

Refugee Literature: Alienation and the Maze of Identity in Christy Lefteri's Novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

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Abstract

This study aims to shed light on one of the phenomena that contemporary novelists have increasingly explored in their literary works: the phenomenon of asylum. It focuses specifically on alienation and the search for identity in Christy Lefteri's novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, in which these experiences are vividly embodied by the characters. The novel conveys their feelings of fear, alienation, and lack of belonging, which become central concerns throughout their journeys. Lefteri deeply portrays these emotional experiences, presenting her characters as caught between loss and anxiety during their displacement and between feelings of alienation and the search for identity in refugee camps in European countries.

Keywords: asylum, alienation, refugee literature, identity, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a mirror of society and its concerns, as it gives voice to people, defends their values, and expresses their aspirations and objectives. Following the catastrophes that occurred in Palestine, Iraq, and Syria, and the destruction caused by wars, many citizens were forced to leave their countries and migrate in search of safety elsewhere. As a result, what has come to be known as refugee literature or asylum literature emerged to give human expression to the suffering associated with displacement, the experiences of refugees during their journeys and in refugee camps, and the various realities they encounter. It also conveys their feelings of alienation and homesickness and their search for the security and stability that they have lost in their homelands, as they attempt to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way.

Accordingly, this study examines manifestations of alienation and loss of identity in the novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. We selected the novel *Nahal Aleppo* [*The Beekeeper of Aleppo*] by Christy Lefteri, who drew on her experience as a volunteer in refugee camps to convey the suffering of Syrian refugees and others.

The research is based on the following central question: To what extent does the narrative of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* reflect the state of alienation experienced by Syrian refugees? And how are the labyrinths of identity constructed through the characters of the novel?

1. Foundational Theoretical Concepts

1.1. Refugee/Asylum Literature

To define refugee literature, it is first necessary to clarify the concept of asylum. Linguistically, asylum refers to the act of resorting to or seeking refuge in something for protection and security. It also denotes a stronghold or place of protection (Ibn Sayyidah, 2000). Similarly, asylum may refer to a person resorting to a place, intending to seek protection there, including the granting of the right to political asylum (Umar, 2008). Thus, in its linguistic sense, asylum involves seeking protection, security, and refuge.

In legal and conceptual terms, asylum is defined as “the protection granted by a state on its territory or above any place under its authority to an individual or group of individuals who have requested protection after they have been subjected to injustice and persecution in their country for multiple reasons, which may be political, scientific, social or material” (Abu Al-Wafa, 2008, p. 53). This means that individuals move to another country in order to obtain protection and security from injustice and persecution.

Asylum is also understood as forced migration from one’s homeland, either voluntarily as a result of political change caused by a revolution or coup, or involuntarily when individuals are forced to flee terrorism or persecution for religious, political, ideological, or racial reasons and choose another country in which to reside permanently or temporarily until the causes of asylum disappear (Mohammadi & Balkhir, 2021, p. 195). The causes of asylum are often political or related to war.

Refugee literature, also referred to as asylum literature, is concerned with representing the realities of refugees during their journeys of displacement. It has been described as “a political and social literature in a calm manner, as the political and social heart of it lives a revolution inside a refugee that has been torn apart inside it and lives its internal divisions, and it is sometimes blatant in revealing the personality of the depressed, lonely and very isolated refugee majority that is far from life and even unsuccessful” (Al-Salloum, 2018, p. 4). Asylum literature therefore seeks to convey refugees’ experiences throughout their journeys and in refugee camps, including their emotions, alienation, and loss of identity and sense of self.

One of the most important characteristics of refugee literature is that “it cannot be restricted by spatial and temporal space because refugee literature necessarily requires that it be limited to space or time only. A writer can write while in his homeland or outside it, yet all shades of the text indicate that it is refugee literature.” The writer’s task is to convey facts (Al-Salloum, 2018, p. 12), feelings, and experiences, whether they occur inside or outside the homeland.

Refugee literature in the Arab world emerged particularly clearly following three major catastrophes (Al-Salloum, 2018, p. 7):

- The first occurred between 1948 and 1967 as a result of the Zionist entity and the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- The second followed the invasion of Iraq by U.S. occupation forces in 2003, which led millions of Iraqis to seek refuge in neighboring countries, Europe, and Australia.

- The third followed the Syrian regime's response to the Syrian people's revolution in 2011 with severe repression, which resulted in the displacement of approximately half of the Syrian population.

The themes of refugee literature can be summarized in the following points (Al-Salloum, 2018, p. 12):

- Self-expression.
- Bearing witness to real social and political realities. By moving away from the immediate physical setting, refugee literature allows readers to view the tragedy from a broader perspective.

2.1. Alienation

The phenomenon of alienation has attracted considerable attention from novelists, who have represented it in their literary works as a phenomenon reflecting the psychological, intellectual, and subjective dimensions of fictional characters. Consequently, alienation gives literary works distinctive semantic and symbolic dimensions.

Linguistically, alienation means "exile from the country, that is, distance, and it is said: estranged from me: that is, distance, estrangement and estrangement: displacement from the homeland" (Ibn Manzur, n.d.). In this sense, alienation denotes distance, displacement, and exile from one's homeland.

According to the *Dictionary of Language Standards*, alienation refers to "distance from the homeland, it is said: It set from the durr, and from this door the sunset as if it were far from the face of the earth" (Ibn Faris, n.d.). Thus, alienation is associated with distance from the homeland.

Alienation, however, is not limited to physical distance from one's homeland. "The loss of loved ones in the homelands is alienation, so how if alienation meets and the loss of loved ones" (Al-Asbahani, 1972, p. 32). Alienation can therefore also arise from the loss of people who give the homeland its emotional meaning.

Based on these linguistic definitions, alienation can be understood as conveying a central meaning: displacement from and exile away from one's homeland.

In conceptual terms, alienation is "the dissolution of the bond between the individual and society, that is, the physical inability to occupy the place that one should occupy and his sense of dependence or sense of belonging to a person or to another mechanism, so one becomes subject to it – to it, but rather to it, and this generates a sense of loss of freedom and frustration" (Hinouni, 2015, p. 22). The loss of belonging within society can therefore be regarded as a manifestation of alienation and a source of diminished freedom.

Alienation is also described as an individual's awareness of "the conflict between himself and the surrounding environment in a way that is embodied in a sense of non-affiliation, discontent, anxiety and the accompanying behavior, or a sense of loss of meaning" and indifference (Al-Jama'i, 2010, p. 49). The conflict between the self and the surrounding environment can thus produce a persistent sense of anxiety and fear and constitute another dimension of alienation.

Alienation is closely connected with the psychological dimension of the individual. It is "a tense feeling associated with anxiety and sadness, and one does not experience it from time to time, but rather it is a condition accompanying it that constantly increases in strength or weakness at times, but it is an inseparable state, and thus the individual feels disconnected

from reality and self, a speaker with an internal revolution that drives him to rejection and rebellion” (Boutarin, 2010, p. 47). This internal turmoil can consequently generate a profound sense of psychological alienation.

“The loss of human values and ideals and the submission to a social reality in which man controls and then enslaves him, man feels separated and isolated from others and even from himself” (Al-Hamdani, 2011, p. 85).

Philosophers have also addressed alienation from a philosophical perspective. One definition describes it as follows: “He who alienated himself from the ethics of his time and society and called for the establishment of a virtuous republic ruled by philosophers until justice was achieved. By alienation, he meant the removal of man from the world of ideals and his living in an emergency earthly world without his will” (Jumaa, n.d., p. 24). From this perspective, alienation among philosophers involves distancing oneself from the prevailing moral values of one’s time and society.

Hegel defines alienation as “the alienation of man from his essential nature to the extent of extremism in dissonance with himself and its subjugation, in other words that man loses his first personality” (Jumaa, n.d., p. 24). He also considers alienation to be “the relationship between the individual and the state that no longer satisfies his capabilities, but rather exists as an alienated system, from which the positive political interest of citizens has disappeared” (Ali, 1997, p. 59). Hegel therefore links alienation to the relationship between the individual and the state. From this perspective, the greater the gap between the individual’s needs and the state’s capacity to respond to them, the stronger the individual’s experience of alienation.

3.1. Identity

The word *identity* appears in Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-Arab* under the root associated with the concept of falling from a height: “He whispered in conquest, he whims as Haya, Hoya and Huyan, and Anhui fell from above to the bottom, and his whims said: His identity if I throw him from above, the identity of the reduction of a pit, and it was said: Identity is a distant shaft... The abyss is said to be the distal abyss” (Ibn Manzur, n.d.). In this linguistic sense, the term is associated with falling from a higher to a lower position and with the idea of depth.

Identity is also defined as “the absolute truth that includes the facts, the inclusion of the nucleus on the tree in the absolute unseen, and the identity that is in force in all beings if the truth of existence is taken” (Al-Sharif Al-Jurjani, 1988, pp. 137–138).

Modern dictionaries provide a broader understanding of the concept: “(id) in Sufism: the unseen whose witnesses are not valid for others, such as the unseen identity expressed, but it is in the eye, and it is the innermost interior, the identity (in philosophy): the truth of the thing or person that distinguishes it from others, and a card in which the name of the person, his nationality, birth and work is proven, also called the identity card” (Mustafa et al., 2004, p. 989). Thus, the meaning of identity has developed from its linguistic, mystical, and philosophical dimensions to include the contemporary notion of an identity card.

In terminological terms, identity is “the name of the entity or existence as it is, that is, the existence of the person, the people, or the nation as it is, based on certain elements, specifications, and characteristics, lies from the awareness of the owner of the identity without suspicion with his likenesses, and the issue in this case is related to the quality of those specifications, components, and characteristics” (Boubeidi et al., 2020, p. 19). Identity,

therefore, refers to the components and characteristics shared by members of a particular community or nation.

Identity has also been defined as “everything common to the members of a specific group, or a social segment that contributes to building a general environment for a country, and those individuals are treated according to their own identity, and the identity is in this regard, on the one hand, it adds privacy and subjectivity to the individual, on the other hand, it contributes to the expression of the individual's language, culture and history, and on the third hand, it expresses the bridge that is communicated with all individuals in different societies” (Boubeidi et al., 2020, p. 20).

Identity consists of several basic elements:

- **Language:** Language goes beyond being a tool of communication between individuals. It can be viewed as a symbol of the group that contributes to its identification and definition, as well as a means of unifying the group, preserving it, and ensuring its continuity (Bayyaf & Bouhamelin, 2016, p. 196).
- **Religion:** Religion is among the most psychologically unifying components of identity because it constitutes a spiritual bond that transcends social distinctions (Bin Tamsak et al., n.d., p. 59).
- **History:** The history of a group provides a framework for determining its identity, since collective identity is deeply rooted in the group's historical experience (Mechelly, 1993, p. 25).

2. Manifestations of Alienation in the Novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

2.1. Summary of the Novel

The novel is based partly on the personal experience of the writer Christy Lefteri, who worked in a refugee center in Athens. It is set against the background of the Syrian war and focuses on Nuri, a beekeeper from Aleppo, and his wife, Afra, a visual artist who loses her sight following a psychological trauma after soldiers destroy their home and kill their only son, Sami. Nuri and Afra decide to help Mustafa, Nuri's cousin, leave Aleppo and Syria for Britain in search of safety and stability. The novel depicts Nuri and Afra's journey from Syria to Turkey, then to Greece and onward to Europe, revealing the suffering of refugees and the obstacles they encounter, including poverty, oppression, fear, homesickness, and psychological devastation.

2.2. Spatial Alienation in the Novel

Linguistically, place is defined as follows: “Place and place are one and the place of being is the thing in it” (Ibn Manzur, n.d.).

In terminological terms, place is defined as “the world that is the scene of the flow of events and the movement of characters, and the relationships these places carry with the event, and the impact on the characters, and this indicates here that the place is the place where events also take place and the characters revolve around it, and this place has a close relationship with the event” (Al-Naas, 2014, p. 112).

The characters experience the places represented in the novel through contradictory emotions. They feel safe and familiar in some places while experiencing hostility and fear in others. These apparently contradictory feelings can coexist in relation to the same place. This is evident in the experiences of Nuri, Mustafa, and Afra, who are deeply attached to Aleppo as

their homeland and as a place associated with safety and belonging. However, after the outbreak of war, Aleppo becomes a threat to their lives. Their feelings of familiarity and affection toward the city consequently turn into fear and apprehension. Nuri states: “Aleppo, which was full of dust. Afraa would not have left her. Everyone left. Even Mustafa is desperate to leave now. But not Afra” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 51). Afra’s attachment to the destroyed city is closely connected to the memories it holds of her son Sami.

However, the circumstances of war eventually force them to flee. After Mustafa leaves, he sends Nuri a message: “Leave this place, Nuri, it is no longer a homeland. Aleppo is now like a dead body of a person we love, there is no life in it, and no soul, it is full of decomposed blood” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 54). The comparison between Aleppo and the body of a beloved dead person is particularly powerful. Despite our love for the deceased, we must eventually say goodbye and bury them. Similarly, Nuri and Afra are forced to leave Aleppo because remaining there threatens their lives.

Throughout the novel, Nuri also describes the places in which refugee camps are established. In Turkey, he says: “I found a place under the trees and then a sense of calm here. A feeling that was not familiar to me. In Syria, calmness carries in its mercy an omen of danger, as it can be fragmented at any moment by the explosion of a shell or the sound of gunfire or the heavy footsteps of the soldiers” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 108). Leaving Aleppo and Syria does not immediately provide Nuri with a sense of safety and stability. Instead, he comes to perceive calmness as merely a temporary condition that may precede another storm. This experience reflects the condition of refugees more generally, as many flee their countries for reasons that have deprived them of the ability to feel safe or to believe that there is a place where they can finally settle.

After crossing Turkey and arriving in Greece, Nuri finds himself among refugees in a place “surrounded by barbed wire, and in front of us is a lonely village with very clean concrete walking paths, and interlocking fences of wire and white gravel. There are rows and rows of square cabins, so that people sit in them until they get their identity papers, a huge amount of identity papers” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 194). Danger surrounds the refugees from every direction, and the place where they arrive therefore fails to provide the security they seek. Instead, many refugees remain preoccupied with the uncertainty of whether they will ever reach a genuinely safe place.

As the journey continues, Nuri and Afra eventually arrive in Britain seeking asylum and join Mustafa and his family. They stay in a house inhabited by refugees displaced from Arab and African countries. Their circumstances, however, are not significantly better than those they experienced previously. Their room in the hostel is infested with mice and cockroaches, yet they attempt to adapt to their surroundings while waiting for their asylum applications to be processed and hoping to establish a life with Mustafa. Nevertheless, Syria and Aleppo remain deeply present in Nuri’s consciousness. His strong attachment to his city and his former occupation intensifies his sense of exile and deepens his nostalgic wounds. He says: “I go out to the concrete garden and sit on the chair under the tree. I remember the hum of the bees, the sound of peace, and I can almost smell the smell of honey, lemon and jasmine, but this was suddenly replaced by the smell of hollow ashes” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 43). Aleppo represents the center of Nuri’s stable life and professional identity, whereas Britain appears unfamiliar and

rootless. He therefore struggles to develop a sense of belonging and throughout the novel attempts to preserve something of his homeland within himself.

3.2. Psychological Alienation in the Novel

There are several forms of alienation represented in the novel. One of them is psychological alienation, which refers to “the individual’s sense of isolation, lack of belonging, loss of confidence, rejection of social values and norms, suffering from psychological pressures, and the exposure of the personality unit to weakness and collapse under the influence of cultural and social processes that take place within society” (Abdullah, 2008, p. 15). Psychological alienation can therefore be considered one of the most difficult forms of alienation that an individual may experience, as it involves a loss of confidence, a lack of belonging, and other profound psychological experiences.

The writer reflects the psychological alienation experienced by the characters throughout their journey toward asylum. Both Nuri and Afra refuse to integrate with the other refugees, which represents a psychological rejection of the reality in which they find themselves. Afra remains in her room, away from the other refugees, and has no meaningful relationship with them. Her only regular contact is with her husband. He states: “Afra was talking about Aleppo as if she was talking about a magical land like the one we find in the stories. It was as if she had forgotten everything else. She had forgotten the years before the war. She had forgotten the violence, she had forgotten the droughts, she had forgotten the leanness in which we were struggling until then to survive, even before the bombs” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 87). Her idealized view of Aleppo reflects her sense of isolation in the refugee camps. Her feeling that she does not belong in this new environment, together with her loss of confidence in those around her, leads her to regard Aleppo as the only safe place in the world. Afra’s experience thus represents both internal and external dimensions of psychological alienation. Her internal alienation is manifested in her inability to accept her new reality and communicate with the other refugees, while her external alienation is reflected in her loss of vision. She states: “The bomb was not the reason that made me blind. It was because I saw Sami die. At that moment, everything went black” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 302). Her loss of vision is consequently presented as the result of the profound psychological shock she experienced when witnessing the death of her son.

Nuri also attempts to remain distant from the other refugees in order to be alone with his thoughts. He states: “I wait here until the room is empty of those in it, until all the inmates leave here and leave with them their foreign languages and foreign behavior, and only the distant sound of cars remains. I imagine a beehive rippling with yellow bees, I imagine it coming out and heading towards the sky and then flying away in search of flowers” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 46). Although Nuri and the other refugees have reached a place of relative safety away from the war in Syria, their psychological and emotional alienation does not disappear. Their refuge embodies alienation from the lost Aleppo, alienation from the new society, and alienation from language and from the self as a result of the traumatic experiences they have endured.

4.2. Labyrinths of Identity in the Novel

The novel focuses on the problem of identity, which is affected by the places and circumstances experienced by the characters, as well as by the condition of asylum, in which identity becomes vulnerable to fragmentation. Refugees leave their familiar environments

and their cultural, religious, and political contexts in their homeland and consequently face the difficult process of negotiating a new identity, a new country, and a new language.

Nuri's attachment to his occupation constitutes a significant part of his identity and is one of the few aspects that he attempts to preserve throughout his journey. The Arabic language also functions as an important marker of identity. He states: "I decide to walk to the grocery store; Arabic music reaches me as I walk on the street. However, I do not know what song to play, the music brings me home, to its melodies and melodies, and the sound of my language surrounds me and comforts me as I enter the small shop" (Lefteri, 2020, p. 137). However, this feeling of familiarity, comfort, and homesickness associated with hearing Arabic is accompanied by another response: "I am about to respond to it in Arabic, but I do not want to enter into a conversation with this man. I do not want him to ask me where I came from and how I got here" (Lefteri, 2020, p. 137). For Nuri, therefore, the Arabic language acquires two contrasting dimensions. On the one hand, it reminds him of his homeland and generates feelings of familiarity and longing. On the other hand, it reminds him of his status as a refugee in a European country, a reality from which he attempts to distance himself by avoiding people who might force him to confront it.

The novel also reflects the suffering of refugees during displacement and the extent to which they may be compelled to relinquish aspects of their identity and principles in exchange for access to a safe place. This occurs when Nuri and Afra are denied asylum and consequently resort to a smuggler who changes their identities from Syrian refugees to Italian citizens. In the process, both characters are forced to alter aspects of their identities. Afra, in particular, has to remove her hijab despite her resistance:

- "Nuri, now people can all see my hair.
- They really can't, because it's a different color.
- And they can see my leg.
- But they're Gloria Parisi's legs, not yours" (Lefteri, 2020, p. 391).

Although Nuri knows that this transformation conflicts with his religious and cultural identity, he does not reject it and instead attempts to persuade Afra to accept the change. Their transformation can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to construct a new identity and negotiate the painful circumstances imposed upon them by displacement and the asylum process.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is not merely a narrative of the refugee experience. Rather, it conveys the depth of Syrian refugees' suffering by focusing on the duality of alienation and identity. The novel also highlights the psychological and geographical conflicts experienced by its characters as they flee their homeland and attempt to begin new lives. Furthermore, it portrays alienation not simply as physical distance from and loss of place, but also as a form of psychological rupture and internal loss. In this context, an identity that was once an integral part of the individual's existence in the homeland becomes fragmented and open to reconstruction under the pressures of displacement.

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