

A textual analysis of violence in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

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Abstract: The novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) is written with the background of civil war that happens in the country of Syria which started in 2011 and continues even now. People living in the Syria try to flee from it so as to lead a peaceful life at other parts of the world. Christy Lefteri is the author of this war based novel. She is a contemporary writer who lives with her daughter in England. The objective of this study is to interpret war time violence that takes place in the chosen novel in the light of Sustainable Development Goals. The researcher has studied this novel of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* using textual analysis as research method and attempted this framework. The findings of this novel include that civil war happening within a country disturbs the peace of human kind and ignites violence on children, women and other people. Women like Afra are abused sexually, parents had to lose their sons and daughters and further, the citizens of the country are deprived of their access to basic needs, right to live in peaceful place and right to lead a decent life.

Keywords: *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, Christy Lefteri, violence, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), refugee, women

Introduction

Christy Lefteri is a contemporary writer. She lives with her daughter in England. Her parents were refugees who merely escaped from the civil war that happened in Cyprus. They left the country of Cyprus and settled as refugees in London. Now, Christy Lefteri has become citizen of England. She did her Undergraduate, Post-graduate and Doctoral degree in creative writing from Brunel University at London. She is now working as a Professor of Creative Writing in Brunel University, London. She has written a series of novels like *A Watermelon*, *a Fish*

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and a Bible (2010), *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019), *Songbirds* (2021), *Refugee Tales IV* (2021) and *The Book of Fire: A Novel* (2023). The researcher has taken her novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) for analysis.

The novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is written with the background of civil war that happens in the country of Syria which started in 2011 and continues even now. People living in the Syria try to flee from it so as to lead a peaceful life somewhere. The characters in chosen novel mainly include two couples namely Mr. Nuri & Mrs. Afra Nuri and Mr. Mustafa & Mrs. Dahab Mustafa, Aya, the child of Mustafa and Dahab, and both the couples had lost their male child in the ongoing civil war. Some of the other characters include Hazim, a refugee from Morocco, Diomande, a refugee from Ivory Coast, Elias, a refugee from Turkey, Angeliki and Lucy Fisher, the social worker who helps refugees in getting asylum in London. Primarily, this novel deals with two couples named Mr. Nuri Ibrahim & Mrs. Afra Ibrahim, Mr. Mustafa and Mrs. Dahab and few others who try to escape to London so as to escape the cruelties of war that takes place in Aleppo in the country of Syria.

This novel is chosen by researcher for its exploration as it addresses the contemporary problems that the world faces. The studies so conducted till now on this novel have not advocated any of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and its targets as a conceptual framework. The researcher has attempted to focus on select novel using SDG that lays emphasis on the eradication of violence and betterment of refugees.

Methodology

The research objectives for this research article are:

1. To find the space for SDG in the novel to be followed for the betterment of refugees.
2. To find the space for SDG that addresses eradication of violence in the novel.
3. To highlight the various issues like poverty, unemployment, homelessness of the refugees through the novel.

United Nations organization formed after the Second World War has its origin from the year 1945. It ensures to maintain peace and avoid war and bloodshed among the countries of this world. Sustainable Development Goals is an initiative of UN with aim to transform the world. Sustainable Development Goals are a series of 17

goals and 169 targets adopted by the organization. Every aspect of human life has been addressed in the list of comprehensive 17 goals.

Sustainable Development Goals focusing on eradication of violence includes,

‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (SDG 16) the second target of SDG 16 says that, ‘The inclusion of specific target in the agenda for Sustainable Development to end all forms of violence against children gives renewed impetus towards the realization of the right of every child to live free from fear, neglect, abuse and exploitation’ (United Nations 2015).

Several other SDG’s targets address the violence against women and children includes the second target within fifth goal which vows to, “Eliminate violence against women and girls: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation” (Ibidem).

Some of the SDGs that are associated with refugees and chosen for the study include No Poverty (SDG 1), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Quality Education (SDG 4), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) are analysed with respect to the chosen work in this study.

Discussion

Mr. Nuri Ibrahim and Mrs. Afra Ibrahim are husband and wife living in the city of Aleppo. Aleppo is the second most important city in the country of Syria, next to Damascus the capital of the country. To the west of Aleppo is Syrian Desert whereas in the east it is Mediterranean sea. Mr. Nuri hails from the desert side (Western part) of the city whereas; Afra hails from coastal region (eastern part) of Aleppo. A river named Queiq is also located on the southern side of it and grassy lands in the northern side. Thus, Aleppo as a place features in the novel.

Afra loses her vision due to a bomb explosion that killed her son in the civil war. As a result, Nuri has to accompany her always and cares for her always. Afra is a good painter by birth and she did painting as her profession before losing her sight in the civil war. Further, Firas, son of Mustafa was also killed in the war as result of which they left the country, “Yesterday I went for a walk to the river, and I watched as four soldiers lined up a group of boys. They blindfolded them and shot

them, one by one, and they threw their bodies in the river” (Lefteri 2019, 37). The consequence of war can be felt in river Queiq that is in Bustan al-Qasr. One could see dead and rotten bodies of people floating in it. People of Aleppo came to search for the dead bodies of their loved ones. On finding a huge number of dead bodies, the volunteers took them to a neighboring school. Since the place was considered safe in a belief that it will not be bombed by rebellious people or soldiers who fought for government. Thus the war made Afra to lose her eyes and son, many people to face death.

The people have witnessed violence through their physical eyes such that a dream about bloodshed is common in the life of people living in a country affected by civil war. Definitely anyone in that chaotic world, they will dream of utopian land or Celestial Land since they feel their own country like most cruel place to live. Thus their mental spaces have been infused with violence.

The violence makes people to loss their identity in this earth. Definitely Aleppo is place of identity for Mr.Nuri, Mrs.Afra, Mr.Mustafa and Mrs.Dahab, “Where there are bees there are flowers, and where there are flowers there is new life and hope” (Ibid, 30). People living in the countries where civil war occurs, they try to flee from the country and escape to other countries trying to find solace there. Nuri and Afra try to do the same. Thus, violence removes the basic identity people do own.

People here don’t have safety to work and live in their own country due to civil war. Nuri is a beekeeper by profession and he learnt the art of apiculture (honey farming) from his cousin Mustafa. Mustafa works as a Professor in Damascus University and he had learnt the art of beekeeping from his grandparents. Further, both did the job of Bee farming and as a result, it reared them much products like honey, cosmetics which fetched them good revenue. The condition of those who try to flee as seek solace outside one’s own country are very worse than the bees and birds which has more freedom than a human being to fly and cross boundaries wherever and whenever it wants. Thus, violence in their country makes people to lose their profession and migrate in order to save their lives.

Manmade violence is inflicted on the environmental space of Aleppo. The militants and people of Aleppo use weapons and other artilleries in the war, which makes the air, land and water of the country severely gets affected. Sustainable use of environment is questioned by use of weapons like artilleries. This kind of environment

violence happens is in Aleppo too, “but, as the years passed, the desert was slowly growing, the climate becoming harsh, rivers drying up, farmers struggling; only the bees were drought-resistant” (Ibid, 12). Due to man centered moves taken by men, government and militant groups the environment gets devastated. Thus violence destroys the natural space in Aleppo.

Mustafa had a friend in Aleppo, who was working as Professor of Sociology. He went to England and settled there just three years before. Mustafa is also a well learned man and professor by profession could have gone with him. But because of the love and passion towards the bees and his land he was reluctant to do so. However the civil war that broke out in the country of Syria made him to think vice versa. Now, he is forced to take that move to leave his country. As during the course of war, someone has set fire on all his beehives. Mustafa and his wife Mrs. Dahab along with their daughter Aya decided to leave Syria and migrate as refugee to London. Violence influences and guides people to take heart aching decision.

The violence seen and experienced by people of Aleppo are as follows, “A bomb dropped in the darkness and the sky flashed and I helped Afra to get ready for bed” (Ibid, 43). People living in countries affected by civil wars have to awaken at the sound of bombs and it serves as an alarm that they have to move to safer places. People who successfully migrate to countries as refugee are the guiding and motivational force for the remaining people to reach safer destination whichever the country offer asylum for refugees. Mr. Mustafa is one such person who successfully reaches UK and he gives awareness that, “Whenever the bombs were silent, the birds came out to sing” (Ibid, 35). He has to give instructions to Nuri and Afra to have a safe plight to London as refugees. Mustafa and his family have already reached Yorkshire in UK after undergoing huge trouble. During their journey to London, Nuri and Afra had to experience violence on physical bodies as well as in their mind. They had to mingle with smugglers and refugees from various other countries with whom they sail. They could see violence being inflicted on humans through the landscape. Everywhere they could bloodstains, dead bodies, cities and villages under the control of rebellious people, armed men or military of the government. “I remembered the dogs eating human corpses in the fields where the roses used to be, and somewhere else in the distance I heard a wild screech, metal on metal, like a creature being dragged towards death” (Ibid, 44). The path to next destination weren’t easy for

them. From the blood stained city of Aleppo they had to get through Turkey, Greece so as to reach England. Women had the fear of being sexually abused in the journey,

There were burnt cars, lines of filthy washing hanging from abandoned terraces, electric wires dangling low over the streets, bombed-out shops, blocks of flats with their roofs blown off, piles of trash on the pavements. It all stank of death and burnt rubber. In the distance smoke rose, curling into the sky. I felt my mouth dry, my hands clench and shake, trapped by these distorted streets. In the land beyond, the villages were burnt, people flooding out like a river to get away, the women in terror because paramilitaries were on the loose and they feared being raped. (Lefteri 2019, 44–45)

Mr. Nuri and Mrs. Afra Nuri reach the Island of Leros located in Greece, “This island was a leper colony once...This place was like a Nazi concentration camp. People were caged and chained without names or identities. The children here were abandoned, tied to their beds all day” (Ibid, 165). Then, they manage to reach the city of Piraeus, one of the important harbor city in the country of Greece,

But I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of screaming, and a whistling in the sky, a bomb tearing through the darkness. I sat upright, my body wet, my head pounding, the darkness around me pulsating. I saw the faint outline of a window through a bedsheet, the light of the moon streaming in. I saw Afra’s face fuzzy in the darkness and slowly remembered where I was. I reached out to hold her hand. There were no bombs. We were not in Aleppo. We were safe in Athens, in an old school. (Ibid, 203)

Mr. Nuri and Mrs. Afra Nuri reach Athens, the capital city of Greece where, Nuri and Afra were introduced to a agent named Mr. Fotakis, a smuggler who raped visually challenged Afra taking advantage, when Nuri went to work without locking the door of the house they stayed,

I remember the key that I forgot on the coffee table of the smuggler’s apartment, I remember driving through the streets of Athens and not turning back. I am shaking now. I fight it, push the thought out. I realise I have forgotten to love her. [...] [...] ‘I am sorry I forgot the key’. She doesn’t say anything but she wraps her arms around me so that I can smell the roses, and then I can feel her crying on my chest (Ibid, 354).

Through this incident, the struggles faced by refugee women are evident. Nuri and Afra had to tolerate all this in a hope of good and promising life inorder to reach destined location of Heathrow Airport in London.

Counting on the instructions from Mustafa and Dahab, Nuri and Afra desire to settle in London taking the same pathway as them, “To stay in the UK as a refugee you must be unable to live safely in any part of your own country because you fear persecution there” (Ibid, 57). However, violence and persecution is prominent for refugees at any part of the world because, wherever people go they still carry their own burden within them. This shellshock experience, dreams and hallucination can be seen in the life of the characters, especially in their mind, which traumatizes the refugees.

But the sound of chattering people moving around me, phones ringing from the cubicles behind the desk, children laughing... I hear the sound of a bomb ripping through the sky, glass shattering... ‘Are you OK, sir?’ I look up. There is a flash and a crashing sound. I kneel down and cover my ears. I feel a hand on my back, then there is water. (Ibid, 132–133)

The role of social worker, NGO’s, Lawyers, Human Rights Organization that is much needed to anyone in the country affected by civil wars like Aleppo or in any other kind of wars. Lucy Fisher is one such person who could plead for the cause of innocent and common people. Many immigrants who wish to seek asylum in London approach her, “I try to imagine how many people she has worked with, how many she has seen sent back, how many questions people have asked her, how everyone must hold on to her as if she is a lifeboat on a stormy sea” (Ibid, 107). The innocent and common people if they have to save themselves and their family from the violence that takes place in their native country, they need the help of people like Lucy Fisher in order to stay safe and seek provisions for living a good life as stated in SDG number 16 as “provide access to justice for all” (United Nations 2015). Nuri and Afra were no way different from such people who seek humanitarian aid. They meet her where she guides them in everything about the process of claiming asylum in London. They were informed that they should meet an Immigration officer to attend interview. She requested them to be attentive and careful to answer any question they raise. Thus the characters in the novel find aid from humanitarian volunteers who advocates for refugees and uplift refugees. Finally the people from the violence filled space of Aleppo, Mr. Nuri Ibrahim, Mrs. Afra Ibrahim and Mr. Mustafa & Mrs. Dahab all reach unite together in London.

Conclusion

United Nations has adopted these sustainable goals binding on all countries, so that every country of the world have to ensure that they reach sustainable growth and let a peaceful life and also live the earth as possession to the next generations. The findings of the novel include that civil war happening within a country disturbs the peace of human kind and ignites violence on children, women and other people. Women like Afra are abused sexually, parents had to lose their sons and daughters and further, the citizens of the country are deprived of their access to basic needs, right to live in peaceful place and right to lead a decent life. Thus, the researcher has studied this novel of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* using textual analysis as research method and attempted a new framework to read the novel in the light of SDGs that address war time violence and the issues related with refugees. The scope for this study can be extended by employing various new critical theories that deals with peace.

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