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Threats, Victims, and Survivors: The Racialized Gendering of Syrian Refugees and Literary Contestations of Dominant Media Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Western media narratives about Syrian refugees frequently depict men as threats and women as helpless victims through racialized and gendered constructions. Contemporary Syrian diasporic literature can counter these problematic and dominant media portrayals. Specifically, Christy Lefteri's **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** and Atia Abawi's **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** offer readers opportunities to empathize by contesting racialized representations of Syrian refugee men as threats by positively characterizing complex male protagonists, revealing their vulnerabilities, and emphasizing their care for their families—especially for the women in their families. They acknowledge the patriarchal cultural expectations for Syrians and reaffirm the agency and power of refugee women's voices by showing their effects on others' empathy.

KEYWORDS

refugee; literature; agency; racialization; gender; representation

RÉSUMÉ

Les récits des médias occidentaux sur les réfugiés syriens dépeignent souvent les hommes comme des menaces et les femmes comme des victimes sans défense, à travers des constructions racialisées et genrées. La littérature contemporaine de la diaspora syrienne peut contrer ces représentations médiatiques problématiques et dominantes. Plus précisément, *L'Apiculteur d'Alep* de Christy Lefteri et *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* d'Atia Abawi offrent aux lecteurs la possibilité de ressentir de l'empathie en contestant les représentations racialisées des hommes réfugiés syriens comme des menaces, en décrivant de manière positive des protagonistes masculins complexes, en révélant leurs vulnérabilités et en mettant l'accent sur l'attention qu'ils portent à leur famille, et en particulier aux femmes qui en font partie. Ces œuvres reconnaissent les attentes culturelles patriarcales à l'égard des Syriens et réaffirment l'agentivité et le pouvoir des voix des femmes réfugiées en montrant leurs effets sur l'empathie d'autrui.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, an international audience witnessed the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's lifeless body on a Turkish beach (Gray & Franck, 2019, p. 275). Alan's death led to more coverage of the migration of Syrian refugees, causing media narratives to influence audiences' opinions. In the first five years of Syria's civil war, about 5.7 million Syrians became refugees (Bachleitner, 2021, p. 44). Media coverage grew as Syrians fled to neighbouring countries or Europe. However, these media narratives are often problematic because as Gray and Franck (2019) find, they rely "upon the assumption … of racialized women as innately vulnerable and in need of paternalistic protection and … of racialized able-bodied men, in particular those without family ties, as suspicious and threatening" (p. 281). The possibility that these harmful

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perspectives are readily accepted by some observers reflects a history of colonization and orientalism: "It is **because** of the [racializing] logics that underpin colonial modernity that non-white populations come to be easily read and treated as threatening and violent," particularly racialized men (p. 278). Refugee women experience misrecognition as passive victims, and humanitarian organizations may use these "ideal victims" to construct "white saviors" (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2022, p. 1002). Media framing has evolved over time based on purpose, initially eliciting compassion towards Syrian women and children but shifting towards a perception of refugees as a security risk following the 2015 Paris attacks and incidents of sexual harassment in Germany (Gray & Franck, 2019, pp. 283–285).[1] As negative perceptions develop in the media, politics, and social discourse, fictional narratives might evoke empathy for and understanding of refugees.

While mainstream media may dehumanize refugees by emphasizing masculine threat and feminine vulnerability, fictional narratives can rehumanize refugees by depicting the emotion and vulnerability of men, showcasing familial bonds, and emphasizing the agency of women characters. Novels allow for character development, storytelling, and exploration of journeys, inviting readers to understand the complexity of Syrian refugees. Narratives "present a current interpretation of the past" that can influence how the war and the social identity constructions of those impacted by it are remembered (Bachleitner, 2021, p. 46). Literature proposes alternative narratives and can create empathy for characters and the identities they represent. However, a reader should not become a "surrogate victim," as empathy should be a "virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 200). Contemporary Syrian diasporic literature provides a space for this empathetic experience as counter-narratives to problematic media portrayals of Syrian refugees that rely on racialized and gendered stereotypes. Specifically, **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** by Christy Lefteri and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** by Atia Abawi offer opportunities for readers to empathize by contesting racialized representations of Syrian refugee men as threats; they do this by positively characterizing their complex male protagonists, revealing their vulnerabilities, and emphasizing their care for family—especially over the women in their families. While this may gender vulnerability in a way that makes femininity appear weak, the novels have the potential to go against patriarchal cultural expectations for Syrians and reaffirm the agency and power of refugee women's voices by showing their effect on others to empathize despite being in vulnerable situations.

In **The Beekeeper of Aleppo**, Nuri and his wife, Afra, live in Aleppo until the Syrian civil war destroys their house and kills their son, forcing them to leave. Afra loses her eyesight from the trauma of seeing her son die, and Nuri has delusions that a boy like their son is with them during their harrowing journey to Europe to reunite with family and reach safety. Once in England, they stay in a house with other refugees while undergoing their

[1] Gray and Franck (2019) expand on how dominant narratives in news articles from September to early November 2015 "largely [reflect] compassion towards the refugees" that "relied on the overwhelming depiction of refugees as vulnerable, and particularly as 'womenandchildren"' (pp. 282–283). In November 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris claimed by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) shifted news narratives of the refugee crisis. These "came to be dominated by the fear that would-be terrorists are slipping into and across Europe under the cover of the movements of refugees … creat[ing] a lasting association in the newspaper discourse between the arrival of refugees in Europe and threats to security" (p. 283). Additionally, "on 31 December 2015, numerous incidents of mass sexual harassment, sexual assault and theft took place in European cities. … It was widely reported that the attacks in Cologne were carried out by 'up to 1,000 men of Arab or North African appearance"' (p. 284).

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asylum application process. Along the way, how these events unfold in the novel inverts dominant media stereotypes by representing Syrian refugee men as threatened and by attributing Syrian women's vulnerability to trauma rather than to femininity.

The young adult novel **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** also follows the journey of a Syrian refugee, but its protagonist, Tareq, is a teenager. This allows young adult readers to relate and reveals how war can destroy youthful innocence. Tareq flees Syria after his home is bombed, killing most of his family except his father and sister, Susan. Together, they attempt to make it to Germany. This novel explores changing familial connections and responsibilities as refugees, encouraging readers to relate to refugees by considering their own family dynamics and the gendering of vulnerability.

METHODOLOGY

There are several contemporary Syrian diasporic books, but I choose to analyze **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** because of the large, Western-focused audiences they reach and their unique insights. **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** has sold over 500,000 copies and won several awards (Dwyer, 2020; Harley, 2021). Given the novel's wide reach, its potential influence should be considered. Additionally, **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** provides insight into initial texts about refugees that young adults may encounter. The novel also exemplifies why a journalist turns to literature: Abawi found it allowed her to give "'the full story, a depth that the reader could take in and find a way to empathize more with the people who are struggling"' (Martin, 2018, para. 3). Her thoughts underscore how novels can offer more opportunities for readers to empathize because authors can develop complexity and depth, which short media narratives may lack.

This essay is based on textual analysis of **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**. I referred to texts discussing orientalism, media studies, and political research on Middle Eastern representation and refugees to guide my reading of the texts. I place my research within the dialogue on dominant Western media narratives on Syrian refugees. With this knowledge and context, I analyzed the representation of Syrian refugees in the two texts by conducting a close reading of both novels' language and literary techniques through post-colonial and feminist theory lenses. I took note of when and how the books' language and techniques contest or reflect dominant media narratives' gendered and racialized representation of refugees. I then read research on trauma, grievability, and migration policy to reveal how literature can play an important role in problematizing the Western news media's dehumanization of refugees and encouraging humanitarian responses.

This essay is based on textual analysis rather than the imagined intent of the authors, as neither author is Syrian and should not be considered a substitute for refugees' voices. Both authors are the children of refugees. Lefteri's parents fled Cyprus in 1974, and in 2016, she worked at a refugee camp in Athens to help Syrian refugees (Lefteri, 2019, pp. 311–312). Abawi's parents fled Afghanistan during the Soviet War. Her mother was pregnant when they made it to West Germany, and Abawi was born a refugee. Abawi also travelled to Greece and Turkey to speak with refugees when writing her book (Abawi, 2018). The positionality of the authors should be considered. It is important to note that

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> voice appropriations in literature and other arts generally present an **imaginary** "other" in place of genuine culture (Said 1978). In general, people who learn about other cultures through art will not have a clear way to distinguish what is accurate from what is misrepresented.
>
> (Gracyk, 2023, p. 295)

Nevertheless, these valuable texts showcase how fictional interpretations provide space and flexibility for responding to and complicating dominant media narratives.

FINDINGS

Refugee Men as Vulnerable and Familial Responsibility

Both novels contest narratives depicting Syrian refugees as threats by portraying their male protagonists with complexity and emotional depth through continuous scenes of vulnerability and sensitive characterization. **The Beekeeper of Aleppo**'s protagonist, Nuri, exemplifies this as he receives a letter from his cousin that says, "You must convince Afra to leave. You are too soft, too sensitive. This is an admirable quality when it comes to working with bees, but not now." After reading the letter, Nuri admits that he "cried, sobbed like a child" (Lefteri, 2019, pp. 34–35). Having emotional male protagonists with characterization descriptors such as "soft" and "sensitive" allows for a sustained depiction of refugee men in this way. Such representations can have a significant impact "in national security discourses, [where] there is an extremely high premium on avoiding thinking about human fallibility, vulnerability, and suffering," as they "[threaten] the constructions of rationalist hegemonic masculinity that are built into the entire intellectual project" (Cohn, 2014, p. 53–54). Vulnerable portrayals, then, can contest dominant threat portrayals in the media, which can encourage thinking about human vulnerability in political contexts.

The novels provide other openings to contest the male refugee-as-threat trope by reinserting the father figure to highlight their vulnerability, which the media may exclude. A study that looked at images in British news stories about refugees found almost half of the images containing refugee men showed them alone. There was a "gendered misrecognition of male refugees as a dangerous threat, devoid of family responsibility or vulnerability" (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2022, pp. 1000, 1006). These novels can humanize Syrian men by emphasizing their family responsibility. For example, in **The Beekeeper of Aleppo**, Nuri's son dies in a drone bombing, but during his journey to Europe, Nuri hallucinates meeting a lost boy, Mohammed. When Nuri supposedly finds Mohammed sleeping on the floor, he "[carries] him to the bedroom and [lays] him gently on the blanket" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 88). Such fatherly actions emphasize his familial connection, which can add a layer of vulnerability. A father carrying his child to bed may be familiar to some readers, encouraging them to make a positive connection between Nuri and their own fathers. Further adding to his soft characterization are words such as "gently." Such scenes can evoke emotions akin to public responses to images of Alan Kurdi: "Grief and shame that Europe, and the world more broadly, let children like Kurdi die, were feelings frequently expressed," including by political leaders, because of Alan's picture circulating in media (Adler-Nissen et al., 2019, p. 76). As visuality and emotions are connected in international politics, the imagined visuality of books may produce a similar effect to humanize Syrian refugees. Specifically, fatherly depictions can create these openings to humanize or relate to refugee men.

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Moreover, the hallucination of Mohammed shows how Nuri is always a father, representing refugees as humans with a past and a future, rather than in a temporary crisis. Despite his son's death, Nuri's paternal concern persists. When he imagines Mohammed falling off the boat, "without thinking, [Nuri] jumped in" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 108). "Without thinking" suggests that this is an instinct—like this fatherly role is a part of his identity. This encourages readers to regard refugees as always fathers, mothers, brothers, and so on, which can counter how some dominant Western media may portray refugee "men in isolation," without family, "or in large groups with unidentifiable facial features and emotions," which can harmfully dehumanize them (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2022, p. 1000). Nuri's hallucination serves as a coping mechanism for his trauma, allowing him to maintain a fatherly role amid grief. These narratives acknowledge the lasting trauma of refugee experiences, potentially evoking an empathetic response to contest media tropes and explain the familial relations unique to each refugee that may be relatable.

A Land of Permanent Goodbyes similarly emphasizes family responsibility when Tareq's father, Fayed, asks Tareq to take his sister Susan to Europe without him, as he can only afford for his children to continue. Fayed tells his son, "'You are her big brother. Your job is to protect her, and my job is to protect you both"' (Abawi, 2018, p. 138). This dialogue highlights both Tareq's and Fayed's familial responsibility as a part of their identities—a responsibility that may be familiar to some readers. Fayed asks Tareq to prioritize his sister's protection over his own. This may reflect his awareness of the higher risks girls face in patriarchal societies. Additionally, Fayed's willingness to sacrifice for his children characterizes him positively, as sacrifices are traditionally considered heroic acts of love. This can provide an opening to empathize with the hardships that come with caregiver roles some readers may relate to. This may also bring to light that refugee men may be alone because of similar difficult decisions. The familial relationships of Tareq and Fayed bring associated duties of love and sacrifice, which can add to the vulnerability of Syrian men to counter narratives that attempt to use their separation from family to villainize them.

The Nuance of Shame

A Land of Permanent Goodbyes also demonstrates how the distressing circumstances of the refugee journey can make it difficult for men to fulfill fatherly duties. For instance, when Fayed realizes he does not have enough money to send himself and his children across the Mediterranean Sea, "he felt like he had failed as a father." He felt "shame … and the failure of not providing what his family needed" (Abawi, 2018, p. 136). These emotions reflect the importance of Fayed's identity as a father, suggesting a caring and vulnerable characterization. Failing as a father does not mean failing as a person. Such language attaches failure to his inability to provide for his kids given the situation rather than degrading his whole identity. In a way, this protects his positive characterization. The word "felt" also indicates that he **thinks** he has failed as a father, inviting readers to question the veracity of his claim. Empathy, it seems, tends to be stronger for those who feel guilt or responsibility as it is associated with selflessness. Additionally, "needed" indicates that sending his family across a treacherous sea is not exactly a choice but a need. This can help reframe how refugees' actions are necessary steps in their journeys to survive. These aspects within the quote show Fayed struggles to

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fulfill his fatherly role given the hardships of the refugee's journey, preserving his positive characterization and selflessness.

Fayed's shame in his inability to protect his children at this moment can be reframed to build on his vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. The shame of "[failing] as a father" and in "providing" leads Fayed to plead with the smuggler to reduce the fees for his son, as Fayed says, "'He's **my** child [emphasis added]"' in response to the smuggler claiming that "[Tareq's] not a child" (Abawi, 2018, p. 134, 137). Saying "my child" can also encourage the smuggler—and, indirectly, readers—to consider Syrian refugees from the perspective of a parent. This may allow readers to better understand the desire to protect and the shame that comes from failing to do so. Brown (2012), who researches shame, has explained how shame and vulnerability are gendered. For men, shame is being "perceived as weak" (p. 78). Brown finds that "the perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability and the most dangerous." She argues that vulnerability is instead "courage beyond measure" (p. 42). Therefore, the narrative's admission of Fayed's "shame" in front of others depicts male vulnerability and provides an opening to present it as courage, rather than a weakness of begging, given his dangerous and traumatic journey. This can encourage readers to empathize with refugees by reframing shame as having the strength to be vulnerable and make tough decisions in a society used to depicting strength through a problematic racialized and gendered lens.

Having a teen protagonist in **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** can allow young adult readers to better relate to and understand how shame develops into adulthood. For example, Tareq's sister, Susan, tells other refugees how they've lost their mother and siblings as Tareq "[hopes] to hide the tears swelling in his own eyes" (Abawi, 2018, p. 133). His sadness depicts male vulnerability, and his hope suggests an underlying shame or desire to avoid being vulnerable in front of others. For young adult readers who may experience similar pressures of masculine expectations, this "[hope] to hide the tears" may resonate. As a result, this complexity of experiencing emotion but not expressing it can build empathy by showing that refugee men may still possess innocence, even if shame due to gender expectations suppresses their expression of vulnerability, which the media may manipulate for threat narratives. According to Ryan and Tonkiss (2022), "It is the child-ness of the refugee that represents innocence. However, as the child grows into an adult, gender emerges as a critical factor which, for men, involves a distorted depiction of masculinity as diminishing innocence" (p. 1004). Gray and Franck (2019) similarly write, "Others draw clear lines between vulnerable male children and threatening male adults" (p. 281). In **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**, Tareq's age blurs the line between childhood and adulthood. The teenager allows for the opportunity to question associations of vulnerability and age, as his emergence into adulthood is filled with more vulnerable situations rather than less. Tareq's desire "to hide the tears" reveals how patriarchal society begins to form his shame as he becomes an adult. Tareq's vulnerability and innocence are still present, but his expression of it changes potentially because of gendered expectations in entering adulthood.

Research that finds age to be tied to innocence can help explain how Tareq is positively characterized, as the language calls upon his youthfulness to do so. Tareq is described as a "good boy. The kind every parent dreams of having" (Abawi, 2018, p. 7). His goodness

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and innocence are established and tied to his youthfulness—"boy"—encouraging reader support throughout his journey. While media narratives could portray teenage refugees as men, using "boy" to describe Tareq can remind readers of the youthfulness of teenagers. Moreover, "every parent" indicates that regardless of race, ethnicity, and background, a parent would be proud of Tareq. These words position Tareq as a role model rather than a threat. Language that positively characterizes Tareq encourages readers to hold a gentler understanding of Syrian teenage boys, potentially contesting media portrayals of them as threats, presenting them as relatable or as role models instead.

Developing the complexity of vulnerability and shame at the intersection of age and gender can foster empathy by contesting narratives that Syrian refugee men are dangerous. Readers understand that Tareq's vulnerability—a sign of courage as Brown's research finds—contests the media's narratives of adult refugee men as emotionless threats. This can relate to a real-life example of how the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act campaign relied on how young undocumented immigrants "could present themselves as innocent, non-threatening, assimilating and making a valued contribution to US society. These characteristics are key criteria in judgements of social worth" (Sirriyeh, 2018, p. 142). The nuance of shame and innocence at the intersection of age and gender can have practical effects in social perceptions and migration policy.

Negative Representations of Men

Despite depictions of vulnerability and positive characterization of refugee men, both novels also include negative representations to avoid unrealistic portrayals, which can help them gain more credibility. It can also reframe how refugees **are threatened**, contesting dominant narratives that generalize refugees **as threats**. For instance, **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** includes an Afghan refugee who takes advantage of boys at a refugee camp and is described as "evil," and several men in the camp "held him down and took turns beating him" to death (Lefteri, 2019, pp. 228–229). This does not excuse violence, but it associates it with personality characteristics like "evil" rather than with race. Nuri feels extreme guilt afterward, demonstrating the dangers of the refugee experience and how it can push someone to violence, despite it being out of character. Vigilante violence may further reflect the cruel side of patriarchal behaviours, as only men participated in this scene. This complexity may allow readers to better empathize as it adds depth and realness to Nuri's character since he is not always a good man; rather, he is a good man placed in difficult situations throughout his refugee experience.

Smugglers in both books are also negatively depicted to show how individuals may take advantage of refugees—regardless of ethnicity—which may work against the coloniality of migration. **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** includes a smuggler who rapes Afra. The smuggler's name is Constantinos Fotakis; Nuri admits that "[he] was surprised that his name was Greek as he spoke Arabic like a native, but as [he] looked at his features and the color of his skin, it was difficult to know where he was from" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 271). "Like a native" raises the question: what does it mean for a language to be "native"? Does it involve the accent, the slang, the speed? Is the language "native" if a native speaker does not notice? Questioning the smuggler's "nativeness" blurs the line between Middle Eastern and Greek identities. This language can remove identity borders that have been

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created through historical practices and colonialism, such as de-separating the Orient and Occident by merging characteristics of both areas in one identity. Such literary moves connect to research on the coloniality of migration:

> Migration regulation ensures that the Other of the nation/Europe/the Occident is reconfigured in racial terms. The logic generated in this context constructs and produces objects to be governed through restrictions, management devices, and administrative categories such as "refugee," "asylum seeker," or a variety of migrant statuses. The coloniality of migration operates within this matrix of social classification on the basis of colonial racial hierarchies.
>
> (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 24)

Therefore, this ambiguity of the smuggler's race disrupts attempts to attach ethnicity to racialized stereotypes of threats associated with migrant statuses that reflect harmful racial hierarchies that migration regulation in the West may operate within.

Men as Protectors

To further counter dominant threat narratives, the novels demonstrate the men's protectiveness over women. In **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**, when Fayed tells Tareq that he must take his sister away from Turkey, he says, "'Too many bad things happen to our people here, especially our women and girls. We must protect your sister"' (Abawi, 2018, p. 138). Rather than being threats, these characters are protectors. "Too many" evokes that bad things happen everywhere but that there is a limit that forces one to migrate. Moreover, "our people" reframes how Syrian refugees are threatened. Emphasizing the protection of "especially our women and girls" complicates how Syrian refugee women are "especially" exploited based on the precariousness of their situation intersecting with their gender. Fayed and Tareq "must" protect Susan because they recognize their familial duty and that going to Europe is a necessity to fulfill this selfless responsibility. The complexity here is that this does not mean their other actions throughout the novel are not manifestations of patriarchal tendencies. However, this interaction can reframe how Syrian men may make necessary decisions to protect the women in their lives who are threatened greatly because of the precariousness of the refugee's journey.

Gendering Vulnerability and Victimization

At the same time, however, this strategy can have the unhappy effect of gendering vulnerability problematically. Syrian men might be recoded as protectors instead of threats, but this implies that Syrian women are unable to take care of themselves. A female Syrian journalist has critiqued Syrian media stereotypes of women "as dependents who can't do anything without the help of a man," as victims of war, and as defined by their relationship with men alone (Erhaim, 2019, para. 11). Given this context, although it is not surprising that a father would want to protect his daughter, the usage of the possessive, "**our** women and girls [emphasis added]," and the pointed insistence of "we [men] must" (Abawi, 2018, p. 138) can reinforce patriarchal hegemony culturally. This effect is amplified by repetition in seemingly insignificant details of differential characterization, as when Nuri notices at a refugee camp how "Afra was shivering and saying nothing. She was frightened here. I wrapped as many blankets around her as I could" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 185). While this may demonstrate an unspoken bond of love and care, the exclusion of any mention of Nuri's fear is significant. It appears that only Afra was frightened. This makes her appear weak compared to Nuri, potentially contributing to assumptions of female fragility already

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problematically used to normalize male dominance in Syrian law and culture, as some Syrian activists have worried.[2]

Gendering vulnerability can lead to a complex trope of refugee women as silent victims, which can create empathy but also make women feel inferior. Female vulnerability is used in politics because it can garner support for legislation that assists refugees. As Tastsoglou et al. (2014) write, "The victimization and silencing of refugees is a recognized political trope. This is more exaggerated for female refugees and ties in with gender stereotyping" (p. 69). In these two novels, women are given less dialogue, but the texts interrogate the causes of this silencing. For instance, Mustafa describes how at a refugee camp,

> There is one girl here who has lost her voice—she must be about eighteen … I wonder what words are trapped inside her that can't come out … who knows what this girl has been through, what she has seen.
>
> (Lefteri, 2019, p. 84)

Here, the young woman's silence speaks to Mustafa as a story unheard and as trauma that silences her. Her silence is not the result of a supposedly natural gendered vulnerability but rather a result of her traumatic refugee experience.

Readers should consider each refugee experience as unique and not generalize based on gendered tropes of vulnerability that assume women are less resilient. Contemporary texts work against "the coloniality of gender," which "defines the universalization of a European cisgender dichotomy, which produced positions of masculine superiority and feminine inferiority" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 20). This scene with Mustafa and the young woman counters this dichotomy, as the woman is not regarded as inferior. Mustafa wonders, "Who knows what this girl has been through," suggesting how her experiences are incomprehensible to readers—even to other refugees. Therefore, if each refugee experience is unique, novels that present rich, complex, and individualized stories can counter dominant narratives that tend to rely on gender stereotypes, such as a supposed female inferiority.

Novels allow readers to potentially develop relationships with characters to better recognize that the silence of refugee women results from difficult experiences. For example, when boarding a dinghy to cross the Mediterranean, "Afra had still not said anything, not a single word had come out of her mouth, but [Nuri] could feel her fear" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 104). The use of "still" reflects that this long silence may result from fear of the dangers of the overall refugee experience. "Still" also hints that Nuri expects Afra to say something, emphasizing how migration journeys can be traumatic and silencing, causing individuals to act out of their usual character. This can disassociate gender with silence and inferiority. Additionally, Nuri's ability to "feel her fear" results from their years together in a loving marriage and his close attention to Afra. His empathy sheds light on how it can be difficult for others to understand the emotions refugees experience unless they share the experience or have developed a personal relationship with another refugee. Books enable this relationship because readers learn about and develop affection for characters, allowing them to feel close and likewise experience such empathy. Narratives in literature can then present "more nuanced representations such as providing more refined representations of refugees' personal stories," which can "enable a shift from pity and victimization

[2] A normalization of paternalism can lead to harm, such as a father believing that marrying off his 15-year-old daughter would protect her, which was found in a report by Syrians for Truth and Justice (2021). By no means is this dynamic of male dominance restricted to Syria or Arab countries.

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to empathy and recognition," potentially countering the gendering of vulnerability (Smets et al., 2019, p. 193). Exploring the various reasons for silence through relationships shows how literature can promote empathy without promoting a gendered vulnerability by developing a better understanding of refugee women characters.

The novels' inclusion of men who become silent at times can also discourage an overemphasis on the silence of women. In **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**, after Tareq and his cousin witness a beheading in Syria, "the ride home was silent. … The boys couldn't muster the energy to talk, and even if they had been able to, they wouldn't have known what to say" (Abawi, 2018, p. 66). This can help explain the silence of all refugees—not just women—resulting from traumatic experiences. The idea of not knowing what to say can build understanding for readers to hopefully realize that some experiences can be difficult to make sense of, resulting in someone's inability to share their stories when coming out of confusion or shock. Traumatic experiences can be difficult for refugees to speak about, regardless of gender.

It is important to amplify the voices of refugee women to solidify their agency and recognize their ability to foster understanding. In **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**, during an open mic night at a café in Turkey, the character Shamaya reads a poem she wrote about leaving home, which resonates with the other refugees. Upon hearing her poem, Tareq "didn't feel alone. This excruciating journey was shared by those around him … it was the pain of a nation, not just an individual" (Abawi, 2018, p. 92). Tareq's response exemplifies the benefits of sharing the voices of refugee women as it stirs emotional responses of sympathy and understanding, without relying on gendered vulnerability. This scene also complicates such binaries by showing Tareq's vulnerability in resonating with Shamaya's words. Tareq's respect of Shamaya also counters some of the potentially paternalistic messages in the book. If refugee women continue to be victimized and have the associated inferiority impressed upon them, it can "[lead them] to feeling ashamed about being a refugee" and cause them "to conceal their status or make it less prominent" (Smets et al., 2019, p. 186). Therefore, ensuring refugee women are represented with agency through scenes that showcase the power of their voice can help them avoid feelings of shame.

Similarly, **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** includes scenes of refugee women building relationships based on empathy. Angeliki, a Somalian refugee woman, shares her story with Nuri. Despite having different experiences, he understood how "memories of both Somalia and her baby were filling her mind and her senses, in the way the memory of the heat and the sand of the Syrian Desert came back and engulfed [Nuri] and filled [his] heart" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 248). This memory reflects how some make sense of the experiences of others through their own experiences. Therefore, books and the consideration of more refugee voices—including women—are crucial to building empathy and agency. Once we read a story, in a way, it becomes part of our memory, allowing us to better understand a greater range of experiences and build empathetic relationships. In fact, "by allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation" (Alexander, 2004, p. 4). Stories of migration journeys can provide a path for this participation, building understanding and possibly having an impact on integration efforts. Having women in these

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literary scenes, where their words have the power to resonate, initiates recognition of the powerful capabilities of women refugee voices to build understanding.

Women as Survivors and the Agency of Refugee Women

These books can also produce a compassionate response by highlighting how some refugee women are raped during their migration journey as others exploit their situation. In **The Beekeeper of Aleppo**, the smuggler rapes Afra. She explains to Nuri, "He told me I should be quiet or you would come back and find me dead" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 279). At this point in the book, Afra is blind and staying in the smuggler's apartment while Nuri runs errands for the smuggler to pay for the cost of going to England. The smuggler takes advantage of their situation, exposing how the refugee journey is often filled with life-or-death scenarios and trauma.

Likewise, in **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes**, Tareq learns that Muzhgan, an Afghan refugee woman he meets on his journey, was repeatedly raped by her smuggler in Turkey: "The camps didn't have the capabilities to help with these circumstances, so she was left to cope on her own. The best they could hope for was help when they landed in their final destination—but even that was unlikely" (Abawi, 2018, pp. 256–257). This sheds light on the humanitarian needs at refugee camps that go beyond securing basic life necessities. Additionally, showing how Muzhgan is "left to cope on her own" emphasizes the lack of humanitarian support and the importance of stories emphasizing refugees as individuals with struggles unique to their experience. Instead of generalizing refugees as dominant media narratives tend to do, these scenes of rape shed light on the horrific experiences some refugee women face alone.

The language used in the media or novels may harmfully contribute to narratives that present interpersonal violence as an exploitation of a supposed natural weakness of femininity, but other language can promote a narrative where women should be free from assault and violence by recognizing their agency. Humanitarian frames rely on female vulnerability to create sympathy and support, but messages that aim to bring awareness or support to refugee survivors of sexual violence should be relayed in a way that places the blame fully on the attacker to avoid feelings of shame for survivors. Women should not be understood as being unable to protect themselves but rather as individuals who "have the right to be free from assault. They do defend and provide for themselves and their families, are resilient and resourceful, and resist gendered oppression in multiple ways. Vulnerability is part of the human condition" (Tastsoglou et al., 2014, p. 69). In **The Beekeeper of Aleppo**, Afra feels that she cannot punish her rapist because Afra and Nuri need him to smuggle them to England. Nuri observes while they speak with the rapist/smuggler that Afra "was sitting on the sofa, and [he] wished she would do something … but she just sat there as if she had died inside and only her body was alive" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 292). As Nuri "wished she would do something," he recognized her agency and placed the responsibility on Afra to act, contesting paternalistic narratives. However, this may also be interpreted as placing an insensitive burden on women who have been raped to respond without support. The change Nuri observes in Afra emphasizes that her passiveness results from the traumatic act of violence as a survivor. These horrific scenes place importance on ensuring the refugee journey is not one filled with vulnerable scenarios where refugees can be harmed. If women's agency is not

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recognized, individuals and policy-makers "may perceive the need to protect the vulnerable, but they are far less likely to imagine, notice, and realize the value in supporting the efforts that people in 'vulnerable groups' make to change their own circumstances" (Cohn, 2014, p. 62). Rapists exploit the vulnerability of the characters' situations, not their vulnerability as women. These stories can help readers recognize this while still seeing the agency these women have, which can lead to more appropriate responses of improving the safety of refugees on their journeys.

In comparison, **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** shows gendering of vulnerability when presenting sexual violence but emphasizes that this results from a patriarchal society in which women are frequently threatened. The narrator says that "the burden of softness and vulnerability is an extra weight a segment of the population carries. The daily decisions of where to stand and walk are always a gamble, much more so for a female than for a male" (Abawi, 2018, p. 148). "Softness" suggests femininity is vulnerable, but the language avoids depicting it as innate because the "decisions of where to stand and walk" imply threats from others. These words place vulnerability on the situation rather than on biology. Vulnerability is a "burden," suggesting that it is placed onto women because of patriarchal social relations, and that it is possible to be removed depending on the scenario. Language should avoid stereotypical associations of vulnerability and femininity when discussing refugee women who are survivors of sexual violence and instead should promote their agency, encouraging humanitarian support that considers survivors.

Recognizing the agency of female characters acknowledges the vulnerability of refugees without a need for paternalistic protection if their environment is supportive. The "vulnerable victim" trope can erase a refugee woman's agency, but it is important to recognize and support the agency of vulnerable individuals "to create an environment which is enabling" (Cohn, 2014, pp. 62, 64). For example, when Nuri plays hangman with other refugees in England, he comments, "The Afghan woman is very competitive and claps loudly when she wins." She and her brother are "very intelligent," as they speak several languages (Lefteri, 2019, p. 126). Her description as "competitive" and clapping "loudly" contests tropes of inferior and silent refugee women. The Afghan woman is not afraid to be passionate and loud, which she may feel enabled to do given the playful, safe environment and support from living with other refugees. This description, coupled with her characterization as "intelligent," presents her as a bold, smart woman who has agency and does not need paternalistic oversight. Refugees endure situations that make them more vulnerable in certain instances, but this does not mean their agency should be diminished; rather, the environment they are in can enable their agency.

Showing refugee women as caregivers demonstrates how becoming vulnerable can be an act of agency. For example, after Nuri's wrist is cut by another man at the refugee camp, Afra "began to feel the wound with her hands and she pressed down on it, attempting, in vain, to stop the blood," and "Angeliki had taken off her green headwrap and was twisting it around [Nuri's] wrist" (Lefteri, 2019, p. 220). Afra, despite being blind, and Angeliki, a Somalian refugee, help Nuri without his asking. It may seem obvious to help someone who is bleeding, but what is striking in this scene is its lack of dialogue. Silence here emphasizes these women's agency. Moreover, Angeliki remov-

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ing her headwrap symbolizes how women become vulnerable to help another. This is a powerful gesture of care, as the headwrap has cultural and religious connotations and should not be removed in front of men. For Angeliki to remove her headwrap implies that she is willing to put cultural expectations aside to help Nuri, emphasizing her agency in decision-making. Such acts of caregiving are understood by patriarchy as unimportant because they are stereotypically women's roles and are not considered as requiring agency. Therefore, scenes of refugee women helping others can contest this patriarchal belief and have the potential to frame caregiving as an important act that requires skills, knowledge, the courage to be vulnerable, and agency to be fulfilled.

A Land of Permanent Goodbyes builds on this through scenes of refugee women helping men, revealing their strength and intelligence by reversing gender roles familiar to Western readers. When on a boat crossing the Mediterranean Sea, the individuals on board realize they need to reduce the weight of items to avoid sinking. One woman "yanked away her husband's grip of their pack and drew out a resealable freezer bag that held old family photos along with their money. She knew it was not much, but they would need it. 'Get a grip,"' she says (Abawi, 2018, p. 171). The woman takes charge, going against traditional, patriarchal gender roles, where the husband is expected to have his emotions under control. Readers see this expectation put onto him as the wife tells him to "get a grip." While this may sustain gender expectations for men, it contests the perception of women as weak victims. The woman takes on what Western audiences recognize as a more masculine role associated with strength. Although, to complicate this, these women might not take on the masculine but rather assert power as women in ways that are misrecognized as masculine. While "the victim position," often delegated by the media and politics to refugees, "legitimizes refugees' presence and legal recognition … [it] hinders the feeling of being someone, or to have been someone before—an individual" (Smets et al., 2019, p. 186). Therefore, literature can acknowledge the individuality of refugee women through the reversal of traditional gender roles familiar to a Western audience, so readers can connect refugee women to Western associations of masculinity that go against victimization.

DISCUSSION

The Beekeeper of Aleppo and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** have strength in their potential to contest representations of Syrian refugee men as threats and complicate female vulnerability by highlighting the agency and power of refugee women's voices while recognizing their need for protection given their dangerous journeys. The novels do so by characterizing their male protagonists through scenes of male vulnerability and positive descriptions of their personality or youthfulness. Their familial relationships are associated with duties of love to counter lonesome refugee tropes and reveal how the difficulties of the refugee journey make it hard to fulfill those duties, resulting in feelings of shame. However, their vulnerability and shame can be reframed into courage, given their willingness to express such emotions and the struggles they overcome. What further builds depth—and therefore trust and understanding—in these protagonists is the inclusion of negative representations of refugee men so the fictional novels appear more realistic.

These antagonists also disassociate threat stereotypes to racialized logics. Refugees are threatened by these antagonists, emphasiz-

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ing the necessity of migrating to Europe to protect their families, especially the women in their lives. While this may gender vulnerability in a problematic way, making women characters appear weak, these books reassert refugee women's agency and amplify their voices by including scenes of their impact in fostering relationships of understanding and empathy. The silence of refugee women is not a natural gendered vulnerability but results from traumatic experiences. Moreover, the language used presents interpersonal violence as an exploitation of the vulnerability of a refugee's situation and depicts sexual violence as a result of a paternalistic society in which women are frequently threatened, especially depending on their environment, illustrating the need for protection on migrant journeys. Agency is also depicted when refugee women selflessly become more vulnerable to help others or through the reversal of traditional gender roles. Through the depth and complexity of the language and scenes, these books provide readers potential to develop relationships with the characters, creating openings to empathize.

By contesting and complicating racial and gender stereotypes for Syrian refugees, **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** bring attention to how media constructs who is regarded as grievable based on racialized gendering. Narratives that frame refugees as threats are dangerous because "they do not appear as 'lives,' but as the threat to life," making refugees seem less grievable (Butler, 2015, para. 20). Therefore, these novels do important work in making refugees appear less threatening. This may cause readers to equate the value of a refugee's life to their own: "We imagine that our existence is bound up with others with whom we can find national affinity, who are recognizable to us" (Butler, 2015, para. 19). Since Syrian refugees come from a different culture than some readers, characteristics of vulnerability, shame, and agency can offer readers recognizable traits. Furthermore, the misrecognition of refugee women lacking agency and of men as not being vulnerable in news media images resulted in "the 'grievability' (Butler, 2009) of the bodies portrayed in the images [to be] heavily gendered" as a study found "empathy elicited most strongly for the images of children and at least a form of pity expressed for the images of women …, while the images of men did not elicit these responses" (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2022, pp. 1008–1009). While dominant narratives in mass media rely on generalizations given their space and time constraints, they can have harmful effects on how audiences perceive refugees as grievable. Novels are well-suited mediums for building empathy as they provide the space for developing complicated, unique characters, providing more opportunities for readers to relate.

CONCLUSION

Both **The Beekeeper of Aleppo** and **A Land of Permanent Goodbyes** end with a reunion of characters separated by the war. The books' endings signify the hope refugees hold on to and cherish as they begin again in a new country. As the war in Syria may lessen or end, new conflicts may arise that will displace individuals. Looking critically at diasporic literature sheds light on how greater dialogues on refugees are influenced by racialized gendering. Representing Syrian refugee men as threats has consequences as governments enact security measures, while the idea of female vulnerability better lends to humanitarian measures. Novels acknowledge and delve into the complexity of humanity within each individual, encouraging us to notice and critically analyze manipulated representations in mass media

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and within public perceptions to advocate for empathy, understanding, and humanitarian obligations. Stories of the refugee's journey share a deeply human experience of vulnerability, trauma, and hope that can contribute to a social discourse that calls for the prevention of tragedies, such as Alan Kurdi's death, from happening.

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