Writing Refugee Lives: On Home

Sena Taha
Ibn Haldun University, Alliance of Civilizations Institute
snyya.taha@stu.ihu.edu.tr; sanyyakyo@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes an unacknowledged treasure trove of refugee literature that contests media stereotypes of anonymous, needy people fleeing their homes and creating problems wherever they go. It is part of the author's doctoral dissertation on the role of Syrian refugees' literature in creating a better understanding of the lives of people in unfamiliar places and terrifying phases of their lives. Based on her reading of 15 Syrian refugee literary works and her interviews with 10 Syrian writers, in this article, she presents an analysis of the concept of home for refugees. First, she compares definitions of diasporic peoples, exiles, migrants, and refugees. Second, she reviews theories on home. Third, she analyzes how Syrian writers who narrate refugee experiences refer to home in their stories. She argues that for refugees, all definitions of home disappear instantly. Interweaving memory and creativity, refugees use their past to rebuild the foundations of the present and re-create home.

***Keywords*:** Home, refugee, literature, memory, creativity, key

Home

> *Through car lights, she looked for something special to carve the sentence: 'Sara was here' … Finally, she found a large tree … With great difficulty, she went about carving the words with the key to her home that she wore as a necklace following the Palestinian custom. The only difference was that, for her, there was no home left.* (al-Barghūth, 2021, p. 10)

> *I need medicine for the wounds that have opened since I left home. I am alone, lost among the displaced. I do not think I can find medicine for these wounds in this world's pharmacies.* (Shākūsh, 2020, p. 14)

Home, a word whose sound starts near the heart and ends in a state of being. The letter 'h' is air. It comes out of the lungs and passes through the vocal cords in silence, signaling the following vibration. It is released from the mouth in a kind of comfort that precedes action. In Sufism, the sound 'h' comes with an additional 'u' to symbolize the One and Only. 'Hu' is the essence of all things. 'Hu' is God. It is in every breath. Dervishes of the Mevlevi order combine their hands over their chest, breathe through, and chant 'Huwa Allah' as they whirl to release their ego and connect with God. 'Ome', not far in sensation from 'Om' with a long, consistent humming of the sound 'm', is the vibration of the universe and ultimate truth. In Hinduism, 'Om' is hailed and crowned as a sound of sacred connections. It is the sound of the universe that contains all other sounds within it. 'Om' is a mantra of spiritual power and peace chanted in

Hindu practices and meditation circles. Coming together, ‘h’ and ‘ome’ create a whirlwind of silence and noise, of emotion and intellect.

Aliens at Un-Home

This article is about the concept of home in Syrian stories by and about refugees, women and men, who are struggling to understand the meaning of home in an age of nation-states where “only nationals could be citizens” (Arendt, 1973, p. 275). i.e., at home in their nations.

Nation-state constructs its understanding of home through homogeneity on the one hand and nativity on the other. As critics Lynn Staeheli and Caroline Nagel (2006) write, “Home and citizenship carry contradictory and ambiguous meanings” (p. 3). Home is a place but also a state of mind, of belonging and not belonging, rootedness and movement, the familiar and the strange. Home can create happiness or misery, stagnation or growth.

Citizen, defined by political theorist Hannah Arendt (1970) as a “citizen among citizens of a country among countries, [a person whose] rights and duties must be defined and limited, not only by those of his fellow citizens but also by the boundaries of a territory” (p. 81) transformed in the 20th century, to *national* in a nation-state “whose citizens, at least in theory, were of homogeneous stock” (Arendt, 1973, p. 238). Based on her experience as a German Jewish refugee, Arendt (1973) notes homogeneity as the basis upon which nation-states evolved, making a difference between peoples who shared a similar race, religion, region, or language and constituted a nation of their own and peoples who “were too small and too scattered to reach full nationhood” (p. 272). According to this definition, the former are at home, and the latter are not.

Giorgio Agamben (2000), an Italian philosopher and reader of Arendt, gives another interpretation of nation-states. For him, “*Nation-state* means a state that makes nativity or birth … the foundation of its own sovereignty” (p. 20). Agamben (2000) argues that, whereas politics of the European classical period separated human life at home from political life in the polis, the nation-states of the modern period combined the two lives into one, equating home with polis. This means that individuals become nationals the moment they are born in the nation that is their home. Those who reside outside their place of origin are non-citizens, non-nationals, away from home.

The United Nations (UN) *Declaration on the Expulsion of Aliens* (2014) defines non-nationals as *aliens* far from their home. An alien is “an individual who does not have the nationality of the State in whose territory that individual is present” (International Organization of Migration, 2019a, p. 8). Based on this definition, diasporic peoples, exiles, migrants, and refugees are aliens. Agustin Nsanzineza Gus, a refugee poet in England, writes:

… a refugee is a citizenshipless citizen

A heartless human being

A consciousless conscience

An unbearable burden

… Did I say humans?

No, sorry

The world of potential refugees

Or better than that

The world of refugees to be.

(quoted in Nyers, 2013, p. 65)

Gus criticizes alienness. Aliens are not completely human beings.

Aliens are at *un-home*. "UN-HOME [original caps], as being 'in' but not being 'of' the countries in which they are located" (Doná, 2015, p. 69). This makes them *dis-placed* or *out of place*. Edward Said (2000), a Palestinian who lived the life of an exile in the U.S., writes: "In the deepest sense 'home' was something I was excluded from (p. 61) … The overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place" (p. 3). Literary scholars Gus and Said feel excluded from home. Does this mean that they constitute a community of aliens at un-home? In other words, do they share the same experience?

If nationals are, in Arendt's words, homogeneous, "at least in theory," aliens are not. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) (2019a) has a glossary of terms of around 250 pages about displacement. The Glossary collects definitions of terms provided by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The glossary is purposeful; there is not one but multiple ways of becoming alien. In legal terms, all nationals are at home; each alien is at un-home in his/her own way.[1]

Clarification of Terms

In my search for the concepts of home and the refugee, I attended a panel at the 2023 Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Conference that was entitled *Modern Arabic Exile Literature*. The speakers talked about the Arab *diaspora* and analyzed pieces of literature by writers who were *refugees*. They referred to Arab *Mahjar* literature and described it as *diasporic* and *migratory*. The terms were confusing. Diaspora, exile, the migrant, and the refugee collapsed into one category. I had noticed a similar habit of using one of these terms to mean the other at other public as well as academic events. When I asked the speakers about it, they had no answer.

[1] Playing on Tolstoy's famous introduction to *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 1878/2016, p. 3).

They did not see the difference. This made me realize that my search for clear terms is crucial. Each of the terms comes out of a distinct experience that I explain using the concept of home.

Like refugees, diasporic peoples, exiles, and migrants are away from their home countries. Deprived of basic human rights, they leave, exploring various routes and attaching different meanings to home. In what follows, I will provide definitions for each of the terms and highlight their distinctive features while bearing in mind that, within particular contexts, one definition may blur into another.

Diaspora

In extended use, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), *diaspora* means "any group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin; the dispersion or spread of a group of people in this way; an instance of this" (n., 2). Dispersion and collectivity define diaspora. The term is an umbrella term in plural form. It primarily refers to the community of the Jews who lived outside their *homeland,* which they have always called the *land of Israel*. Scholar Martin Baumann (2000) studies the genealogy of *diaspora* and discovers that it was first restricted to Jewish and Christian contexts – the Jews using it to describe being away from the *promised land* and the Christians to describe being away from the *heavenly city Jerusalem* (pp. 318-319). This usage continued until the 1960s when the term broadened: it first appeared within African Studies to describe the dispersion of sub-Saharan Africans through the colonial slave trade (p. 321) and later in several regional-thematic fields such as Armenian studies, Irish studies, and Tibetian studies to describe the dispersion of national, cultural, and religious groups and communities (p. 322).

Diasporic peoples are only physically detached from their home countries. Over time, their dispersed communities unite in the imagination of the homeland they lost. They share "collective memory, myth of original homeland, idealization of homeland, a will to return, maintenance of homeland and ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity" (Pokharel, 2020, p. 91). For them, returning home is a will and also a right. The Palestinian diaspora preserves their right to return by keeping the key to their houses in Palestine and passing it on through generations.

The key is a symbol of resilience and proof of ownership of the lost homeland. Homeland is never forgotten. It is embedded in the mind and heart. The intent to return home is unquestionable.

Exile

Exile prompts me to think of an *Ex-country*, *Ex-* meaning *out of* in Latin, and *former* in modern, colloquial English. Exile has two definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.). The first is a "prolonged absence from one's native country or a place regarded as home, endured by force of circumstances or voluntarily undergone for some purpose" (n.[1], I.1a). Exile does not refer to a group but to an individual. Prolonged absence from home comes first, and the circumstances that lead to it come second in the definition. The sequence is meaningful. Exiles prioritize the experience over the cause of the experience that is compulsive or voluntary. For them, the loss of home is what matters. They romanticize home and their inability to return home.

Under repressive regimes, exiles either leave or are expelled as a sort of punishment, forced to stay away from their native country. In the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), the second definition of exile is: "banishment to a foreign country" (n.[1], I.1b.i). The punishment works. Expelled exiles suffer the distance and nurture longing for their home. Longing triggers activism. Political exiles are both romantics and activists. They fight against the regime that caused their exile from home. Fifty years after his exile from Chile in 1973, when President Salvador Allende was killed in a military coup, academic and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman still writes about his home. In his article titled *Duck!* (2023), he laments the days when Chile was on its way to liberation and when he felt so free as to publish *How to Read Donald Duck* (2020), criticizing the ideology of Walt Disney's cartoon and its negative effect on Chileans. An exile in the U.S., Dorfman keeps dreaming of a democratic Chile.

Romanticizing home is necessary for exiles to re-form their identity and bring themselves to existence. Edward Said says: "Exiles feel … an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (Said, 2002, p. 177). Exile creates artists.

Migrant

From the diasporic peoples who construct the idea of an alternative home that they may never have inhabited and exiles who romanticize home, I turn to the *migrant*, who does not see home as the ideal place. In the *Glossary on Migration* provided by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) (2019a), the migrant is "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons" (p. 132). The key phrases are: variety of reasons, borders, and movement.

Reasons for migration could be *positive*, such as work opportunities, study, and family reunion. I focus here on the migrant who chooses to leave because life in their home country is intolerable. *Negative* determinants of migration include: "poverty, food insecurity, poor governance, disasters, inequalities … persecution, human rights violations, armed conflicts, violence or serious disturbances of public order, among others" (IOM, 2019a, p. 58). In a negative context, the migrant loses hope for a humane life at home and leaves.

The migrant crosses international borders. Crossing borders dehumanizes migrants and transforms them into a legal category. There are legal/documented migrants and illegal/ undocumented migrants. The difference lies in whether the migrants follow national procedures for seeking asylum or not. National procedures can be too complicated, leaving migrants in limbo for years. Consequently, some migrants choose to be illegal, taking unsafe and deadly routes to seek asylum in countries of destination, proving their vulnerability, helplessness, and need to leave home.

The hardships suffered in places that lack basic human rights pressure the migrants' decision to leave their home country and seek a better life abroad. The IOM (2019b) reports that more than 40 percent of migrants worldwide in 2019 originated from (India, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) (p. 26). Migrants move to countries of larger economies either temporarily, hoping for circumstances at home to change, or permanently, wishing never to return home.

Refugee

The *refugee* is a migrant who does not choose but is forced out of home, with a high degree of vulnerability. International law defines refugees as those who "have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (UNHCR, n.d.). They are "unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, n.d.). This definition is stated in the 1951 Convention that was drafted to grant protection to refugees following the two World Wars. The context is war or conflict. The outcome is fear, fleeing, and inability or unwillingness to return home.

Refugees do not leave but escape from home. The World Wars of the 20th century created conditions for millions of people fleeing home for safety. During and after the World Wars, the first refugees were mostly from European countries. Geographer Malcolm J. Proudfoot (1956) estimates that around 60 million Europeans were forcibly displaced during and after World War II (p. 21).

Drafting the definition, the UNHCR determined the conditions of who a refugee is. Terms are useful for international humanitarian organizations and nation-states in processing asylum applications and legalizing the displaced people's presence outside their home countries. Upon arrival, asylum-seekers must tell their stories to the authorities concerned. If their stories fit the definition, they are accepted as refugees and granted human rights that differ between host countries.

Today, refugees originate from all over the world. The UNHCR (n.d.) reports that, by May 2024, more than 120 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide. Their stories are particularly important. Refugees must talk about home, their house, their relatives, the conflict, their role in the conflict, their escape, and their arrival at the host country in order to have their case studied. They are obliged to fit their experience at home into a grid to gain transfer to a destination of choice. Asylum procedures transformed home into a legal story, blurring the refugee's relation to home.

Refugees are unable to return. How do they think about home? Do they claim a right to their home and create a collective memory of the homeland, like diasporic peoples? Do they romanticize and glorify home, like exiles? Or are they unsure about their attachment to home, like migrants? What if, for them, home has an entirely different meaning? How can the concept of home be theorized?

Theories of Home

It is only since the 1980's that research on home theory proliferated. Sociologist Craig M. Gurney (1997) refers to two main developments that quickened the pace of theories on home. The first is a number of international conferences and edited collections on home, such as *Home Environments* (1985). Editors of the volume Irwin Altman and Carol M. Werner (1985) note that "researchers and theorists from many disciplines have begun to meet regularly, share ideas and perspectives, and move the investigation of psychological, social, and behavioral aspects of home" into the forefront in interdisciplinary studies (p. ix). The second development that Gurney

(1997) mentions is some crucial contributions from the feminist critique of home as a house. What are the definitions that theorists made?

Critic Shelley Mallett (2004) investigates the ways in which theorists defined home. Definitions were mostly positive: Human geographers looked at home as a *place* where one stays, a place of dwelling and residence, a place of origin and return, where everything starts and ends. It is also a *space* that is familiar and comfortable, an environment inhabited by people and things. For literary scholars, home is a *haven* and refuge where people can relax. For sociologists, home is a socio-spatial *system*, a source of identity formation, and a unit of relationships and social interaction. For psychologists, home is an emotional *experience*, an expression of the senses, and an intellectual experience. They saw home as a *being*, an embodiment of the human *I* and *we* that creates meaning through life with others. Negative definitions came from Feminists who moved beyond house design and defined home as a social and political *order* and as a *constitution* of hierarchy and domination where women are abused. Based on her critical review of the literature on home, Mallett (2004) concludes that home is not only *where* we live but also *how* we live.

In studies of displacement, home is still under-theorized. Critic Bhagabat Nayak (2021) notes that "home is vaguely defined or under-theorized in scholarly conventions and philosophical contexts of diaspora" (n.d.), in addition to migrants and refugees. This is because home in these contexts is lost, and the UNHCR leaves the displaced with no option but to return or endlessly search for home.

There are three definitions of home that critic Giorgia Doná (2015) sees to be in tension in the discourse on forced displacement. To differentiate between them, Doná uses upper as well as lower case letters. Accordingly:

> *HOME* refers to the broader political and historical context in which home is understood and experienced, and to the homeland as defined by the national borders of nation-states; *Home* describes forced migrants' memories of, longing for, and imaginations of homes that are idealized; and *home* describes day-to-day practices and meanings individuals give to the places they inhabit. (p. 69)

The UNHCR and nation-states that are hosts of displaced people define *HOME* as homeland. Diasporic peoples believe in this definition and sustain it in their imagination of home return. On the other hand, *Home* in terms of memories of the ideal is similar to the exilic romantic vision of home. Displacement is an illness. Return to the homeland is the only cure. Refugees, however, do not see return as the only cure. In the introduction to this article, the refugee narrator, Shākūsh (2020), says that she is constantly in pain, unable to find a cure for her loss of home anywhere in the world, not even in her home country. The cure appears in Doná's third definition of *home*. Home, in terms of daily practices, gives refugees the space for homemaking. Refugees work on emplacing their displacement and finding new ways to be at home beyond the borders of their home countries. I use this definition of the concept of home to analyze the literary pieces written by Syrian refugees about the refugee experience in the following section.

What Does Home Mean for Refugees?

Once, I had the diasporic dream of returning home. Even though I did not live in the Palestinian Yarmouk Camp and I did not study in UNRWA schools, as a Palestinian growing up in Syria, the imagination of a lost homeland to which I had a right lived in me. Following my displacement from Syria, as a Syrian refugee, my feelings changed. The bonds that I had with both Palestine and Syria were broken. I only realized this when, upon writing this article, I posed the question to myself: what does home mean to me? I could not think of an answer. I did not know. It was complicated.

For refugees, the myriad of definitions of home explodes and vanishes in one instant. Refugees lose home as the place, house, and homeland. The place falls into ruins. They lose the familiar space. They are in camps across borders, makeshift shelters, or unfamiliar cities. They lose the life they shared with their kin and loved ones. People they grew up among are dead, under arrest, or asylum seekers in faraway countries. They lose safety and comfort. All the bonds that give them home melt into thin air. Ironic but true: refugees also lose their revolutions and civil wars.

In one of my visits to the Syrian writer ʾIbtisām Shākūsh who was forced to leave her home in Syria to Turkey in 2012, I asked about loss. The stories that Shākūsh wrote about Syrian refugees are tragic. They represent true experiences of people whom she knew had lost their houses, their loved ones, and everything they owned. “Is tragedy all that is left?” I asked. Smiling, Shākūsh took her phone, spent some time searching, and then showed me the photo below.:

Figure 1. ***"Despite Everything Syrians Create" by 'Ibtisām Shākūsh.***
(Image copyright 'Ibtisām Shākūsh).

"This is a corner in one of the Syrian refugee camps in Southern Turkey. The people there made gardens between the tents," Shākūsh paused for a minute as I looked. Then, she said, "This is hope for you."

The photo shows a passage between the tents in the refugee camp. Towards the narrow end, a man crouches to enter the tent. At the entrance, there is laundry. Tents are fragile. Yet, people found a way to live, not for a short period. The passage is filled with greenery, without which the tents are indistinguishable from the yellow sand. The plants bring life to the place. On the left, there is corn, and on the right, zucchini buds. In camps, refugees make gardens.

This refugee camp is not the only one with gardens. Photographer Henk Wildschut visits the Choucha camp on the borders of Tunisia, the Zaatari camp in Jordan, and the Bekaa refugee camps in Lebanon and concludes his trips with his book *Rooted* (2019). In all of these camps,

refugees made gardens. Rooted are the plants, but also the refugees who defy their uprootedness and make home in the most fragile of places.

Gardens in refugee camps serve more than one purpose. Vegetables are planted for food, and flowers for beauty. In the small and crowded space of the camp, pots around the entrance of tents and between the tents that are too close to each other provide safety and privacy. Under an open sky and over arid land, trees provide shade and protection. Gardens are also a source of memories, the memories of the lost home that refugees can retrieve anywhere with a seed.

Researcher Yasmine Shamma (2020) interviews Syrian refugees in Jordan's Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps about their gardens. She discovers that the plants there make the refugees feel as though they are at home and also in heaven. Referring to the Arabic term for garden *Jneayneh*, she explains that it is derived from *Jannah*, meaning paradise (p. 327). In one of the interviews, a Syrian refugee woman shows Shamma a flower she planted at the entrance of her tent. The flower's name is *Muknisit il Janneh*: Heaven's Sweeper (pp. 327-328).

Figure 2. ***A muknisit al janna bush, growing outside a tent in the Azraq Refugee Camp, from "Both in refugee camps and in lockdown gardening offers a release" by Yasmine Shamma, The Independent, 2020.*** (Image copyright Yasmine Shamma).

The photo is visually striking. The Heaven's Sweepers shine against the dull surface of the refugee tent that is marked with the UNHCR logo. They grow tall and strong over the arid earth, embodying the resilience of the people who strive to give rise to their roots.

Is tragedy all that is left? No. If refugees grow heaven inside the camps, this means that they do not give in to tragedy. Refugees do not surrender to their loss. They labor to emplace their displacement. They are on a mission to search for and explore new definitions of home.

On a Mission: The Refugee's Search for Home

When all definitions of home vanish, refugees need to redefine home from scratch. They start searching for home from the moment they set foot on the refugee route. Refugees' search for home is an arduous journey. Anthropologists Parin Dossa & Jelena Golubovic (2019) describe refugee homemaking as a *form of labor*: "The experience of forced displacement deeply unsettles our received notions of home, exposing the significant labour that goes into cultivating and achieving this most basic sense of security" (p. 172). When home is nothing, it can be anything.

Observing the gardens in the camps, writer Shākūsh takes a photo, writes down some notes on her memoir, and moves on, motivated to do her search and find her home. Set in Southern Turkey at a time during the beginning of the Syrian displacement, *Tawq fi ʿunuqi (Necklace Around My Neck)* by Shākūsh (2020) is an autobiographical account of a refugee's loss and search for home. Shākūsh documents the period when she escaped from danger in Syria to Gaziantep in Southern Turkey and struggled to find settlement and work. She is the representation of every refugee who, alone and without support, in a series of trials and errors, roams the streets in search of home.

Searching introduces Shākūsh's story. Shākūsh writes: "'Search', my grandfather used to tell us. I followed his advice, and I searched" (2020, p. 11). The word prepares the reader for how this refugee journey will be like. *Searching* implies a lengthy act that requires effort. It reminds Shākūsh of her grandfather, who passed the wisdom he gained through the years onto her in one word. The word is refuge on the refugee journey. Shākūsh does not only keep the word at the back of her mind but also embodies it in a statue. In the middle of a square in the market of the city of Gaziantep stands a statue that captivates Shākūsh and leaves her staring. The statue seems to speak: *Search*. It looks just like her grandfather. Shākūsh writes:

> I approached him. I stood gazing at him with reverence. I asked him the reason for his sadness. He did not answer or raise his eyes to look at me. I walked closer to him. I whispered that I had been painfully looking for him for a long time in my displacement and that my search extended like the ink that rhymed the lines of my grandfather's diary and rolled around my neck to become the most precious gift. (2020, p. 13)

Sadness, pain, ink, and gift bring Shākūsh to a conversation with the statue in Gaziantep. The conversation is a testimony of Shākūsh's loneliness, loss, and need for someone to talk to. The sadness and pain are not the statue's but hers. The ink and gift are the memory of her grandfather. Shākūsh personifies the statue. Shākūsh's grandfather becomes the statue, and his wise words turn into a necklace around Shākūsh's neck, reminding her of her task at all times. The title of the novel *Tawq fi ʿunuqi (Necklace Around My Neck)* means one thing: search.

Tawq fi ʿunuqi depicts the refugees' uncertainty about their destination following their loss of home. It sheds light on the refugees' journey between the loss of home and finding another home, a period defined by obscurity.

Searching for Home in the Unknown

On her arduous journey in search of home, Shākūsh takes the same first steps of a hero's journey as defined by mythologist Joseph Campbell (2004). With a task ahead (search for home), a long route (defined by obscurity), and a guardian (the grandfather statue), Shākūsh turns into a Campbellian hero.

According to Campbell (2004), the hero's journey is a journey of exile from home (p. 356). It is the journey of an individual who detaches from the familiar life and undertakes the challenges of exploring life anew. Campbell describes the journey as a quest, the first step of which is taking a "passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown" (p. 76)., i.e., beyond life at home into a new life away from home.

Syrian refugee stories by Syrian writers Umm al-Saʿd (2020), Nagham Khīṭo (2021), and Nūr Zakariyya al-Hilālī (2018) contain a plethora of synonyms for the unknown that refugees go through.

Umm al-Saʿd (2020) refers to the unknown as *another world* (p. 410) and a *strange land* (p. 355) that looks and smells different. "Strange land … I don't know its smell and its earth" (p. 355). The five senses of refugees are overwhelmed by the unknown, unable to recognize the new environment.

Khīṭo (2021) talks about *here* and *there* (p. 9), the former being the unknown and the latter being the lost home. "Nothing *here* on this *planet* is like it was *there*" (p. 9). Leaving home to the unknown, refugees feel as though they are leaving planet Earth for another planet. Just like the astronaut, Khīṭo says, "who flies to another planet, leaving everything that connects him to this life, to where there is no time and no place" (p. 10).

Al-Hilālī (2018) has more vivid images of the unknown. She describes it as a *dark forest* (p. 147), a *gray nightmare* (p. 147), an *arid exile* (p. 125), and an *unrecognizable exile* (p. 145). The unknown is a scary zone. The refugee's task is difficult.

The unknown hides multiple obstacles. The road in it is full of trials. Campbell (2008) concludes that the hero does not retreat. He/she continues the search until he/she finds home again, and home is the end of the journey. How do refugees continue?

On this heroic refugee journey, Shākūsh (2020) describes herself as thistledown, a flower with light fluffy white prickles that are blown easily by the wind:

> In our displacement, we are like thistledown. The breeze carries them like butterflies. Children run after them to blow them away and change their direction. Children laugh at the journey of the thistledown as it gets longer. The prickles hide in corners until they are blown again by the wind … I watch the prickles that stick to the earth. They stick under juice drops that fall from the hands of a running child. Some of us. No, many of us stick to the earth, held by stains of blood that are shed by those who don't believe in the earth, in the human, nor the creator of the earth and the human. (2020, p. 73)

The metaphor extends to describe the refugee's journey, losing its romantic aspect. Shākūsh tries but is unable to romanticize her search for home. Stains of blood ruin everything. They are the

obstacles that prevent her from moving and making home anew. Where does this blood come from?

The blood comes from memories of home that Shākūsh had to leave behind. It is the blood of the people of Syria who were killed during the revolution. It is shed by the regime whom Shākūsh describes as heretic. It refuses to be forgotten.

Staining the Syrian past and present, the image of blood creates traumas for Syrian refugees in their search for home.

Memory

Memory plays an integral role in the refugees' search for home. Dossa and Golubovic (2019) explain the labour that refugees exert in homemaking involves the cultivation of the memory to forge a connection between the lost home and the new environment. They write: "As lost homes are remembered … new forms of belonging are imagined and engendered" (p. 176). In other words, refugees do not let go of the home that they lost. They keep it in memory and then recreate it on their journey.

Memories affect the refugees' search for home. Whereas the memory of the grandfather motivates Shākūsh to continue, the memory of the Syrian crisis disheartens her. Syrian refugee stories exhibit a mixture of memories from before and during the war in Syria. These memories change the paths refugees take to find home.

In *ʿAlā ḥāffat waṭan (On the Edge of a Country)* by the Syrian novelist Umm al-Saʿd (2020) who fled Syria to Turkey in 2011, we see the impact of memory on refugees as they search for home. Memory holds four young Syrian refugees from finding home in the host country of Turkey.

ʿAlā ḥāffat waṭan is the story of Raghad, Ḥusām, Sāra, and Usāma, four young people who live through the protests and arrests in Syria and struggle to overcome their traumas and start life anew after they escape, each on their own and without their families to Turkey. The memories that the young refugees share of each other and their home in Syria affect every step of the way. The refugee journey begins in chapter three. The title of the chapter is "Loss, Istanbul, 2013." The Syrian home is lost, and the search for a new home begins. Potential destination: Istanbul, Turkey.

The chapter opens with Raghad, who searches for home in a *job*. From her first week in Istanbul, Raghad takes the position of a school teacher at a Syrian school and is surrounded by children. To her surprise, Raghad immediately feels as if the school is her home. She says:

> I found myself among them. Their joyful voices were medicine to my soul … They rushed through my heart without permission. They were Syrians, just like me. (p. 188) … I felt comfortable with them. There was something of that light happiness that took me for some moments to my home. (p. 192)

Among Syrian children, Raghad finds herself. Her soul is healed, and her heart is filled with joy. Could this be real? "They were Syrians" coming from her home. Everything seems perfect; everything is fine except for a man who passes by. Who is that man? She is told he is the school

principal. Unable to look at his face for long, Raghad snaps back to reality and falls from the clouds, saying: "he would have looked more normal if that stain of blood remained on his face" (p. 188). Stains of blood come again to de-romanticize the scene.

The blood comes out of Raghad's memory and fails her first attempt to find home. It is the blood of this man whom Raghad once helped after he got shot in a protest in Syria. The blood dropped on the seat inside Raghad's car on their way to the hospital, and its stains filled her memory from then onwards. Following that incident, Raghad was arrested and imprisoned. Home at school collapses. Raghad must search for home again. How can Syrian refugees escape from this vicious cycle?

Creativity

Referring to the role of memory of the lost home in refugees' lives, critic Daniel Warner (1994) writes: "The past is 'remembered' as part of a creative process in the present. And that creativity is part of a vision of what we want the past and present to represent" (p. 171). The search for home is an act of creativity. Refugees use their memories in a creative way to find home. Refugees do not bring the past into the present. Creativity in refugees' search for home involves using the past to create the foundations of the present.

Like growing flowers around the tents in a camp, refugees think out of the box in their search for home. They surpass the place and the community and continue the search in novel ways. Memory and creativity interweave to create home anew. Reading Syrian refugee stories, I found home in a key.

"Lost Without My Keys"

The key to the home that Syrian refugees lost often found a space in their pockets or around their necks from the moment that they set foot on the refugee route. Small in size, great in value, and easy to carry and keep, the key is a precious item for the Syrian refugees and a recurring symbol of home in their stories.

The key as an emblem of home is celebrated in Palestinian diasporic narratives. Syrian writers rejuvenate the Palestinian experience in their use of the key as a symbol of home and call attention to the difference in the Syrian refugee context. Syrian writer Bilāl al-Barghūth (2021) who fled Syria to Germany in 2015, in the quote that introduced the article, tells the story of Sāra, who wears the key to her home as a necklace following the Palestinian habit, and then he mentions the difference: "The only difference is that, for her, there is no home left. Her home collapsed after heavy bombing that lasted for thirty-three days until the city fell" (p. 10). When home means house, the Palestinian home was stolen, and the Syrian home disappeared. Palestinians and Syrians attach different values to the keys to their homes.

Whereas in Palestine, the home of one people became the home of another, in Syria, home ceased to exist. Critic Leïla Vignal (2014) describes what happened in Syria post-2011, using Stephen Graham's concept of *urbicide* which means 'killing of the cities' (p. 327), i.e., razing entire cities and urban neighborhoods into the ground. Vignal interprets the urbicide in Syria as an "instrument widely employed [by the regime] to pursue military and repression goals" (p. 338). The Asad regime stayed in power by making the keys of Syrian homes useless. Why do Syrian refugees hold onto their keys?

For Syrian refugees, the key is a synecdoche of their home. The crumbled walls, the broken windows, and the crushed door reincarnate into this key that refugees can carry. Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) once wrote: "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (p. 43). Similar to the turtle in this expression is Sāra in al-Barghūth's story. Sāra's home was razed to the ground. By attaching the key to a necklace around her neck, Sāra carries her home with her wherever she goes: "Through car lights, she looked for something special to carve the sentence: 'Sāra was here' … Finally, she found a large tree … With great difficulty, she went about carving the words with the key to her home" (2021, p. 10). Using the key as a pen to write her name, Sāra extracts her home from Syria and lets it stream everywhere. If she returns to any of these places where her memory is carved, Sāra will be able to find a piece of herself and her home.

There are four keys on the cover of the short-story collection *Al-taghrība al-sūriyya (The Syrian Displacement)* (2018) by Syrian writer Nūr Zakariyya al-Hilālī, denoting a number of lost homes. The cover shows a mixture of Palestinian and Syrian elements. Currently based in Turkey, al-Hilālī told me that she wanted to raise the voices of her Palestinian friends and relatives who had touched her life back in Syria. The word *taghrība* in the title refers to *Al-taghrība al-filasṭīniyya* (The Palestinian Displacement) of 1948. Al-Hilālī uses the reference to note the similarity with the Syrian context, where Syrians were forced to leave like the Palestinians. *Al-taghrība* (the displacement) is now *Sūriyya* (Syrian).

Figure 3. ***Book Cover of "Al-taghrība al-sūriyya" by Nūr Zakariyya al-Hilālī (2018).***
(Image used under fair use for academic commentary).

On the cover page, the background is dark, and a window in the shape of the map of Syria opens to a scene of destruction. On the top right corner of the map, many hands are raised high; one hand holds onto another as if trying to find something to grasp to be rescued. On the bottom left corner, a man, two women, and a child start their *taghrība*. They represent two generations, old and young, forced to escape for safety. They stand *ʿAlā ḥāffat waṭan (On the Edge of a Country),* as Umm al-Saʿd (2020) describes it in the title of her novel, with one leg inside the country and another outside, about to make the crossing of the threshold. The little child raises his hand forward, pointing the way out and alluding to a glimpse of hope.

The refugees do not escape empty-handed. They take with them their keys. Four keys spread on the cover, enormous as their value. They look old and rusty, used for so long. The experiences of the refugees are carved over the surface of the keys: *al-Ḥarb* (War), *Waṭan*

(Nation), *Ghurba* (Exile), and *Ḥanīn* (Longing). Refugee keys open different kinds of doors. They open the doors to new definitions of home that refugees need on their journey. Refugees grasp their keys tight to make a new home.

While researching Syrian refugee keys, I came across an album by British photojournalist Bradley Secker (n.d.) entitled *Syrian Nakba*, again in reference to the Palestinian *Nakba*. The album contains around a hundred photos that Secker captures the hands of Syrian refugees holding keys. The photos are astonishing. Three generations, children, adults, and old people from several cities in Syria (Damascus, Latakia, Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Hama, Al-Haydariya, and Raqqa) all keep the key(s) to their lost homes and load them with value. In the captions, Syrian refugees say their keys mean their *community (family*, *sons* and *daughters*, *neighbors* and *friends)*, their *country* and *nation*, their *haven (sanctuary and shelter)*, and their whole *life (blood*, *soul*, *memories*, *world*, *existence*, *everything)*. They say they cannot let go of their keys. Nassif from Homs says: "I feel bare without it" (n.d.). The keys signify all that they lost. Nermeen from Latakia says: "lost without it" (n.d.). The keys give the refugees the feeling of home.

When I found out that Secker was based in Istanbul, I felt lucky. I emailed him, introducing my research and he replied, kindly saying he would be happy to meet. We met in a small, quiet café in Kadikoy that became an inspirational workspace for me since that day.

"How did you come up with the idea?" I asked. He said the idea came after a conversation with his Syrian flatmate. He asked his friend if he kept the key to his home in Syria and then took a photo of the friend's hand holding the key. It seemed like a great project.

The project started in 2013 when the mass displacement of Syrian refugees to Turkey took place. For two years, Secker journeyed around Turkey to meet with Syrian refugees who kept their keys. The work was intermittent. One of the locations where Secker made connections was a bus station in the town of Kilis. People from Syria had just crossed the borders and entered the city. There, in answer to his question: when was the last time that you were at home? He got the answers: "yesterday" and "this morning." Do you have the key to your home? "Yes."

Working on this album, Secker mentioned that he intended to show a reaction against the media coverage of the Syrian crisis that led to the victimization of the people. That is why his photos show only hands. Just by looking at the hands, one can know a lot about these refugees. Upon my request, Secker combined as many photos as possible to keep them visible in one design. Thank you, Secker, for this treasure.

Figure 4. ***"Syrian Nakba" by Bradley Secker.***
(Image copyright Bradley Secker).

On the top right, 17-year-old Abdullah from Aleppo carries the keys gently over the palm of his hand. The last time Abdullah used the key was a year and a half before the photo date. An embroidered chain with the name Ahmad is attached to the key. I learned from Secker that this chain was made to commemorate a martyr. Abdullah had lost a house and a loved one. The keys and the chain keep the memory of the house and the martyr. What does the key mean to Abdullah? It means sanctuary (n.d.). When he looks at his key chain, Abdullah feels safe.

Next to Abdullah's hand to the left, a female hand with purple nail polish holds the keys to the side in a protective way as if to keep them from falling. The owner is Ola, 28 years old, from Latakia. The last time Ola used the keys was a year before the photo date. As small as they are, Ola sees in her keys, paradise (n.d.).

The only owner showing the back of his hand is Rashed, 26 years old from Deir Ezzor. Rashed seems to play with the keys across his fingers, hanging them to the forefinger and spreading them all over the back of his hand. The key chain in the shape of a bridge takes a role in the game, sliding in the direction of the thumb. Rashed wears the wedding ring. This might be the reason why he has so many colorful keys. Each key carries a unique memory. The last time Rashed used the keys was a year before the photo date. Rashed says: "I miss everything" (n.d.).

40-year-old Wael from Idlib grips his keys tightly, showing great strength. The veins are clear. The keys merge into the hand and appear as brass fingers. They look like an extra body part. Wael counts the months of his separation from home. He tells Secker: 17 months. What do the keys mean to him? They mean life memories (n.d.).

My father also keeps the key to our lost home in Damascus. Writing this article, I asked him why he kept the key and what it meant to him. He said he could not just throw it away and that it was the only thing left from our home. My father said it is proof of his connection to Syria and of property that he owns there. I believe that, as a Palestinian Syrian, my father grew up to think of keys in the Palestinian way: rights, land, and ownership. Today, my father works in Turkey as a real estate agent, holding a chain of keys to dozens of houses, together with one key to his home.

References

Agamben, G. (2000). *Means without end: Notes on politics* (V. Binetti & C. Casarino, Trans.). (NED-New edition, Vol. 20). University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved [April 30, 2024] from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttttww

Anzaldúa, G. (1999). *Borderlands: The new mestiza = La frontera*. Aunt Lute Books.

Arendt, H. (1968). *Men in dark times*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism* (New Edition.). San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

al-Barghūth, B. (2021). *Thalātha lāji'īn wa niṣf (Three Refugees and a Half)*. Mosaic for Studies and Publication.

Baumann, M. (2000). Diaspora: Genealogies of semantics and transcultural comparison. *Numen, 47*(3), 313-337. Brill.

Campbell, J. (2004). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton University Press.

Doná, G. (2015). Making homes in limbo: Embodied virtual "homes" in prolonged conditions of displacement. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *31*(1), 67-73. Centre for Refugee Studies, York University.

Dorfman, A. (2023). Duck! Walt Disney and Salvador Allende are still fighting for our souls. *TomDispatch.com*. Retrieved [December 9, 2023] from: https://tomdispatch.com/duck/

Dossa, P., & Golubovic, J. (2019). Reimagining home in the wake of displacement. *Studies in Social Justice*, *13*(1), 171-186.

Gurney, C. M. (1997). "… Half of me was satisfied": Making sense of home through episodic ethnographies. *Women's Studies International Forum, Concepts of Home, 20*(3), 373-386.

International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2019a). *Glossary on Migration. International Migration Law, No. 34*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM). Retrieved [April 28, 2025] from: https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration

International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2019b). *World Migration Report 2020*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration. Retrieved [November 26, 2023] from: https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2020

Khīṭo, N. (2021). *Shaẓāyā al-janūb (Shrapnel of the South)*. Turkey: Kitap Sarayi.

Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review, 52*(1), 62-89. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Nayak, B. (2021). Theorizing the ontology of 'home' in diaspora imagination. *Dibrugarh University Journal of English Studies (DUJES), 29*, 147-155.

Nyers, P. (2013). *Rethinking refugees: Beyond state of emergency*. Routledge.

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.). Exile, n.[1], I.1b.i. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved [April 28, 2025a], from: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/exile_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#5018598

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.). Exile, n.[1], I.1a. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved [April 28, 2025b] from: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/exile_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#5018598

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.). Diaspora, n., 2. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved [April 28, 2025c] from: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/diaspora_n?tab=meaning_and_use

Pokharel, B. (2020). Diaspora and diasporic literature: Condition to consciousness. *The Outlook: Journal of English Studies, 11*, 86-98.

Proudfoot, M. J. (1956). *European refugees: 1939-52; a study in forced population movement*. Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press. Retrieved [April 28, 2025] from: http://archive.org/details/europeanrefugees0000unse

Said, E. W. (1999). *Out of place: A memoir*. Knopf.

Said, E. W. (2002). *Reflections on exile and other essays* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Shākūsh, 'Ibtisām. (2020). *Tawq fi ʿunuqī (Necklace Around My Neck)*. Kitap Sarayi.

Shamma, Y. (2020). "Heaven is green": The ecoglobalism of refugee desert gardens. *Journal of Narrative Theory, 50*(3), 321-338. Eastern Michigan University.

Shamma, Y. (2020, August 18). Both in refugee camps and in lockdown gardening offers a release. *The Independent*. Retrieved [April 29, 2025] from: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/refugee-camp-lockdown-gardening-zaatari-jordan-a9663101.html

Staeheli, L. A., & Nagel, C. R. (2006). Topographies of home and citizenship: Arab-American activists in the United States. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *38*(9), 1599-1614. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Tolstoy, L. (2016). *Anna Karenina* (R. Bartlett, Tran.) (2nd ed.). London, England: Oxford University Press.

Umm al-Saʿd. (2020). *ʿAlā hāffat waṭan (On the Edge of a Country)*. Turkey: Kitap Sarayi.

UNHCR. (1951). *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*. Retrieved [April 28, 2025] from: https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees

UNHCR. (n.d.). Refugee Statistics | USA for UNHCR. Retrieved [October 18, 2023] from: https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/

UNHCR. (n.d.). Who is a 'refugee'? UNHCR. Retrieved [September 26, 2023] from: https://www.unhcr.org/what-refugee

United Nations. (2014). *Draft articles on the expulsion of aliens, with commentaries*. International Law Commission. Retrieved from: https://www.refworld.org/docid/5539ef8e4.html

Vignal, L. (2014). Destraction-in-progress: Revolution, repression and war planning in Syria (2011 Onwards). *Built Environment (1978-)*, *40*(3), 326-341. Alexandrine Press.

Warner, D. (1994). Voluntary repatriation and the meaning of return to home: A critique of liberal mathematics. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *7*(2-3), 160-174.

Wildschut, H. (2019). *Rooted*. Henk Wilschut.

Zakariyya al-Hilālī, N. (2018). *Al-taghrība al-sūriyya (The Syrian Displacement)* (2nd ed.). Istanbul, Turkey: Darulhayr Islami Yayinevi.