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A True Story: The Contrasting Literary Ethics of Refugee Novels and Memoirs

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Abstract

This research explores the contrasting literary ethics of refugee memoirs and novels. It builds on my previous work that applied lessons from literary criticism of refugee novels to develop guidelines for ethical refugee simulation events. These related projects emphasize that narratives and stories constitute the core of refugee policies specifically and the reception of refugees more generally. Through the exploration of two novels, *Exit West* and *What Strange Paradise*, and two memoirs, *Homes* and *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian*, I argue that novels are a better vehicle for ethical engagement with refugees. Although prone to spectacularizing and/or universalizing the refugee, novels have more latitude to probe implicit biases and counteract common portrayals of refugees, ultimately achieving a suspension of judgement. Memoirs, through their dependence on a developmental arc that feeds a savior mentality, create a contingent empathy that can be detrimental for most refugees. Overall, this comparison demonstrates that an ethical engagement with the cultural imagination of refugees is central to creating a more humane future for refugees.

Keywords: refugees, memoirs, novels, ethics

Technically speaking, the personal statement, or declaration, of an asylum seeker is optional, but it is commonly understood that no asylum application would be granted without it. Moreover, it is not just the submission that matters, but also how the story is crafted that determines whether the applicant is granted a stay, something that can quite literally be a matter of life and death. Herein lies the importance of stories, especially for refugee lives, and how our own expectations matter in the interaction. Interest in refugee stories has recently grown, as seen through an intensified demand for refugee novels, memoirs, news reports, and even refugee simulation events.¹ However, this increased demand has not resulted in the same proliferation of ethical treatment and policies towards migrants and refugees. This paper attempts to understand this question at the intersection of legal, cultural, and literary studies. Through a direct comparison of refugee memoirs and refugee novels, it will be shown that while memoirs provide a voice for the individual, they rely on a developmental arc, portraying the refugee in transition from a morally blameless victim to fully functioning member of society, creating an empathy that is contingent on certain characteristics and feeding into our implicit biases. Novels, although prone to universalizing and spectacularizing the refugee, have more latitude to probe these biases and achieve a suspension of judgement, calling to mind what a reader does not know and therefore serving as a better genre to produce an ethical, kind response.

Drawing on literary analysis and criticism, philosophy, legal studies, and sociology, this paper considers the limits and possibilities of various narrative forms of Muslim refugee literary texts. The argument exists at the intersection of these disciplines, incorporating them all to understand fully the extent to which stories can impact the treatment of South Asian Muslim refugees. Due to the constant warfare and crisis that has plagued the Middle East for so long, this area has seen a remarkably persistent and substantial exodus of migrants. Additionally, as seen through the United States' invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent withdrawal, these refugees are typically a byproduct of foreign involvement and meddling in their countries, which results in stark divisions and political tensions in Western countries about plans of action for welcoming these refugees. These high stakes make it a relevant and incredibly important area for research, and one that, because it is so foundational to society, should be looked at primarily through literary analysis. A significant portion of the cultural imagination of a country is formed through literature and stories, as often these narrative forms can serve as a person's vessel for entrance into society. Therefore, utilizing literature and literary analysis examines the root of this critical issue.

Exploring the concept of a refugee, even in something narrowed down to literary analysis, is still rather expansive; I further focus my analysis into a direct comparison between two refugee memoirs, *Homes* and *Butterfly: My Journey from Refugee to Olympian*, and two refugee novels, *Exit West* and *What Strange Paradise*. Memoirs are unique in that they have a "truth purchase." While the reader acknowledges that all the historical facts may not be necessarily told in the correct order, the reader has a general expectation that the events are true, something that, in the age of "fake news" and personal, self-serving truth, gives memoirs

¹ Mark Libin. "Marking Territory: Rawi Hage's Novels and the Challenge to Postcolonial Ethics." *English Studies in Canada* 39, no. 4 (December 2013): 79. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2013.0043>.

considerable power over a reader. Novels, on the other hand, obviously lack any sort of historical truth; however, their benefit derives exactly from this lack of truth, as authors are given more latitude to write different narratives that memoirs cannot reach. The reader has different expectations for both, and consequently interacts differently with both. This, along with the different narrative structures each possesses, creates an excellent research opportunity to study the power of stories and its impacts on society.

The advantage of memoirs is that they provide a voice and give a sense of individualism to the refugee that counters the misconception of the refugee as one, singular entity. Media coverage tends to flatten out refugee lives, giving them little depth other than a tragic face in a picture, and because of this, Western consciousness often imagines refugees as one group, all sharing the same characteristics, regardless of country of origin, religion, or background.² Even the word refugee and its application to all migrants denotes this very fact.³ This creates a situation in which individuals wrongly generalize aspects that are true for one refugee to all of them as a whole. The foremost aspect that is assumed to be true of all of them is that they are triumphant heroes of a long journey when they arrive at a host country. Clearly, this is not the case, and this assumption across all refugees does a great disservice to migrants and refugees everywhere, as it gives their character very little depth and personality in Western imagination, leading to their easy dismissal.⁴

Memoirs have the important ability to counter this and provide a voice to the refugee character. This is done countless times throughout memoirs, but perhaps the easiest point to observe this is when the refugee displays their personality and emotions. In *Homes*, Abu develops a strong relationship with his cousins, detailing their weekend slumber parties in which they avoided homework and played video games.⁵ In *Butterfly*, Yusra's interactions with her newfound friends and companions on the journey provide insight into who she is as a person and develop a depth that could not be captured by any picture or news article. These intimate scenes and instances provide the opportunity for a sense of friendship with the refugee, creating a deeper connection that erases the idea of a singular refugee body.

However, it is important to note that this voice and individualism that makes memoirs so advantageous is filtered through a Western lens that alters the story. Whether it be because the refugee wants the story to be read, the refugee's perspective has changed,⁶ or even because the mediator changes it themselves, refugee stories bend to be more friendly to a Western appetite.⁷ Thus, there very rarely – if ever – are any mentions of missteps or faults by Western governments in memoirs. In *Homes*, the political nature of the Syrian Civil War barely gets passing mention. Additionally, Abu never decries any other governments for failing to

² Ana Belén Martínez García. "Refugees' Mediated Narratives in the Public Sphere." *Narrative* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 210. doi:10.1353/nar.2021.0012.

³ Woods, "Refugees' Stories: Empathy, Agency, and Solidarity," 509.

⁴ Timothy K August. "Re-placing the Accent: From the Exile to the Refugee Position." *Melus* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44155267>.

⁵ Abu Bakr Al Rabeeah and Winnie Yeung. *Homes: A Refugee Story* (Calgary: Freehand Books, 2018), 36.

⁶ Stacey Hynd. "Trauma, Violence, and Memory in African Child Soldier Memoirs." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 45, no. 3 (March 2021): 79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-020-09668-4>.

⁷ Diana Tietjens Meyers. "Victims' Stories of Human Rights Abuse: The Ethics of Ownership, Dissemination, and Reception." *Metaphilosophy* 49, no. 2 (January 2018): 45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12285>.

intervene. The same could be said for *Butterfly*, as Yusra almost makes it seem that her acceptance into Germany, in which she finds “strangers that come to cheer her and offer her a chance for a future,” completely erases any responsibility these countries have for her perilous journey before reaching her final destination.⁸

Moreover, the story itself, through this filtering, plays into certain implicit biases the Western reader has through reliance on a developmental arc, something that is well established in research.⁹ Essentially, it is the depiction of a refugee that transitions from helpless, innocent victim to fully functioning member of Western society.¹⁰ In a sense, the refugee’s life is on an upward arc and the refugee status is portrayed as something to overcome.¹¹ In the context of *Homes*, this can be seen in Abu depicted as a young boy at the beginning, doing typical childhood things such as playing soccer and video games, emphasizing his innocence with the hopes that this makes him a more ideal character.¹² As the Syrian Civil War begins and violence descends all around him, Abu and his family become helpless, waiting for their application for asylum to another country to be granted. Finally, once accepted into Canada, Abu attends school and returns to his former activities such as soccer. The upward swing of Abu’s life is undeniable, just as it is for Yusra Mardini, who, in the title of her book, lays out her own arc she will travel: from refugee to Olympian.

Granted, this developmental arc is inevitable to a certain extent in memoirs, as the refugee must survive (or else the book would cease to exist), but the emphasis on overcoming refugee status is fraught with problems for refugees across the globe. The most notable of these problems is its creation of a “contingent empathy” that begins with a pure refugee victim and finishes with the refugee “making it.” Due to cultural discourse, Western individuals have been trained to extend empathy to those who have either had their agency taken away, i.e., pure victims, or those that use their agency for morally praiseworthy ends.¹³ In both memoirs, Yusra and Abu are consistently depicted as helpless, innocent victims; for example, Abu is almost shot on his way to the bakery – a random bystander in a civil war of which he had no part.¹⁴ This portrayal feeds directly into the Western idea of both a victim and a refugee, creating an empathy that is dependent on their innocence. However, most refugees are not morally pure, according to Khader and Meyers, as they have had to often undertake perilous and even criminal acts in order to survive.¹⁵ Admittedly, it is unclear whether Abu or Yusra ever undertook these sorts of acts in their journeys in the first place, but both memoirs contain nothing that can even be considered close to illegal acts by the protagonists. Regardless, these two memoirs only further the idea of an innocent refugee, an idea that is unrepresentative and

⁸ Yusra Mardini. *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian – My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2018), 194.

⁹ August, “Re-placing the Accent;” Martínez García, “Refugees Mediated Narratives;” Hynd, “Trauma, Violence, and Memory;” Meyers, “Victims’ Stories of Human Rights Abuse.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ August, “Re-placing the Accent,” 77.

¹² Meyers, “Victims’ Stories of Human Rights Abuse,” 52.

¹³ Meyers, “Victims’ Stories of Human Rights Abuse,” 43.

¹⁴ Al Rabeeah, *Homes*, 84.

¹⁵ Serene J. Khader “Victims’ Stories and the Postcolonial Politics of Empathy.” *Metaphilosophy* 49, no. 2 (January 2018): 16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12289>; Meyers, “Victim’s Stories of Human Rights Abuse,” 40.

detrimental to the creation of empathy with those that are not innocent. Because the term “refugee” has been equated with pure, blameless victim, individuals struggle greatly or even lack the ability completely to empathize with those that are not innocent, creating disastrous effects for this considerable portion of refugees.

Not only do memoirs support the idea that all refugees are innocent victims, but they also indicate that all refugees make it and contribute to Western society in some meaningful way. This, however, could not be farther from the truth, as these refugees who write memoirs in the slightest minority. Countless refugees fail to make it out of their host country and are denied asylum; others don’t want to leave their host country, feeling a deep sense of connection with it; finally, if a refugee does arrive in a host country, they often face a tough adjustment period, one in which they may not be able to hold a job, speak the language, or attend school.¹⁶ However, memoirs can give the false pretense that all do, which creates an empathy that is contingent on this successful ending. Thus, because they are not exposed to them enough, Western society fails to develop the ability to empathize with the aforementioned other classes of refugees that don’t make it, creating a contentious situation and conflict, as seen in refugee hatred and bigotry against those that are “freeloading” in a host country.¹⁷

Along with this creation of a contingent empathy, memoirs also feed into the Savior Complex. Much like the development arc, a Savior complex is well-established in research, and it details the ways in which Westerners regard themselves as saviors for refugees.¹⁸ Through the reading of memoirs of refugees who were granted asylum, Westerners feel that “s/he has made authentic experiential and ethical contact with the marginalized other who constructs the text and, by doing so, has successfully welcomed the displaced subject into his/her secure and empathetic homeland.”¹⁹ In essence, a reader can wash his/her conscious clear. This can be seen in both *Homes* and *Butterfly*. In the former, Abu repeatedly mentions how lucky and grateful he is for the opportunity to settle in Canada. In the latter, Yusra is granted a spot in the Olympics by virtue of her being a refugee, something she is very grateful for. What this creates is a sense of peace and comfort for the reader, one in which the reader feels a pleasant feeling that they, as part of their country, are doing their part in solving the crisis. A memoir reader could walk away with a sense of closure and feeling that the current system works.²⁰ This, however, could not be further from the truth. For one, the current system is clearly broken, as illegal smuggling and political calculations run rampant.²¹ Two, Western countries are by no means Savors in the Middle East,²² and to argue or think this ignores recent history (see Afghanistan). Westerners are not in any way, shape, or form Savors, yet memoirs tend to feed

¹⁶ Dina Nayeri. *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (United Kingdom: Canongate, 2019), 12.

¹⁷ Jill Koyama “Resettling Notions of Social Mobility: Locating Refugees as ‘Educable’ and ‘Employable.’” *British Journal of Sociology and Education*, no. 5 (September 2013): 949. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43818807>.

¹⁸ David James. “Listening to the Refugee: Valeria Luiselli’s Sentimental Activism.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 390-417. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/77>; Hynd, “Trauma, Violence, and Memory;” Meyers, “Victims’ Stories of Human Rights Abuse.”

¹⁹ Libin, “Marking Territory,” 73.

²⁰ Meyers, “Victim’s Stories of Human Rights Abuse,” 52.

²¹ Amnesty International, Tackling the Global Refugee Crisis, 24.

²² Woods, “Refugees’ Stories: Empathy, Agency, and Solidarity,” 513.

into this implicit bias. Additionally, the Savior complex also further complicates the creation of empathy, as it becomes exercised on the reader's part from a superior place, something that can be ethically perilous as "many human rights violations, and the global culture that allows them to fester, are caused by empathizing with some people too much and from an elevated place."²³

All of this creates a situation in which memoirs, by their virtue of being "true," hold significant power over a reader, play into implicit biases and not only do not correct misconceptions and shape proper notions of a refugee, but instead feed into the exact opposite. They create a contingent empathy that bolsters our savior complex, something that has disastrous impacts for refugees as a whole. Fiction, on the other hand, has the unique ability to counter this through its achievement of a suspension of judgement and therefore generate a deeper, more enduring response.

Literary critic Dorothy Hale defines alterity, or the suspension of judgement, as the ethical locus of literature; it is a state of frustration and incomprehension, one in which the reader recognizes the limitations in their ways of knowing the other.²⁴ As opposed to empathy, which focuses on establishing a connection through putting oneself into another's shoes, suspension of judgement instead focuses on the opposite. Its focus is on realizing the distance between two subjects and being respectful of that space. In essence, it calls to mind what the reader does not know, a stark contrast from memoirs, and resists easy consumption by the reader, generating a more lasting response.²⁵

As for how novels achieve this, the foremost and most obvious example is the protagonist not surviving or making it to the host country. In *What Strange Paradise*, the reader follows Amir for the whole story, walking along with him on his journey around the island at which his migrant ship arrives. The reader develops a connection with Amir, rooting for him as he dodges the island's army and searches for a way back to his home. In the second to last chapter of the book, Amir finally finds a boat and sets sail, allowing the reader to breathe a sigh of relief; he is going to make it. However, the last chapter, just two pages long, details a boy's lifeless body washing up on shore, the implication being that it is Amir. This last chapter directly contradicts a reader's notion of a happy ending, one that is similar to a memoir. There is no integration into society and no saving. Thus, this passage is an excellent example of a suspension of judgement, as the reader must acknowledge their limitations in knowing the migrant story. He/she may think all migrants make it, or that at least Amir will, but El Akkad thwarts the reader's expectations in a brilliant way and challenges the reader to recognize the reality that not all refugees make it.

Obviously, this ending is not possible in memoirs, but there is another way that novels can achieve a suspension of judgement: the mundane, everyday. The first reason the mundane, everyday is so important is because it can connect across time and culture. In *Exit West*, Hamid takes great lengths to display Nadia and Saeed as normal, college age students – similar to his audience of readers. Take something as simple as Nadia streaming music from the internet; this

²³ Meyers, "Victim's Stories of Human Rights Abuse," 40.

²⁴ Dorothy J. Hale. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (PMLA) 124, no. 3 (May 2009): 318. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614333>.

²⁵ August, "Re-placing the Accent," 83.

is not something that is generally noteworthy to the plot, but to gloss over this misses the brilliance of the novel. This detail is a way in which the reader, who seemingly has downloaded music from the internet, identifies with Nadia, a person who is likely far different from her. Countless other examples of this exist, but the overarching point is that these little, mundane experiences create and sustain a common humanity.

This common humanity, then, establishes a connection that will ultimately be broken through differences of the everyday, creating the suspension of judgement and deep, enduring response. The routines, schedules, and everyday experiences of individuals is one of the things they take the most comfort in, especially because it is experienced so often. Thus, by probing and introducing distortions of the everyday, it shatters not only a reader's previous connection but also one of his/her most secure experiences, leaving little reaction other than incomprehension and suspension of judgement.²⁶ Returning back to *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed are slowly distanced from the reader via the everyday; for example, Hamid writes, "without work there was no impediment to Saeed and Nadia meeting during the day except for the fighting."²⁷ The genius of this quote lies in Hamid's ability to downplay the violence in the story and make it almost like an ordinary, everyday experience. Obviously, this is not the case for much of the world, and in reality, it is the exact opposite. Thus, the reader must face a much different everyday reality than theirs, creating a deep crisis and a confrontation with alterity, which leads to a severe reconsideration of oneself and others.²⁸

As important as this suspension of judgement in fiction is, it is also important to note the genre's drawbacks, starting first with its universalizing of the refugee. As previously mentioned, memoirs strength is their ability to display an individual voice that counters the idea of a solitary refugee. Fiction, at times, plays into this imagination through its intentional universalization, the result of an excessive attempt to encourage a common humanity.²⁹ For all of the benefits of El Akkad's novel, one of its most striking plot points is that the island on which Amir arrives is unnamed. While creating the idea that the story could happen anywhere, it also deletes the important historical and political factors that make up such a considerable portion of a refugee's story. In reality, these stories do not happen anywhere; they happen in a specific country as a result of that country or international failures, and to omit this detrimental to refugees as it washes the Western conscious free of all blame. The same could be said of *Exit West*. Hamid's attempt to create a common humanity is even more pronounced than El Akkad's. At one point, he writes, "we are all migrants through time."³⁰ This depiction has led to sharp criticism from literary critics, including Yogita Goyal who decries its loss of historical and political context: "Hamid naturalizes the fact of migration in a way that evacuates the specific historical experience that generates it, rendering banal what must remain historical."³¹ Moreover, in the novel, there is never a mention of any city, place, or country, and while this

²⁶ Roger Silverstone. "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life." *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 761. <https://muse-jhu-edu.cuhsl.creighton.edu/article/37634>.

²⁷ Mohsin Hamid. *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 73.

²⁸ Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion," 764.

²⁹ James, "Listening to the Refugee," 396.

³⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 221.

³¹ Yogita Goyal. "'We Are All Migrants': The Refugee Novel and the Claims of Universalism." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 241. doi:10.1353/mfs.2020.0019.

generates a feeling of familiarity and closeness with Saeed and Nadia as the story unfolds, it also does a great disservice to migrants and refugees everywhere. These migrants are not migrants by choice, and they are not simply escaping from a neglectful government. These are forced, stratified migrations that are often the result of intervening, profit-seeking governments or a “failure of the international community” to adequately respond such as in the case of Syria.³² To render the migrant as without place or origin ultimately fails to capture the main story of the migrant.

Along with this universalization, another downside to novels is their spectacularizing of the refugee figure, making them seem nothing more than a fantastical element and not a real-life figure whose care is needed. This spectacularizing is the potential drawback to the latitude that fiction has; on one hand, it can write creative endings such as *What Strange Paradise* that thwarts preconceived notions and happy endings, but on the other, it interjects fantastical elements that subtract from the validity of the novel to tell a refugee story.³³ Hamid’s decision to utilize magical doors that travel anywhere into *Exit West*, omitting the journey portion of their story completely, gives the novel a feeling of complete fiction. It becomes easy for the reader, then, to completely dismiss the story as no different than any other fiction novel, such as science fiction, even though its main storyline of refugees is a real-life crisis that needs attention.

This spectacularizing and universalizing in novels are considerable arguments that must be made against them, but their overall ability to achieve a suspension of judgement and thwart preconceived notions still makes it a more powerful genre for ethical refugee writing. Put simply, novels call to mind what the reader does *not* know, perhaps the most powerful response any literary method can achieve. Memoirs, while providing a sense of voice and individualism, too often feed into implicit biases that all refugees “make it,” creating a contingent empathy and feeding a Westerner’s Savior complex, all of which do little to generate a proper ethical response. Novels, through their latitude to either directly thwart a happy ending or by introducing differences of the everyday, create a state of alterity and “the possibility that we might change for the better, that we might actively try to judge less and undergo more.”³⁴

Thus, as outrageous as it seems, novels carry more truth and more representation in them, and this is the crux of the comparison between refugee novels and memoirs. After reading a novel like *What Strange Paradise*, the reader cannot feel any satisfaction with himself/herself or the system, unlike reading *Homes* or *Butterfly*. This response mirrors the reaction one should have when looking at our current system and creates the greater potential for change – the importance of which should be obvious. There are close to 26 million refugees in the world today, all who need a kind and welcoming home, society, and country to live in. Stories, due to their considerable power in today’s world, can encourage this with both novels and memoirs, although novels are the better genre to help, even if they lack “truth.”

³² Amnesty International, Tackling the Global Refugee Crisis, 12.

³³ Martínez García, “Refugees Mediated Narratives,” 214.

³⁴ Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics,” 318.

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