.

3. How did you balance staying true to the original text while making it accessible to an international audience?

See my answer to question 1. Again, this is a question a translator faces in every sentence and every paragraph of every translation!

Another major issue was the structural or developmental edit, where the editor proposed moving and repositioning certain sections to improve the narrative flow, and make the book more readable. I was in favour of this, as the book hadn't had a very detailed edit in the Arabic edition; the first sections were less polished as they were Yazbek's notes before she had decided to publish the diary as a book. The final section was written once she had decided to publish, if I remember correctly.

The impact of this very involved structural edit was that as translators we felt we had to take great care to check for any confusion this introduced in terms of individuals' stories, including cross-references forward and back through the book. We had to come back to the editor with various corrections where characters were confused or referred to but we hadn't met them yet. I think some translators feel that working with editors in this way is beyond their remit and that when they finish the translation, it's up to the editor to do what they want with it. I strongly disagree and see the need for the translator or translators to be actively consulted right up to the point of approving the second page proofs, as accidental misunderstandings (e.g. two individuals with a similar name being conflated into one) could happen at any stage. As the translator, you end up knowing the text so intimately, that you're sometimes the only one who might notice such errors or inconsistencies. All the same, it was very challenging to keep track of various edits to the text and to ensure that well-intentioned amendments didn't have other consequences elsewhere. We worked with another translator, Sawad Hussain, at this editorial stage as there was a lot of correspondence with the author and new text to translate and incorporate into the book.

4. Were there metaphors or symbols in the text that were particularly hard to convey in English? And were there concepts or phrases you simplified for western readers who are unfamiliar with Syrian context?

Again, see question 1. As far as I remember, I don't think we simplified anything within the text, but we did add in the Appendix and a select glossary to help readers without much prior context. I'm afraid I don't quite remember who wrote the glossary but I think it was a collaboration between translators and editors, and we consulted a lot of experts - including religious and military experts - on definitions.

5. What role do you think translation plays in fostering Global understanding of the Syrian crisis?

A very important role. It is still noticeable, and lamentable, that in non-fiction, so much of what is published about the Middle East is written by white, male, English-speaking observers. Journalists, historians and military professionals, with deep and extensive lived experience, yes, but with the bias of growing up and seeing the world from a particular perspective. Fiction in translation plays such an important role for readers in growing closer to others' perspectives, and is often - perhaps too often - the route through which anglophone (or non-Arabic reading) readers become acquainted with Syrian culture and politics, and with events and emotions in the Middle East generally. We still need much more *non-fiction* and other types of texts (not only novels and poetry) to be translated from Arabic, Kurdish and other languages and published for general readers, but the barriers for the translation of nonfiction are even higher than for fiction and novels (funding, awareness, publishers' lack of imagination and knowing where to start in seeking out authors and texts…)

In this context, this article that came out this week is interesting.

https://www.newarab.com/features/lack-arabic-literature-english-and-why-it-matters

As for this particular book, I think it did play an important role. It had excellent coverage in the newspapers in the UK and was stocked in the leading booksellers for a long time. (Of all the books I've translated this was the easiest to find in bookshops, which made me very proud.)

6. Do you think the English translation has amplified the reader's response to the memoir and the message it tried to convey?

Yes, almost certainly; every translation into English in particular, makes a book and its message accessible to many more readers.

7. Did you work in collaboration with Samar Yazbek during the translation process? Did she provide you any suggestions or feedback that you found insightful?

Yes, we had quite extensive correspondence with the author, with the help of Sawad Hussain who translated a lot of our questions into Arabic, and if I remember rightly helped us to translate new sections into English as we were struggling time wise with the scale of the work at the time. I'm afraid I don't remember about specific suggestions or feedback, but I'm sure we had a very long list of questions for her and her responses would have been invaluable to our understanding.

8. What were the specific tasks/duties you performed as the co-translator of the memoir?

If I remember correctly, Nashwa translated the first two parts, and I translated the third. Then I believe I led on the first stage of editing the English, ensuring consistency in our style, so that the author's narrative voice would read as one (albeit a book made up of many voices, and with parts 1 and 2 written in a different context and at a different time to part 3).

We were then both involved in checking the edits and responding to the editors' inquiries.

Appendix C

List of Published Articles

Sl. no	Authors	Title of the Article	Name of the Journal with Vol.no, Date and ISSN/ISBN	National/ International	Peer-reviewed/ Refereed/ UGC-CARE Listed
1.	Sree Lakshmi K	Reconstructing Homeland, Redefining Self: A Perusal of Syrian War Memoir.	Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literatures Vol.20.2 December 2020 ISSN 0974-7370	International	Peer-reviewed/ Refereed
2.	Sree Lakshmi K And Dr. Praseedha G.	Re-reading Alia Malek's *The Home That was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria* as Testimonio	Kala Sarovar Vol.24, No.2. 2021 ISSN 0975-4520	National	UGC-CARE
3.	Sree Lakshmi K	Falling Under the Double Shadow: A Study of Subalternity in Julia Otsuka's The Buddha in the Attic	Bodhi International Journal Vol.no.5, April 2021 E-ISSN-2456-5571	International	Peer-reviewed/ Refereed