

The Response of Turkish Children's Literature to the Refugee Children Phenomenon during 2012-2017

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Abstract:

This paper aims to introduce the 9 fictional books created during 2012-2017 that deal with various aspects of the refugee experience that Turkey had to face being a country in the world that hosts the largest population of refugees

The number of people fleeing their home, their country, has accelerated to a level our world has never seen before. In the past five years no fewer than 15 conflicts – some new, some old – have brought unspeakable tragedy and misery to millions across the world. According to the statistics of the UN Refugee Agency-Turkey by the end of 2016 there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced worldwide of which 22.5 million are refugees, 40.3 million are internally displaced people and 2.8 million are asylum-seekers.²

Turkey hosts more than 4.5 million refugees-the greatest number that a single country hosts in the world- including the Syrians and according to the UNHCR Global Trends Displacement Report 2016, Turkey is hosting the largest population of Syrian refugees peaking to 2.8 million by the end of 2016.³ However the most recent statistics of the Turkish Ministry of Internal Affairs present the number of Syrians as 3.208.131 and the total of refugees from all nationalities as 4.5 million.⁴ According to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the technical definition of a "refugee" is someone who has left his/her country and can not return to it :

*owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.*⁵

Generally speaking people under such threat use extreme measures and risk extreme odds to find a safe place to stay and the end is not always happy as the whole world witnessed the catastrophic end of Aylan Kurdi, the 3 year old Syrian boy whose drowned body was found in the shore of Bodrum while the family was trying to cross the Aegean sea in the hope of reaching first Europe and then Canada where the aunt lived, the small boat capsized. The father desperately tried to get hold of his 2 sons and wife ,but the effort was in vain.

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² <http://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/> Access date: 23.01.2018

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5943e8a34/global-trends-forced-displacement-2016.html> Access date: 23.01.2018

⁴ Hürriyet Newspaper, Dated 6.October,2017, Page 4 ,

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html> Access date: 23.01.2018

This tragic story as well as other stories coupled with the images of small refugee children begging for food or living in very bizarre circumstances in the refugee camps allocated to them and the often prejudiced responses they have to deal with alerted the Turkish children's books writers to write their stories, their feeling, their losses, griefs their fears and finally their hopes, in short to be the voice of the voiceless.

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the 9 books written by Turkish writers that contain a refugee child either as a main character or as a side character during the years 2012-2017.

Out of the 9 books 8 of them have targeted readers between 8-12 year olds and one is a picture book.

The bilingual(Turkish & English) picture book *Tarik and the White Crow* is a unique one, both because it is the only picture book but more importantly it is created by 10 children who named themselves "The Polar Star Collective" in a workshop organized by the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants Isparta and sponsored by UNHCR and printed by Sarıgaga in 2012.⁶ The half-day long workshop that resulted in the book was led by editor and sociologist Esra Okutan and psychologist Aslihan Morova. The 10 children who participated in the project created their own story that reflected their own feelings and hopes and their own end of the story thus they were able to make a meaning out of their experience. Meanwhile, through this artistic output non-refugee children can learn about their experiences and develop empathy and understanding towards them.⁷

Because this book is very unique Ilgım Varyeri Alaca proposes that "the project can be a model to help refugee children cope with the hardship they face since picturebook-making can be a balancing activity that can be usefully conducted in the period of adaptation to their new society, as in the case of Turkey."⁸

Very briefly the story that emerged out of this workshop, *Tarik and the White Crow*, is the tale of a young boy named Tarik who lives happily on an island with his family. One day, however, Tarik and his father have to leave their island after a dark cloud hovers over it and pours an excessive amount of rain. They sail away to find a new place to live with their family. Battling towering waves for days, Tarik eventually drops his flute in the sea. When they are about to abandon themselves to despair, a white crow appears and guides them to a new island. Even though the people of the new island are kind and helpful, Tarik realizes that there is something missing in the island that makes people gloomy. While he attempts to find out why the people are not content, he feels lonely at the same time. His acquaintance the white crow, it turns out, is also lonely, as the black crows of the island do not want to play with him.

⁶ Tarik and the White Crow(Tarik ve Beyaz Karga, (2012), The Polar Star Collective, Sarıgaga, İstanbul

⁷ Hope, Julia. 2008. "'One Day We Had to Run': The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children's Literature and its Function in Education." *Children's Literature in Education* 39, no. 4: 295-304.

⁸ Alaca, Varyeri Ilgım, (2017) The Case of Tarik and the White Crow: Refugee Children Bridging Gaps via Picturebooks, In Ana Margarida Ramos, Sandie Mourão, Maria Teresa Cortez (eds.), *Fractures and Disruptions in Children's Literature*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Page 151

Tarik and the white crow become close friends. Meanwhile, Tarik's father makes him a new flute(the old one is lost to the stormy sea) to cheer him up. He begins playing it and it turns out that unlike other crows, the white crow sings with a beautiful voice. Listening to them, the islanders gather around, their moods brightening up. Tarik and his father bring their family to the new island and start a new life. At the end of the book, we are told that one day, they may hear that the dark cloud disappeared, and they may go back to their old island, keeping the hope alive of a possible return to their homeland.

The loneliness seen in the above example is a common feeling found in all of the novels that include a refugee child character.

TİTLE	WRİTER	PUBLİŞER, DATE of PUBLİCATION	Country of the refugee character
PASSWORD CHOCALATE Parolamız Çikolata	Zehra Ünüvar	Bilgi Yayınevi, 2014	Mombasa, Malindi
COAL BLACK CHILD-Kömür Karası Çocuk	Müge İplikçi	Günışığı Kitaplığı, 2014	Mali
FLİGHT- Kaçış	Ayşe Yamaç	Bu, 2015	Syria
CHILDREN of HOPE ROAD-Umut Sokağı Çocukları	Gülsevin Kıral	Günışığı Kitaplığı, 2015	Syria
JUJU-Juju	Çiğdem Sezer	Bilgi Yayınevi Çocuk Kitaplığı, 2015	Syria
MANSİON'S RESİDENTS- Konaktakiler	Karin Karakaşlı	Günışığı Kitaplığı, 2016	Syria
WİSH I WAS BİRD FLYİNG HOME-Kuş Olsam Evime Uçsam	Güzin Öztürk	Tudem, 2016	Syria
CLOUD CRAZY- Bulut Delisi	Leyla Ruhan Okyay	Günışığı Kitaplığı, 2017	Syria

As suggested by Amina Chaudri, the fictional experiences of refugee children represented in the books can be used in classrooms to serve multiple purposes.⁹ First, they affirm the lives of children who may themselves be refugees or are the children of refugees and seldom see themselves reflected in literature. Second, they provide readers of all backgrounds an opportunity to learn about lives different from their own and to make connections on a universal, human level. The fictional children in these books guide readers' attention not only to suffering but also to joy in little things—one little seed, a bicycle, a glass of lemonade, a flute—all of which symbolize bigger things: friendship, loyalty, protection, safety, joy, homeland. Finally, these books treat the topic of refugee experiences as varied and complex and especially when read together can shed light to various aspects of refugee experience.

A brief topic analysis will illustrate my point. There are actually 4 aspects of refugee experience.

1. The hardships they beared at homeland before they decided to leave the country
2. The events and the obstacles they faced while on the road
3. The hardships and prejudices they faced in a foreign country
4. The inner turmoils, traumas because of this profound experience -witnessing war, death of loved ones, loss of homeland and loss of friends, family, school, loss of financial status

Not all books depict each of the 4 aspects but all the books deal with at least 3 of the aspects in various degrees.

For example Juju- a 12 year old daughter of a family who have been able to flee from Syria to Turkey tells the story of her 5 year old sister:

"My sister is 5 years old. Since that night she does not speak with anyone except us. And when she speaks with us, she comes very near and only whispers. When we were in Syria armed men came to our door. Our nanny hid us to the secret space at the back of the stove and said: "Don't you dare to speak or they take you away and never return" Since that day my sister never uttered a single word to strangers"¹⁰

Juju also witnessed how the house of her best friend blew away " a fire blowing dragon like the monsters in the books" swallowed my best friend Fatma and my nanny who was visiting them." says Juju and asks "that day we laughed so hard with Fatma. My mother always says "Don't laugh so much, something bad may happen". Do you think Fatma and nanny died because we laughed so much?

Following this thread of violence endured in homeland Beşir's story is another example. *Wish I Were a Bird and Flew Home*¹¹ is a prize winning book that narrates the story of Beşir and family, their flight, their time in the refugee camp and finally their settlement in İzmir. Beşir's brother is already lost to war.. Beşir, does not have much to do except watch from the window and see the empty streets, the broken windows, torn curtains. Then he sees the small red car left behind by his friend who

⁹ Chaudri, Amina, <https://www.booklistonline.com/Classroom-Connections-Transplanted-Stories-of-Refugee-Children/pid=6275991> access date: 24.01.2018

¹⁰ Sezer, Çiğdem, . (2015) **Juju**, Bilgi Yayınevi Kitaplığı, P5

¹¹ Öztürk, Güzin. (2016) *Kuş Olsam Evime Uçsam*, Tudem, İzmir

has already left the country. He decides to go for it and is caught in the middle of crossfire. He is saved by his mother and the next day they leave for Turkey.

The road to peace is full of dangers. The Flight by Ayşe Yamaç narrates the story of a family with 3 small children of 9,7 and 4 years of age walking through the mountains to reach a border city.¹² The sad thing is the father is a doctor who wish to return back as soon as he places the family in a secure land. On the way the family had to separate and the 9 year old daughter had to take care of the children alone for 3 days. They experience hunger, sleepless nights, walking in dark through unknown territory, pain and injury due to walking. When they finally find their parents 9 year old Şehnaz is not a child anymore the war has stolen her childhood like it did to many children left without a family.

If the road to safety is full of hardships, it is not a rose garden when the refugees reach a safe shelter. Almost all the books narrate the prejudices that the refugee families and/or refugee children had to face and endure. Coal Black Child's main character Salif from Mali on his way to France had to endure a bully's name calling "Black, Black", or the banana shoved into his mouth and feeling second class because he can not speak the language properly. He only has music love and talent and a kind hearted music teacher to lean on in a what seems hostile world.¹³

Similarly, in Password Chocolate, the ill mother and her baby had been robbed of their last money by human traffickers who were supposedly take them to Greece.¹⁴ They were found in a basement shivering and in fever. While the neighbors were trying to think of a solution, one ill hearted neighbor reported them to the police. But the neighbors group together and find a satisfactory solution for the illegal refugees. This novel, depicts the help of kind hearted individuals that come together to find creative solution. This is a recurring theme, although there are people who want to get rid of the refugees, who believe that the refugees are a big threat to their jobs, or refugees are a threat to their families, there are also good people who force the circumstances and their comfort zone to ease a tragic situation. ,

For instance in the Mansions's Residents, under the leadership of a rich friend the community repairs a forgotten mansion where the refugees can stay temporarily and the mansion can also be used for cultural activities of the community.¹⁵

In the Children of the Hope Street, which is a settlement story of a family of 4, The family lives in a hotel room and the father searches for a job daily without any success. One day the hotel manager insults them in a horrible manner that the mother takes the children and begs for money on the streets as a last resort. Finally the father finds a job at a local restaurant for little money and daily food. Then, slowly their luck changes and with help from the children of Hope Street the family starts a better life and makes local friends.¹⁶

The cruelty of some children is depicted in Cloud Crazy¹⁷. Cloud Crazy is actually a book about a school trip to the eastern part of Turkey. There is one child in the class

¹² Yamaç, Ayşe,. (2015), *Kaçış*, Bu Yayınevi, İstanbul

¹³ İplikçi, Müge,. (2014), *Kömür Karası Çocuk*, Günışığı Kitaplığı, İstanbul

¹⁴ Ünüvar, Zehra,. (2014), *Parolamız Çikolata*, Bilgi Yayınevi, Ankara

¹⁵ Karakaşlı, Karın,. (2016) *Konaktakiler*, Günışığı Kitaplığı, İstanbul

¹⁶ Kırıl, Gülsevin,. (2015) *Umut Sokağı Çocukları*. Günışığı Kitaplığı, İstanbul

¹⁷ Okay, Ruhan Leyla,. (2016) *Bulut Delisi*, Günışığı Kitaplığı, İstanbul

called Azad who talks with no one except a girl who was also a refugee. His father has exploded and died and they ran away with his mother and are staying with their uncle. Azad is tormented by the bullies. They push him, they make him fall, they ridicule him. Finally majority of the students go to the principle and the situation becomes better for Azad.

Beşir in the book *Wish I were a Bird and Flew Home* tells his feelings of being a stranger in this way:

"I think they understand that we are Syrians from our face. Some Turks never come near us, they are afraid of us.

It is hard to earn money. Hard to find a job. If you are a Syrian it is even harder. We have no TV, no book to read. We sleep early, we get up early cause we have nothing to do. We eat on the floor. We always eat flour soup, when we finish our soup, dinner is finished." (p106)

Finally the last aspect, the traumas of the refugee children, their inner worlds are also depicted in the majority of the narratives..

One good example we encounter in the book *Juju*. One day Juju sees on the newspaper her best friend Azer's picture. She faints. When she regains her consciousness she reads that this is an interview with refugee children and the reporter asks about Azer's dreams. He answers "I don't dream, I only work" The war and the state of being a refugee child have taken away the dreams of children. Everyone helps Juju find the address of Azer. She writes him a letter. Then Azer's reply comes back. Here is a part of that letter.

" You know, Juju, our house was very big. We had fields, gardens, cattle. After living that way, now we are living in 2 rooms. Working so hard but getting so little money. In the beginning I felt so bad. Then I said to myself "Azer, this is İstanbul. Forget Syria. At that time it was another way, now it is this way. Thinking this way leads to nowhere. Now your life is to work very hard, get very tired, drop to sleep. I don't dream because when you dream and the dream does not come true, it is so hard to endure. Then your letter arrived. I am replying to your letter. This is a dream come true, it is a dream that I did not have the courage to dream." (p66)

Finishing I want to emphasize that hope, and signs of a safe new life is the prominent feature in all the books. Sometimes it is given as a direct message like in the ending of the book *Flight* : "War is left behind only in the far away memories. They know that the future will be much more beautiful than those days." or it is more symbolic like in the book *Wish I were a Bird and Flew Home* where the homeland soil that Beşir hid in his pocket while running away contained a seed and from that seed Beşir grew a sapling promising a new tree in Turkish soil thus carrying roots of the past in a new future..

9 books in 5 years is not prolific. There is not a single book that is autobiographical, although this is a type of writing that a refugee child can find her/himself the most. Maybe this is due both language problems as well as access problems to the refugee camps. However Turkey is not unique as Julia Hope points out Quoting King et al in her comprehensive research *Children' Literature about Refugees-A catalyst in the Classroom* :

"migrant literature is slow to develop in a host country as it takes time to learn an unfamiliar language well enough to use it for literary purposes. The writing of children's literature seems to be a further step along this continuum, as some

migrants and refugees do not come from countries where children literature is produced."¹⁸

CONCLUSION:

The one picture book and the 8 middle age novels presented in this paper all have refugee characters either in the main plot or in the subplot. Children who have lived violence, death, loss of loved ones and loss of homeland now must adjust to the unyielding demands of finding their place in a new culture.

Children's literature that addresses real and fictional refugee experiences can expand readers' understanding of the people whose lives are uprooted by war. If shared sensitively and thoughtfully in classrooms, such stories can be instructional as well as transformative creating empathy, sensitivity, fostering inclusive dialogue and a sense of belonging.

There is so much viciousness in the world we are living in. But as all these examples show there are also good people who are ready to act to ease the suffering, good people who do not look at another direction when they see suffering. Maybe we can't all write a book about a refugee but certainly we can find one small kind action to execute to make a refugee child's life better.

¹⁸ Hope, Julia. (2017). Children's Literature About Refugees-A Catalyst in the Classroom. Page 17, UCL Institute of Education Press, London