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The Representation of Refugee Experiences in Christy Leteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019)[1]

Abstract. This paper explores *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) by Christy Lefteri as a work of historical fiction that shifts the focus from general informative narratives to universal humanitarian experiences, emphasizing the individual lives of refugees rather than dehumanizing statistics or generic representations. By interweaving stories of Syrian refugees Nuri and Afra with those of refugees from diverse nationalities, Lefteri underscores the shared resilience and suffering of displaced individuals worldwide. The novel critiques stereotypical portrayals of refugees, presenting a nuanced depiction of their virtues and flaws, while dismantling simplistic binary distinctions of "good" and "bad" refugees.

Through the use of detailed personal narratives, Lefteri contrasts the reductive coverage of refugees in news media and historical accounts, which often focus on numbers and geopolitical implications rather than individual experiences. The novel's vivid depictions of traumatic events, such as harrowing sea crossings and encounters with smugglers, highlight the refugees' emotional and psychological struggles, fostering empathy and understanding in readers. By bringing to light the complexities of refugees' decisions and the humanity behind their journeys, Lefteri moves beyond the confines of traditional historical and journalistic narratives, encouraging readers to see refugees not as faceless masses but as individuals with unique stories. This study points out the role of historical fiction in bridging the gap between the factual and the personal, revealing how art and literature can humanize historical events and challenge preconceived notions. The

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findings emphasize the power of storytelling in encouraging empathy and reshaping public perceptions of humanitarian crises, with implications for how societies engage with displaced populations.

Key Words: historical fiction, refugees, representation, history, media

Christy Lefteri (born in 1980), a British writer and Brunel University instructor, was raised by Cypriot refugee parents in London. Her novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) arose from her volunteer work at a UNICEF-supported centre in Greece. Journalist Sorcha Pollak notes on Lefteri's firsthand encounters with refugees' writing: "Lefteri began exploring the streets of Athens where she met men, women and children who had arrived in Europe seeking safety" (Pollak par.3). In an interview on *Book Reporter*, Lefteri describes the novel's inspiration: "It's about Nuri and Afra, who are refugees who have left Syria... It was inspired by time that I spent as a volunteer in a refugee camp in Athens at the Athens Airport" (Fitzgerald par.2). *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* tells the story of Nuri and his blind wife Afra, Syrian refugees escaping the conflict in Syria, tracing their journey from Aleppo to Turkey, Greece, and finally the United Kingdom. In the following, I will compare how historical events are represented in media and in historical fiction, using the Syrian civil war (starting in late 2011) and *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* as examples.

Numbers and Statistics versus Experience

Media sources—including historical articles, news agencies, and TV and radio channels—have widely covered the displacement of Syrians. Global audiences have seen news reports and read articles, forming varying levels of understanding about the events in Syria. Reactions vary: some sympathize, others assign blame, while many fail to understand the root causes of the migration.

According to the UNHCR report on July 9, 2015, the number of Syrian refugees in nearby countries had reached 4,013,000: "New arrivals in Turkey and updated data from Turkish authorities take the total number of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries to 4,013,000. The four million figure is made up of 1,805,255 Syrian refugees in Turkey, 249,726 in Iraq, 629,128 in Jordan, 132,375 in Egypt, 1,172,753 in Lebanon, and 24,055 elsewhere in North Africa" (UNHCR Divers par. 1). This statistic records the immense scale of displacement, but as a historical document, it does not reveal the profound reasons and struggles behind such a mass exodus. For readers today, statistics alone cannot capture the personal hardships of leaving one's homeland.

In contrast, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* presents Nuri and his cousin Mustafa, fictional characters representing real individuals among the displaced. The novel follows Nuri's decision to flee Syria after losing his only son, with the events unfolding in 2015. Lefteri provides a detailed historical and geographical backdrop, illustrating the grief and hardships that compel Nuri and Mustafa to abandon both their homeland

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and their shared passion for beekeeping. In one poignant moment, Nuri recalls Mustafa's desperation over his missing son, Firas:

> When the bees died, Mustafa was ready to leave Aleppo. We were about to go when Firas went missing, so we waited for him. Mustafa would hardly talk during this time, his mind completely preoccupied, imagining one thing or another. Every so often he would make a suggestion about where Firas might be. 'Maybe he has gone to find one of his friends, Nuri,' or, 'Maybe he can't bring himself to leave Aleppo – he is hiding somewhere so that we will stay,' or, one time, 'Maybe he has died, Nuri. Maybe my son has died.' (Lefteri 22)

As can be seen in the above quotation, the author represents psychological states of the characters, which shifts the attention away from the general statistics and the numbers that history provides, into the psychological deciphering of one of the characters. This allows readers to understand the emotional complexity behind their decision to flee. Mustafa must leave the country within an hour to avoid arrest after killing three mercenary gunmen:

> My aim was good. I got one in the head, one in the stomach, the third in the heart. The fourth man stood and held his hands up and when he realised I had no shots left, he fumbled for his gun and I ran. He saw my face and they will find me. I have to leave tonight. I must get to Dahab and Aya. I should not have waited this long to leave, but I didn't want to go without you and abandon you here in hell. (Lefteri 37)

The novel depicts how hard it is to take the decision to leave one's homeland, as Mustafa writes the following lines to Nuri in his letter:

> I cannot wait here to say goodbye. 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. I will be making my way to England, to find my wife and daughter. Leave this place, Nuri, it is no longer home. Aleppo is now like the dead body of a loved one, it has no life, no soul, it is full of rotting blood. (Lefteri 38)

The representations of Syrian refugees, their decision to leave, and the circumstances surrounding their flight reflect the zeitgeist of the period. The characters in the novel are fictional but the historical settings are real. A contemporary reader or another one in the future might take Lefteri's representation of the Syrian civil war as a historical record that narrates life in Syria after 2011. Thus, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* as a literary text has historical features, and this aligns with New Historicism's concept of the 'historicity of texts,' showing how literary works and historical events are intertwined. In this way, the novel gives a new perspective on the historical event (*Practicing New Historicism 13*).

Throughout the novel, the difficulty of leaving one's own homeland and the mixed feelings of fear, hope, and nostalgia are expressed in meticulous detail. Lefteri intro-

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duces Aleppo, a Syrian family's life, and their work with bees, providing the reader with a glimpse of what it's like to live in Syria and the challenges of leaving it: "Bronze was the colour of the city far below. We lived in a two-bedroom bungalow on a hill. From so high up we could see all the unorganized architecture and the beautiful domes and minarets, and far in the distance the citadel peeking through" (Lefteri 9). These images set the settings of the story and familiarize the readers with the general atmosphere of the place and time of the story.

Emotions and personal stories often get lost in historical records. Literature rescues the stories of people from melting in the general pot of history. Novelist Carrie Callaghan writes: "History lets us learn the billions of other ways humans have lived their lives, and fiction invites us into those lives through the beguiling magic of story. No life is ever one single story, and nearly every earnest story has truth to it. The more stories we learn, the more truth we absorb" (par.6). Thus, historical fiction offers a richer, multifaceted view, in contrast to traditional historical accounts that tend to present a single narrative.

History, The General; Historical Fiction, The Particular

History generally focuses on the results of certain events**,** and it is not inclined to give or deal with its details. On 10 May 2015, *The Indian Express* reported: "Seventeen Syrian refugees including five children drowned on Sunday when their boat sank in Turkish waters on its way to Greece, local media reported" ("Migrant boat sinks off"). The headline reveals this neglect, providing only the number of casualties, location, and time. There is no mention of names, personal stories, or the horrific details of the tragedy. Readers are introduced to the event in a factual, impersonal manner, limited by the nature of news reporting. There are not many details of the way they sank, the things they felt, or their identities. However, these historical accounts do not aim at providing these details anyway, and it is fiction that serves best as it illustrates images and details of various stories.

Historical fiction delves into the horror leading up to a tragedy —the drowning of innocent children— as it takes the reader to the middle of the sea and exposes the feelings of pity and fear, the pity on the victims and the fear of being in their place. Historical fiction can blend the values of personal experience with the details of an important problem. In other words, historical fiction can tell the story beyond the piece of news, giving the details of what it is like to be on a rubber boat, for instance, with many other refugees sinking in the sea. For example, Lefteri vividly captures the terror of such a moment through Nuri's personal experience:

> Then there was darkness I startled awake because there was panic. The waves were bigger. One man was shouting, 'Get the water out! There is too much water!'

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> There were torches flashing, and hands scooping out the water, and children crying. Mohammed was wide-eyed and helping to empty out the water. I watched as men leapt into the sea, the boat immediately buoyant once again. 'Nuri!' Afra said.
> 'Are you on the boat?' 'Don't worry,' I said.
> 'We are.'
> 'Stay on the boat. Don't go into the water.'
> Mohammed was still scooping the water with his hands; everyone else on the boat was doing the same. The girl began to cry now. She was calling out to the men in the sea, calling them to come back onto the boat. The water continued to rise and more men jumped out of the boat. Every child was crying except Mohammed. I could see his face, serious and determined, between the flashes of light. There was a moment of complete darkness, and when the light of the torch flashed again, he was gone. Mohammed was not on the boat. I scanned the water, the black waves, as far as I could see, and then, without thinking, I jumped in. It was freezing but the waves weren't as big as I'd thought, and I swam around, flashing the torch across the surface.
> 'Mohammed!' I called. 'Mohammed!' But there was no answer. (126)

Here the characters' emotions and fears are vividly pictured through the images of Mohammed, Nuri, Afra, and the other refugees on the boat, and descriptions of the terrors of the experience of travelling on rubber boats that can at best be usually vague or do not exist in historical records. As seen in the piece of news referred to above, neither the identities of the people who drowned nor the information about how the incident occurred is accessible in the nonfictional account. However, in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, readers learn the personal stories of nearly every character on the boat, allowing them to feel the fear and desperation of their journey

Historical fiction, as in Lefteri's novel, portrays personal lives and experiences through fictional characters. What unites these examples is the way literary texts bring to life the settings, motives, and conditions of characters within a non-fictional historical context. Lefteri presents images of human suffering often missing from historical accounts, providing insight into characters' minds, conditions, and details not found in history: "Historical fiction allows us to read about things that we know, but it also allows us to not know these same things. In this way, historical fiction most closely represents how the stuff of history happens" (Murray par. 30). Historical fiction provides the complete picture of a certain event, as it sets the conditions before, during and after the main event and explains the way the process goes.

The sorrowful experience of unaccompanied children crossing borders, for example, is presented in some news. For example, The United Nations reports: "Syrian conflict hits tragic milestone: one million children now refugees" (Matti). However, in this report, the focus remains on statistics and numbers while the harrowing reality that these children are orphaned and alone is reduced to a mere fact. That is due to the fact that providing the state of mind of characters and their personal experiences are not the aims of historical accounts, and achieving this is not even possible:

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> The majority of child refugees, some 740,000, are under the age of 11, and more than 3,500 children in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq have crossed Syria's borders either unaccompanied or separated from their families, making them vulnerable to multiple threats including child labour, early marriage and the potential for sexual exploitation and trafficking." (Matti par. 4)

Lefteri includes the feelings and the meanings of the characters' state of mind as she illustrates the horrible details of such an incident. She writes about a girl who has to cross a river on her own leaving her father behind, giving the maximum amount of suspense and shock, such details are not commonly provided in historical texts of similar events:

> A man was lowering a young girl into a large saucepan – the kind that we normally used to boil couscous. There was a long cable attached to it so that men on the other side of the river could pull it across. This man was trying to help the girl into the saucepan, but she was crying and had both arms wrapped around his neck and wouldn't let go.
> 'Please, get in,' the man said.
> 'Go ahead with these nice people and I will see you on the other side.'
> 'But why won't you come with me?' she said.
> 'I promise I will see you on the other side. Please stop crying. They will hear us.' But the girl wouldn't listen. So he pushed her in and slapped her hard around the face. She sat back shocked, her hand on her cheek, the men pulling at the cable as she floated away. When she was out of sight completely, the man sat on the ground, like there was no life left in him, and he began to sob. I knew he wouldn't see her again. And that's when I looked back. I shouldn't have, but I turned away from the crowd of people and looked back into the darkness at the land I was leaving. (Lefteri 75)

Lefteri presents a complete picture by describing the scene in vivid detail, guiding readers to imagine and feel the experience. She captures every single step in which a father is leaving his own daughter, this triggers the readers to think and consider the difficulty of this situation. Lefteri captures the reactions of the characters and delivers the shocking scene. In contrast, the UN piece of news previously referred to, readers are exposed to a statement that indicates only a general result. It does not give the readers any chance to think or imagine the details on the particulars unless they do external research.

Historical fiction provides readers with the underlying motives, fears, hopes, and detailed processes that people experience, offering perspectives that historical accounts often cannot convey. While history typically focuses on the incident, location, and outcomes, historical fiction illustrates specific details. Lefteri's detailed descriptions reflect the 'historicity of texts. She provides information about the hardships that face the Syrian refugees which can function as historical records. This distinction between historical fiction and traditional historical accounts is underscored by Alastair Taylor's observation that: "Historical fiction proper looks backward by the help of imagination and antiquarian study. But there is another class of work which we may call

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'contemporary' historical fiction: that is, the epic, drama, or novel of contemporary manners, which acquires historical value only by the passage of time" (464). While both historical fiction and traditional history share subjective qualities, they differ in their aims, functions, and the information they deliver

Atypical Full Stories

People's feelings, understandings, and perspectives are shaped by factors such as society, personal experiences, and the era in which they live. When reading about certain events in history, everyone would naturally tend to view the incidents from their own perspectives and according to their own experiences and knowledge. Therefore, historical fiction presents a key to a better understanding of the whole story, since it provides the readers with the norms, conditions and laws of the era, the zeitgeist. Yet historical fiction is suggested only as an added value and not as a replacement for history Mary Taylor and Brenda Rosler argue that historical fiction offers a valuable learning experience, helping students understand history in context: "Reading historical fiction provides students with a vicarious experience for places and people they could otherwise never know. Often, they are able to see history through a child's point of view and identify with their emotions" (163). Taylor and Rosler's suggestion supports the idea that fiction adds value, offering ideas and meanings not found in history books.

In Lefteri's novel, the hero and the heroine lose their son Sami. Nevertheless, most readers would expect to see the pain and the sadness of that great loss in the reactions of the father and the mother. This expectation is due to the readers' common knowledge of sadness and their own "horizon of expectation." H.R. Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger explain: "The social function becomes manifest only where the literary experience of the reader enters the horizon of expectations of his life, forms his interpretation of the world, and thereby has an effect on his social actions" (*New Literary History* 31). However, some feelings, such as grief and sadness, have dimensions that are difficult to fully understand for those who haven't experienced similar tragedies, such as the loss of a child in a war. Lefteri does not mention the grief of the parents nor talks much about their tragedy, readers—while reading—feel that Lefteri underestimates the possible impact of such an important misfortune in her novel. Lefteri brilliantly holds back some mysteries to create suspense and shock the readers into discovering that Afra's blindness is caused by her deep grief. This unexpected result is revealed nearly at the end of the novel. Due to her shock and sadness for seeing her son die in her lap after the fall of a bomb on their garden in Aleppo, Afra goes blind. She tells the untold story to the British doctor while he is examining her eyes:

> 'It was a bomb,' she says.
> 'Can you tell me a bit more about it?' Afra shifts in her chair, rolling the marble around in her fingers.

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> 'Sami, my son,' she says, 'he was playing in the garden. I let him play there beneath the tree, but I was watching him from the window – there'd been no bombs for two days and I thought it would be all right. He was a child, he wanted to play in the garden with his friends, but there were no children left. He couldn't be inside all the time, it was like a prison for him. He put on his favourite red T-shirt and jean shorts and he asked me if he could play in the garden, and when I looked into his eyes I couldn't say no, because he was a boy, Dr Faruk, a boy who wanted to play.' Afra's voice is strong and steady. 'What was the last thing you saw?' 'Sami's eyes. They were looking up at the sky.' Afra begins to cry in a way that I have never seen her cry. (Lefteri 245)

Such an atypical reaction of an ordinary person and such a unique experience is not found in most history books. However, Lefteri's novel succeeds in delivering it by illustrating the details of the tragic death of Afra's son, and she succeeds in delivering unusual and unexpected feelings that are beyond the audience's horizon of expectations.

Moreover, readers are exposed to many other and similar scenes and dialogues between Nuri and Mohammed—a parentless boy—who is the same age as Sami, Nuri's son who passed away. However, nearly at the end of the novel, it is revealed that Mohammed is an imaginary character who is in fact the creation of Nuri's mind. Nuri refuses to believe or acknowledge the death of his son. Thus, readers are exposed to dialogues that take place only in Nuri's mind. In other words, Lefteri takes the readers into the mind of the character and enables them to comprehend very complicated feelings as such:

> 'Mohammed's?' she says.
> 'Yes. The little boy we met in Istanbul.' She leans forward as if she is in pain and exhales.
> 'This marble was Sami's,' she says.
> 'Sami's?' I say.
> 'Yes.'
> 'But Mohammed was playing with it.' I'm not looking at her now but I hear her exhale again.
> 'I don't know who Mohammed is,' she says. She hands me the marble.
> 'The boy who fell off the boat. Don't you remember?'
> 'A boy did not fall off the boat. There was a girl who kept crying and when her dad went into the water she went in after him and they had to pull her out and wrap her in the women's scarves. I remember it very well. Her mother told me all of it later when we were on the island by the fire.' She pushes the marble towards me, urging me to accept it. I take it, reluctantly.
> 'The boy who came with us from Istanbul to Greece,' I say,
> 'Mohammed. The boy who fell off the boat!' She ignores what I am saying, just gives me that look. She has already answered these questions.
> 'Why didn't you tell me before?' I say.
> 'Because I thought you needed him,' she says. (337)

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In the above quotation, the readers are again introduced to an experience that is beyond their "horizon of expectation." The readers of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* do not have a clue that a primary character that they are following throughout the novel, is the creation of the agonized father.

What a character thinks or feels is not normally mentioned in historical accounts. History focuses on the event and the numbers. On the contrary, historical fiction provides this exclusive trip to the state of mind and the personal experience of the character. The novelist Linda Kass explains this as such: "But a novel, different than a history book that recounts factual touch points of the past, tells a story and does so through character. What does this character think and feel? Now we are in the realm of fiction—historical fiction" (par. 4). In other words, historical fiction brings life to historical events as Crystal King writes in this regard: "Nowhere is that more true than in historical fiction, which allows readers to step inside the minds of those who have shaped the world we live in, and to imagine the all-too-human side of history" (par. 1). Kass's and King's ideas are embodied in Lefteri's novel as she delivers the emotions, the states of mind and the thoughts of the characters.

Additionally, news agencies normally present the results of an incident and maybe the reasons, whereas historical fiction novels provide the full story from the beginning till the end with a lot of its details. A listener or a reader of the news is introduced to one scene of the story, while the reader of historical fiction lives the whole fictional experience through the eyes of the characters, and therefore, the readers of historical fiction gain a unique experience of understanding and picturing the story. It is like seeing a piece of a puzzle, the particular, versus the whole picture, the general, with all its pieces arranged in their places.

Other Refugees' Stories

While reading a historical text about Syria for instance, the reader automatically focuses on the Syrian case only and that it completely normal. However, historical fiction stories sometimes include other people's experiences, the experiences of people in similar conditions. In other words, it is not only the Syrian case that is to be focused on, but it is rather the human experience of any person who might face the same conditions. For example, in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, the readers are introduced to other immigrants and refugee stories such as the old Moroccan man who lives in the centre for refugees, and Diomande, the refugee from the Ivory Coast. It is implicitly indicated that regardless of the nationalities, any human being would react almost the same way when confronted with such hard circumstances. Historical fiction shifts the readers' attention from a certain group of people to a universal human experience. Therefore, historical fiction takes the readers into the lives of other people and creates a better understanding of the past by making the readers feel the text as can be seen in the depiction of Diomande's story:

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> Diomande sits down again, dejected. 'But I tell them. I tell them life so hard. I tell them about Libya and prison and being beaten till I think I will die. I tell them my sister and mum's life difficult because of civil war. I have no job and my mum she sent me to find better life. I tell them all this. I tell them that here there is hope. Here maybe I will find work. I can clean, I can cook, I can teach, I have many skills.' The birds have silenced now and Diomande's back is so hunched over that the wings under his T-shirt look as if they are opening up. 'I also tell them how beautiful it is there, my country, how much I love being there.' (Lefteri 307)

Such inclusion of stories of people from other nationalities awakens the readers to the fact that these wars and misfortunes threaten every human being. Readers start to imagine themselves in the shoes of every character in the novel, not only the Syrians. The novel also features refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, the Ivory Coast, Somalia, Morocco, and others. These stories show the bright and the dark sides of these people. In other words, Lefteri succeeds in delivering their stories without being biased or tendentious. Additionally, the readers' attention is now on the humanitarian case which does not care about nationalities. History focuses on the events related to specific people in a specific country whereas historical fiction concentrates on the humanitarian aspect. History shows us a certain case as a national one, historical fiction deals with the issue as something that could happen to any human being.

Feelings and understanding unite people from all over the world. Historical fiction frees the readers from political boundaries as in Nuri's description of the Moroccan man in the novel: "The Moroccan man stands to one side of us, watching this scene. I notice him now, the sad look in his eyes, the way he is winding his fingers around one another as if he does not know what else to do" (Lefteri 357). Crystal King writes in acceptance of this pattern: "But historical fiction novels are not only a better read but might be more helpful in making sense of the current world. Historical novels do not just tell us what happened; they make us feel. They create empathy for what other people went through in different times, in a way that is divorced from our own political baggage" (par. 12). Lefteri's inclusion of non-Syrian refugees' stories shows that the issues and circumstances the characters go through are not tied to any nationality, it could be anyone regardless of their nationalities.

Lefteri may aim to portray refugees as resilient, overcoming hardship to adapt to new societies, as seen with Nuri and Afra in the UK. Some might say that this might be an attempt of her to celebrate the story of her own parents. However, Lefteri also presents the darker side of some refugees, showing that her empathy doesn't prevent her from portraying both good and evil. In the novel, Lefteri depicts the story of an Afghan refugee who plays music brilliantly and seems to be a good person but he is, in fact, a child abuser:

> Night after night, the predators came out of the woods. Nadim became more and more friendly with the two boys, and as the nights passed the boys disappeared and reappeared again, in the same spot, each time looking more troubled than before. But they had new shoes, and

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> even a new phone, and they bantered with each other and fought and laughed, and they clung to each other, especially in the early hours of the morning when they returned from wherever they had been. Then they slept, late into the afternoon, even when the sun was beaming down on them, their bodies immovable, their minds switched off. (Lefteri 241)

Maybe, it is a call to abandon stereotypical ways of thinking. There is no clear distinction between good or bad refugees. Each individual represents a person of himself or herself. No one has to carry the burdens of millions of other people just because they share the same nationality.

Stories Of Individuals Versus Public Stories

Refugees and those who have to flee their houses usually suffer a lot on their way to seeking asylum. The word "refugee" is mentioned a lot in news agencies, in addition to many expressions like "refugees' crisis" and many debates are held on the number of refugees and the burden they lay upon the host countries and societies. A piece of news on *The New York Times* website entitled "The Refugee Crisis Isn't a 'European Problem,'" is full of numbers and statistics that dehumanize the refugees and label them as "problems":

> The brunt of the crisis has fallen on the Turks, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, the Iraqis and the Lebanese. Funding appeals by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have failed to meet their targets. The squalor in the refugee camps has become unendurable. Now the refugees have decided that if the international community won't help them, if neither Russia nor the United States is going to force the war to an end, they won't wait any longer. They are coming our way. And we are surprised? (Ignatieff par.5)

However, the daily lives, sufferings, hopes, and circumstances of refugees are rarely mentioned in news reports or history books, as this genre doesn't aim to represent personal stories or details. While some reports, on some news agencies, do talk about some refugees' stories and their sufferings, these reports do not provide the reader or the listener with the full story as well as historical novels do. Additionally, the impact of receiving these stories from news outlets or history differs greatly from that of historical fiction. To understand these differences, we must compare how similar stories are represented in news, history, and mainstream media versus in art, historical fiction, and literature.

Lefteri provides the readers with the full story of refugees, Nuri, his wife Afra, and their relatives through fiction. Lefteri explains to the readers the reasons behind each character's decision to leave Aleppo, some leaving to save their lives, some to unite with their beloved ones, and many other reasons. For instance, Nuri explains one of his reasons to go, which is to meet his beloved cousin again and re-establish their business and passion of beekeeping:

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> In the corner of the room there is a computer with Internet access. I sit down at the desk to see if Mustafa has sent me another message. He left Syria before me and we have been emailing each other throughout our journeys. He is waiting for me in the north of England in Yorkshire. I remember how his words kept me moving. Where there are bees there are flowers, and where there are flowers there is new life and hope. Mustafa is the reason I came here. He is the reason that Afra and I kept going until we got to the United Kingdom. But now all I can do is stare at the reflection of my face on the screen. I do not want Mustafa to know what has become of me. We are finally in the same country, but if we meet he will see a broken man. I do not believe he will recognise me. I turn away from the screen. (Lefteri 30)

Here, Lefteri represents another personal story that is also not among "the horizon of expectation" of the British audience, for instance. The common ideas and concepts of refugees are simply that they escaped war or are looking for a job. Lefteri illustrates other reasons that widen the ideas of readers, she does this by introducing the characters and their lives before the main incident (the war), and this automatically shows the resemblance of human nature.

On the contrary, taking the piece of news published on 7 January 2018 on the *Vocal Europe* titled: "The Smuggling of Syrians Evolves Into An Economic And Social Conundrum In Turkey And Europe," as a case study, it can be observed that news agencies merely report the reasons of the refugees' crisis, assuming, that millions of people have the same common problem: "Ongoing conflicts in Syria have taken a devastating toll on the country's people. So far, 11 million Syrians have fled their homes. Most Syrians have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and in more distant EU countries" (Cengiz par. 2). This reinforces the stereotypical view of refugees as individuals escaping war and seeking employment. Furthermore, the excessive use of numbers shifts the attention from the humanitarian aspects to the statistical and financial issues.

The *Vocal Europe* article equates refugees with smugglers, portraying both as dangerous threats to host societies, while ignoring or naturalizing the refugees' suffering and hardships. However, Lefteri depicts the journey of the Syrian couple to Turkey and the dangers they face, their stay in İstanbul and their deal with the smuggler, their dangerous rubber boat trip to Greece, their residence in the Greek islands and Athens, and their arrival in the UK at last and the procedures they undergo in the migration office. The novel offers a detailed portrayal of these events, capturing the characters' motives, emotions, fears, expectations, nostalgia, and other deeply human experiences. For example, Lefteri writes about Afra and Nuri's stay at the smuggler's apartment and how the smuggler, Mr. Fotakis, tries to rape Afra:

> There was a long pause, and then she said, 'He came in here – Mr Fotakis. I thought it was you because you'd locked the door. I didn't know he had the key. He came in here and he lay down beside me, just where you are lying now. I realised it wasn't you because of the smell of his skin when he came closer to me, and I called out and he put his hand over my mouth and

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> his ring scratched the side of my face, and he told me I should be quiet or you would come back and find me dead.' She didn't need to say any more. (Lefteri 328)

News agencies typically offer a broad overview and omit individual experiences. Instead of addressing personal tragedies, such as rape, they focus on larger issues like the Syrian war. For instance, Cengiz writes: "In terms of smuggling and trafficking, Turkey has been a hotbed of activity. The country's geographic location bridging Asia and the Middle East with EU countries helps to facilitate smuggling and trafficking operations" (Cengiz par. 4). This sheds light on a subordinate problem and neglects the main one, that is of the war. According to Cengiz's article, the problem is the smuggling taking place and not that the people are being smuggled.

Lefteri reveals the motives behind the couple's decision of taking the risky waves on a rubber boat in order to reach Greece. Additionally, Lefteri exposes the readers to dialogues that express the fear and the devastation of the characters who have no other track. The little boy Mohammed expresses his terror and distress to Nuri, and the whole experience on the rubber boat is illustrated:

> A man started to recite a verse from the Qur'an, and as we went further out to sea, other people joined in, their voices merging with the sounds of the waves and the wind. I had one hand in the water. I kept it there, feeling the movement, the rush of sea, the aliveness of it, the way it got colder as we moved away from the land. I placed my other hand on Afra's arm but she didn't respond; her lips were pursed, like a closed shell. Mohammed's teeth were chattering.
> 'We haven't fallen in yet,' he said.
> I laughed. 'No,' I said. 'Not yet.'
> The boy's eyes widened, full of genuine fear. It seemed that he'd been relying on my ignorant optimism.
> 'Don't worry,' I said, 'we won't fall in.
> 'People are praying. Allah will hear.'
> 'Why didn't he hear the other people?'
> 'We've been through this already.'
> 'I know, because we're special. My feet are wet.'
> 'Mine too.'
> 'My feet are cold.'
> 'Mine too.' Mohammed glanced over at Afra. (123)

This quotation highlights the details in Lefteri's novel, where each sentence raises questions and builds suspense, reflecting the slow passage of time during a horrifying experience. These scenes are not represented in the same way in traditional historical accounts or the media, as such experiences are usually represented superficially and in passing, and the focus is usually on the result and not on the experience itself. Lefteri goes on to illustrate the horrors of the dark night at sea. Then she sets the experience

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of a small child who drowns in the deep water, other little girls crying in despair, the terror of men, and the details of the horrific experience:

> 'Mohammed!' I called. 'Mohammed!' The torch flashed over the men's faces. I plunged into the black silence, but even with the torch I could barely see anything. I stayed under for as long as I could, feeling with my hands in case I should catch onto something, an arm or a leg; when there was no air left in my lungs, when the pressure of death was pushing down on me, I came back up gasping into the darkness and the wind. I was about to take a deep breath and go back under when I saw a man holding Mohammed, lifting him up into the boat. The women took the coughing and spluttering boy into their arms, removing their headscarves and wrapping them around him. We were deep into international waters now; the smuggler was right, the water did change, the waves were different, their rhythms foreign. Then everyone flashed their torches, hoping a coastguard would see, hoping we were close enough to Greece that somebody would save us. These lights in the darkness were like prayers, because there was no sign of anyone coming. The men couldn't get back onto the boat – there was still too much water inside. I could feel my body becoming numb. I wanted to sleep, wanted to rest my head upon the moving waves and sleep. 'Nuri!' someone was calling. 'Nuri!' I saw the stars above, and Afra's face. 'Nuri, Nuri, there is a boat!' There was a hand on my arm. 'Uncle Nuri, a boat is coming!' Mohammed was staring down at me, pulling me. My life jacket had started to deflate but I began to kick my legs to stay afloat, to get the blood moving in my body again. (Lefteri 127)

In this excerpt, Lefteri illustrates the experience of the refugees while depicting multiple aspects of their experiences. She delivers the conversations between the characters, in addition to their thoughts and ideas. She sets the settings of the place and time delivering every important detail. All these factors contribute to a more complete picture of the scene and the situation. In other words, the absence of these elements in historical accounts takes away the humanitarian experience. This shifts the attention to the results without understanding the causes and the process as a whole.

Talking about the same experience of people risking their lives at sea, it is possible to refer to a few more details that are mentioned in the articles and reports that tackled this issue as in this one published on 27 September 2015 titled: "Migrant boat sinks off Turkey coast, 17 Syrians dead," the report only provides the number of people drowned, the date they sank, and the number of survivors. Unlike historical fiction, in historical records, there are no personal details and there is no mention of motives, feelings, or human experience. The piece of news on *The Indian Express* goes as:

> Seventeen Syrian refugees including five children drowned on Sunday when their boat sank in Turkish waters on its way to Greece, local media reported.
> The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies from the wooden boat that had set off from the Turkish holiday resort town of Bodrum for the Greek island of Leros, the Dogan news agency reported. The refugees drowned when they failed to get out of the boat's cabin, the

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> news agency said. Another 20 migrants, who were on the boat's deck, survived and swam back to the Turkish coast, it added. All were wearing life jackets. The survivors were taken to a morgue in Bodrum to identify their drowned relatives.
> There has been a sharp spike in the numbers of migrants and refugees setting out from Turkey in flimsy boats for the European Union in search of better lives. Most are fleeing conflicts and misery in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Africa. (Indian Express par.1)

The key difference between the representations of the rubber boat trips, often referred to as 'death boats,' lies in their impact on readers. Readers of the previous piece of news, for instance, have little or no information about the horrors and the reasons behind this tragedy. While many readers may feel sympathy, others may be quick to judge refugees as mere risk-takers, largely due to their lack of understanding of the Syrian conflict's complexities or due to prevailing prejudices. In other words, reading this piece of news requires little knowledge, at least, of the conditions these people undergo. In contrast, readers of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* are introduced to the characters' lives before, during, and after the war. The readers have access to the experiences of the characters and their challenges and confrontations:

> In addition, stories of the past help children to understand that all humans have the same needs, wants, and desires: All people want to be respected and loved, feel secure, and have a sense of belonging. Through historical literature children can see the interdependence of humankind, realizing that we all are affected by the decisions of people we have never met. Finally, through historical literature, children may develop a clearer understanding of human problems and interpersonal relationships. This knowledge could help them see and judge the mistakes of the past and pursue new options in the future. The struggles and hardships that are courageously met by a character in a book may be a source of inspiration to children reading the work. (Johnson and Ebert 489)

An example that highlights the impact of art and literature on people's lives is the famous photo taken by Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir of the drowned Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi. This powerful picture shows the lifeless body of a three-year-old boy on the beach of Bodrum in Turkey. This image succeeds in spreading a massive wave of anger, sorrow, and calls that demand the end of the Syrian catastrophe. *The Middle East Eye* published an article about the outraged reactions of people to the photograph of Aylan Kurdi on 5 September 2015 titled: "Aylan Kurdi Photo Fuels Anger on Arabic Social Media": "Arabic-speaking Twitter users express outrage and blame a number of world actors for the drowning of Aylan Kurdi" (Salahi par. 1). This example demonstrates the power of art and literature, as hundreds of news articles and reports covering the crisis did not evoke the same level of outrage.

The photo was neither the first nor likely the last image of a child drowning, yet it had a far greater impact than countless reports of Syrian families lost at sea. While numerous articles have documented these tragedies for years, few evoked any sig-

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nificant reaction. Why did one photo of a single child spark such an outcry? It seems that people are more moved by personal stories they can relate to. This is precisely what literature, especially historical fiction, achieves—presenting an event from within, rather than from an external, detached perspective like history or news agencies. As such, historical fiction offers a deeper understanding, a fuller picture, and a more human experience:

> Stories are central to human cognition and communication. We engage with others through stories, and storytelling is a lot more than just a recitation of facts and events.
>
> As human beings, we are automatically drawn to stories because we see ourselves reflected in them. We inevitably interpret the meaning in stories and understand ourselves better. (Corson-Knowles par. 2)

Historical fiction focuses on individual stories, allowing readers to connect more deeply with a single person's experience than with a broad narrative about an unknown group. Personal stories, often overlooked or deemed insignificant in historical accounts, are given importance in historical fiction. It places marginalized characters at the heart of the narrative.

In conclusion, historical fiction provides a unique and essential perspective on the refugee experience, as exemplified in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. Unlike traditional news reports and historical accounts, which often present events in broad, dehumanizing or inhuman terms, historical fiction delves into the personal stories of individuals, offering readers a more intimate and empathetic understanding of their struggles. Lefteri's portrayal of Nuri and Afra's journey highlights the complexities of human emotion, the hardships of migration, and the resilience required to survive. Through detailed depictions of their experiences, historical fiction bridges the gap between raw statistics and the lived reality of individuals, allowing readers to connect deeply with the characters. By focusing on the human aspect of historical events, historical fiction not only enriches our understanding of the past but also fosters empathy and compassion, enabling us to better comprehend the profound impacts of conflict and displacement.

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