WAR, LOSS, AND ALIENATION: THE BEEKEEPER OF ALEPPO

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Abstract:Christy Lefteri's novel, The Beekeeper of Aleppo (2019), represents, in fictional form, urgent contemporary matters, such as immigration, war, displacement, and alienation. The narrative is based on experiences of real refugees in Athens, where the author worked with them as a volunteer in 2016 and 2017. By insightfully presenting the contrast between life before the war, the hardships they face when forced to leave home, and the implications this life event entails, Lefteri challenges the contemporary prevalent assumptions, based mainly on superficial knowledge and narrow thinking, according to which immigrants in general, and war refugees, in particular, have a choice. The alternative this part of humanity faces is between remaining and die, or taking the chance and travelling, often in inhuman conditions, to a country that might offer them security. By skilfully employing a simple narrative style and by inserting geographical and temporal shifts between the present (in England) and the past (in Aleppo, or during the journey to England), Lefteri questions complex realities and challenges the reader to revise his/her unexamined assumptions and, by appealing to the moral dimension of the situation, contributes to the development of the reader's empathetic imagination.

Keywords: Syrian war, immigration, alienation, ethics and morality.

Within the heated contemporary debates about immigration, as several thinkers have pointed out, moral considerations are often overlooked or even dismissed as irrelevant. This deplorable omission is possible because of the age-old dichotomy of "us" vs. "them," a strategic perspective which is adopted because it favours those who do not find themselves in the unfortunate situation of fleeing their own homeland and feel justified to defend their own nation and, within it, their local communities. To this end, they invoke what Rousseau showed long ago to be the basis of the formation of civil societies, namely, the principle of property. This principle, wrongly assumed and applied, and often inflated with the conveniently irrefutable principle of illegality, may bring out some of the worst tendencies in people, such as self-justification, feelings of superiority, and degradation of the sense of common humanity.

The novel written by Christy Lefteri, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, provides a rather welcome confrontation with the official contemporary discourse about immigration, immigrants, and asylum seekers. It consists of the story of some families who had to flee their war-torn home countries and, after a long and extremely difficult journey through Europe, now arrive in England, where they try to be granted asylum. The narrative follows closely the geographical and existential trajectory of the protagonist, Nuri, a beekeeper by profession, and his wife Afra, an artist. Anyone seeking to find answers to questions about the contemporary war in Syria will not find them in this novel. Rather, what Lefteri is trying to offer the reader is a glimpse into the crisis prevalent in the area nowadays and the horrifying hardships people who are victims of the conflict are forced to face. Yet, although a work of fiction, the novel is based on the author's experience as a volunteer in a Unicef funded refugee camp in Greece in the summers of 2016 and 2017. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is based on facts, on first-hand experience, on the undeniable everyday realities of areas where the question of immigration has become a compelling problem, which puts one's humanity to the test, whether a victim or a resident of a receiving country.

What might strike the reader from the very first page of the book is the simplicity of the style in which it is written, a simplicity derived, one might argue, from a certain

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humbleness of perception, considering the atrocities described in it. Generally, the text lacks powerful negative adjectives, which might create the impression of facile indignation. And it is precisely through this simplicity of style that Lefteri manages to impress the reader, to facilitate identification with the character, and thus help the reader develop his empathetic imagination.

This last aspect is amplified by the shift from the present situation (and present tense) to the past left behind. Each chapter is divided into two parts, marked by a key-word placed in the middle of a blank page, which connects the first one – focused on the present context, namely the protagonist's and his wife's struggles in the United Kingdom, while waiting for the decision from the authorities about their asylum application – to the second, which describes their life in Aleppo, or part of their journey through Europe. Their home city is portrayed, throughout the book, as an almost idyllic place, where existence is marked by warmth, hard work, performed with respect for nature and, particularly, for bees, and normality. Any Western reader can identify with this part – a normal family, whose members strive to make the best of their lives, enjoying their child, dinner with friends, and warm evenings in the garden. If (s)he may have access only to what is made available to them, by media, then these temporal shifts disrupt the frequently employed narrative of foreigners or refugees as people who simply seek to exploit the receiving country, offering, thus, a perspective on the reality of dislocation and alienation.

Within the narrative context and, one might extend, in the case of most refugees, the state of alienation mentioned above is, at least, two-fold. On the one hand, there is the alienation one feels when one finds oneself in a foreign country, a country that is very different from one's homeland, in spiritual and cultural terms. Nuri and his wife, as well as most of the other refugees living in the pension in England, waiting, struggle to maintain a sort of continuity with their previous lives, rejecting what they regard abnormalities (for example, the habit of Western men to urinate while standing, as the Moroccan man disdainfully observes), and trying to continue with their own habits and rituals. Such enterprises may prove rather futile, yet, what characterises most refugee is the desire (conscious or not) to somehow recreate, in a sense, the familiar situation they lived in before, to create a sort of surrogate, a substitute for their homeland, which might provide a feeble, but, maybe, helpful, sense of clarity and security, to annul, as much as possible, the idea of temporariness that permeates their lives, and the feelings of 'unhousedness' and triviality that derive from it. Yet, the impossibility of leaving behind the familiar and of recreating it in a new setting renders the forced displacement an eternally incomplete and unsuccessful attempt.

This process (because it is, indeed, a process, rather than a sudden occurrence or event) implies a rather complex state of ambivalence. Roberta Rubenstein rightly points out that, "for the culturally displaced person, self-division is inevitable. Torn between preserving her language of origin and acquiring the language of her adopted culture to facilitate assimilation, the exile may harbour ambivalent feelings toward both her home of origin and her adopted domicile. The culturally displaced person constructs her identity in relation to two distinct, if not also antithetical, sites in time, space and memory (*Home Matters*, 65). From this point of view, certain attitudes some characters display – such as Nuri's wife's refusal to engage in conversation with other residents of the pension, or the young Egyptian's difficulties in expressing himself in English – can be understood as a symptom, a manifestation of the characters' struggle with the profound ambivalence of their situation.

The sense of displacement they experience is amplified by the official discourse on immigrants and refugees that appear to permeate the social and political scene in England. There are, in the novel, insertions of references to real life politicians, for example, one who speaks vehemently against acceptance of foreigners who "pose as refugees" and whose face

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looks "like a frog" – most probably, an allusion to one of the fiercest opponents of immigration, the British politician Nigel Farage. Such instances situate the novel in contemporary times, helping the reader identify social and moral aspects depicted in it, and adds to the realistic dimension of the narrative. Also, the inclusion of factual reports, such as those presented by the media, create a juxtaposition between the superficiality with which such themes are treated in the everyday context of the news, and the universe of deaths and sorrow that lies beyond the carefully selected images and words. While in Turkey, during their journey to England, the protagonist observes: "The boat that left last night had toppled over and the people were lost at sea. Only four survivors were pulled from the water, and eight bodies were found. These were the conversations I could hear around me" (119). Novels such as Lefteri's show the reader that, beyond figures, beyond headlines, there are human beings, whose struggle, fear, grief are real and, in terms of our common humanity, the disgraceful dichotomy of "us" and "them" is not only artificial, but also evil.

There are many powerful metaphors, in the novel which suggest this contrast between "the established" and the newcomers and the conditions in which each group lives. One of them involves the garden of the pension in which Nuri and the other refugees live. One day, Nury "drift[s] outside into the concrete courtyard and look through the fence at the landlady's garden. Mohammed was right! It is so green, full of shrubs and trees and flowers, with a hanging basket and a bird feeder [...] The courtyard [of the pension] is bare and grey compared to the landlady's garden" (148-49). This striking difference not only amplifies the nostalgia for their homeland, where they could organise their lives following their own aesthetic principles, but also points at the double standards adopted by the receiving country towards those who have no choice, but to be there.

On the other hand, in the novel, alienation also applies to the relationship between Nuri and his wife. The beginning of the novel is set under the sign of fear: "I'm scared of my wife's eyes" (1). This fear the protagonist feels cannot be explained simply by the fact that his wife is blind, because of the atrocities she witnessed in Aleppo. It is, indeed, part of it, but the blindness symbolises not only her inability to see, but the danger of unsurpassable distance that seems to exist between them. There is no cohesion anymore, not only in their own individual narratives (due to forced displacement), but also between husband and wife. The horrors they witnessed constitute now a sort of emotional barrier that interposes between them, but this could be, one might argue, the only possibility they have to cope with their overwhelming feelings. Nuri is scared of his wife's eyes because of what they represent, because of the past they evoke, and also because they are a constant and unescapable reminder of irretrievable loss – of family bliss, of home, of Sumi, their son. Thus, there is no sense of intimacy, in the sense of belonging to the other, as defined by Thomas Kasulis: "Intimacy is not merely personal but personal in a special way. When in the locus of intimacy, one feels he or she *belongs* there. Among those persons, places, and things with which I am in intimate relation, I am comfortable, I feel at home and at peace. Outside the locus of intimacy, I sometimes sense I do not belong. I can sometimes be amidst my surroundings without feeling part of them, thinking of myself as something separate that has entered, and has been forced to, an alien environment" (*Intimacy or Integrity. Philosophy and Cultural Difference*, 36). The sense of alienation, the absence of a feeling of belonging, applies, therefore, to his surroundings, as well as to his (temporarily) estranged wife. Given the strained circumstances under which they had to leave their homeland, the forced exile into a different country does not equate, in their case, with the possibility of an *incipit vita nuova*; rather, it is limited to emotional struggles, to coping mechanisms, and everyday renegotiations of their personal and cultural identity.

Apart from the narrative shifts from past to present, there appear, within the narrative texture of the novel, other spatial and temporal dislocations, represented by Nuri's 'dreams,'

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or, one might say, visions, or hallucinations, which always involve the presence of an element of the past (more or less distant). The transition from description of the present situation to the protagonist's dreamlike visions is abrupt, with no warning to the reader, but it impresses all the more so by suggesting his tumultuous inner reality, and the sense of irretrievable loss he experiences. Also, they might be regarded as having a rather important psychological function, in that they help the protagonist cope with the traumatic experience of rupture from the idyllic past and of Sumi's death – the fact that his 'dreams' involve, most of the time, Mohammed, the boy they met in the refugee camp in Greece, betrays the emotional deadlock he lives in, after the death of his son.

Another symptom of the nostalgia for the past is represented by the bees – working with them was a significant part of the protagonist's previous life (and one which acquires increasing importance as the novel advances). Nuri, the protagonist, and his cousin Mustafa loved bees, and made a small business with honey and other cosmetic products with it as key ingredient. Yet, beyond their obvious, practical function – exerted in times of peace – the bees become, in the novel, a symbol for the tragic loss Nuri and his family have suffered. This loss goes beyond the forced, geographical relocation (they had no choice, the other option being death), beyond the change of physical settings, which involves leaving behind home, family and friends. In the novel, the bees represent loss as a symbol of the human condition, loss of a certain clear, and clearly defined, situatedness, in spiritual, moral and intellectual terms. They represent, in a way, nostalgia for a lost Paradise, a paradise which involved a sense of wholeness with the environment, of harmony with their own lives and with their surroundings. In fact, at a certain point, the protagonist meditates: "I think of the field in Aleppo, before the fire, when the bees hovered above the land like clouds, humming their song [...]. That was our paradise, at the edge of the desert and the edge of the city" (*The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, 110). That is why, in England, when Nuri finds a wingless bee in the garden of the pension they temporarily live in, he takes care of it. His gentle attitude towards it appears particularly poignant, and may be interpreted as an expression of profound nostalgia, as well as part of an effort to create, within the situation he unwillingly finds himself in, what Jelena Šesnić calls "an alternative centre of stability and meaningfulness" (*From Shadow to Presence*, 188). The fact that, towards the end of the novel, Nuri and his cousin, Mustafa, manage to restart a sort of business with bees in England bears witness to a partial success of the endeavour, and to the restorative character of their struggle.

Conclusion

In contemporary times, in which the questions of identity, foreignness, acceptance, legitimisation, otherness have acquired complex, if not, sometimes, deplorable meanings, it is particularly relevant to challenge the artificial division between "us" and "them", and Lefteri's novel is a significant means of doing that. Such novels as "The Beekeeper of Aleppo" confront the reader's (often) unexamined assumptions about otherness and the motivations that lie beyond people's decisions to leave their homeland and propose a different perspective, one which can be obtained after a narrative journey that describes the victims' hardships, and the effects of war, politics and injustice. Lefteri's novel facilitates the suspension of evasive strategies many of us employ – since the atrocities happen far away, therefore it is easy to keep them 'out of mind' – and challenge us to ask certain questions related to the moral dimension of the situation, thus developing our understanding and empathetic imagination.

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