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LITERATURE

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Individual Traumas in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

Abstract. Christy Lefteri was born in 1980 in London. Years later, her volunteering experience in a UNICEF-supported refugee centre in Greece during the European migrant crisis, which started around 2014 and has been continuing since then, became the basis for *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2018; the edition of 2019 is used here). In the novel, Lefteri reflects on migrant experience through fictitious characters and their personal traumas. Thus, this article aims to discuss how the author represents her characters' traumatic experiences. These traumas start before their moving away from the city of Aleppo (Syria), which suffers from a crisis caused by a civil war, and continue haunting them throughout their journey to Turkey, the Greek islands, Greece, and the UK and result in an identity and relationship crisis. In addition, the migration process itself is not smooth and adds more weight to their earlier experienced traumas. Nuri and his wife Afra, the main characters of the novel, are traumatised mostly psychologically, but their traumas manifest themselves physically. Even though these characters do create coping mechanisms, they never verbalise their traumas until they reach their destination, which is the UK, and thus suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder for quite some time. Only when Nuri and his wife start speaking about their experiences and symptoms, the process of overcoming their traumas starts. The analysis of the novel is carried out within the framework of the Literary Trauma Theory. Some of the key issues of the theory, which are relevant to the discussion, include inability to speak about traumatic experience, post-traumatic symptoms, and belatedly experienced trauma.

Keywords: Christy Lefteri; body; migration; PTSD symptoms; *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*; traumatic experience

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1. Introduction

Christy Lefteri was born in 1980 in London. Her parents had arrived as refugees from Cyprus and settled there in 1974. Lefteri is still based in the UK where she teaches courses related to literature and writing and has published four novels herself so far. One of the novels is *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* that provides insight into what it means to be a refugee or a migrant, as sometimes the boundaries blur and it is not easy to separate them. Since migrants and refugees are often seen by the media as nameless people and pure numbers in statistical reports, in the novel, the author chooses to focus on migration on an individual level by portraying one fictional family and its story about various traumatic experiences of its members.

Because the author's parents were also refugees, it may seem that the novel is directly related to their experiences. In fact, they did not really tell their daughter what they had gone through: "Her father, a former army officer, did not speak to his children of his experiences in the 1974 Cyprus war. Her mother, who also fled the country, never spoke of the war either" (Pollak 2019). However, the very knowledge of small pieces of her family history may have been the reason to become interested in the topic of migration and related experiences. Moreover, in various interviews, Lefteri has explained that *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is inspired by and based on her volunteering experience in Athens (Greece) during the European migrant (refugee) crisis that began in 2014, when large numbers of people started arriving to the EU mostly by sea from Syria, because of the civil war, and other countries. She worked in a UNICEF supported refugee centre in 2016 and probably heard many stories told by traumatised people there.

The present paper aims to analyse how Lefteri represents traumatic experiences of the main characters in her novel. As the object of discussion is trauma, Literary Trauma Theory influenced by ideas of Cathy Caruth, who is considered to belong to the first generation of trauma theorists (Pederson 2014), will be employed. Some of the key issues and ideas of the theory are related to unspeakability: in other words, difficulty or inability to speak about traumatic experiences, fragmented memory, PTSD and post-traumatic symptoms, belatedly experienced trauma, and others. These mostly came into the theory from Sigmund Freud's works but also from scholars in different fields of study (e.g. sociology, history, philosophy, literary studies, etc.), which makes the theory interdisciplinary and applicable in many contexts and situations. It is important to point out that "Trauma theory is sometimes said to locate itself in the rather exclusive field of major-scale traumatic events from which 'smaller' traumas are excluded and collective traumas dominate over 'individual' narratives" (Goarzin 2011, 6). Yet, in this paper, such smaller individual traumas will be given attention, since writers of fiction often describe collective traumas through individual traumatic experiences, which is also the case in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* where one family rather than the whole country is portrayed to reflect on possible experiences of its people during the war in Syria. Nevertheless, it should be noted that any experience,

including traumatic, is personal and unique (Caruth 1995; Gutorow et al. 2010; Vickroy 2002). This means that different individuals experience and perceive the same traumatic event differently. Therefore, the article discusses how Lefteri represents her characters' traumatic experiences by revealing distinct physical and psychological effects and responses.

2. On Trauma

According to Ljubica Matek, "migration is generally a demographic, and consequently also a political and economic phenomenon" (2018, 130). However, it may also be a traumatising experience that continues to haunt even when the one who migrates or is a refugee settles in. In addition to this experience, there may be pre-migration traumatic experiences that force one to migrate in the first place. Therefore, migration experience is not a simple phenomenon of moving from one place to another but rather a process including certain experiences that last for quite some time or, even in extreme cases, for the rest of one's life. Consequently, as Matek notes, "migration is, very often, both desired and traumatic, causing the migrant to develop an ambivalent attitude to the initial decision to migrate" (2018, 131). Because of its essence, traumatic experience usually keeps reminding about itself. Consequently, migration often involves issues related to remembering and forgetting what has happened. As Rogerio Borges and Gustavo Castro state, "Remembering is not only to forget, but also to comprehend and rationalize" (2019, 116), but traumatic experience is often supressed and thus not comprehended or rationalised. Ciano Aydin (2017, 131) refers to this rationalisation as recognition of trauma. What Aydin probably means is that bringing traumatic experiences back, verbalising and understanding traumatic memories might help to live through a particular traumatic experience and move on. Goarzin emphasises:

> while trauma is never a chosen experience and durably disseminates the sense of the self, it appears that there might be a possibility for healing in the choices operated in the narratives of trauma. One of the ways of working through trauma implies narrating it, whatever form it takes. (Goarzin 2011, 5)

In fact, speaking about traumatic experience "serves the therapeutic purpose of letting go of at least a part of the protagonist's psychological burden" in fiction (Matek 2018, 135), but the same purpose is achieved by those who are affected by traumatic experiences of different types in the real world, too. When the traumatised are unable to speak about what has happened to them, writing about it can be helpful as well. Other therapeutic means of expression include drawing, singing, dancing, and similar art forms and activities.

Nevertheless, despite various therapeutic strategies it still might be difficult to overcome and forget trauma for many reasons. One of the main reasons identified by

Sheree L. Toth and Dante Cicchetti is described as follows: "Just as we cannot ask simply if memory is affected by trauma, nor can we assume that all trauma affects memory similarly" (1998, 598). In other words, the same traumatic event may be experienced differently and have different effects on one's body and/ or mind. For instance, "fragmentation of memory, divided into a thousand pieces of memory lived," is quite common (Borges and Castro 2019, 125), but it does not mean that every traumatised individual would suffer from it. In fiction, however, this kind of memory is frequently reflected through fragmented narratives, non-linear time frames, and flashbacks that characters experience. The affected may also create alternative memories to compete with the original ones (Brewin 2018, 2) or "an alternative scenario about a traumatic event" (Matek 2018, 135), both of which can be seen as defence mechanisms (Aydin 2017, 129) or coping strategies (Matek 2018, 135). Despite the coping mechanisms, the past may be relived repeatedly in memories (Borges and Castro 2019). The traumatised may also experience an identity crisis because of the discrepancy between who one used to be before trauma, which may or may not be related to migration, and who one is afterwards, because "severe trauma can be a real threat to the identity of the affected" (Aydin 2017, 126). As a result, "psychological impact of trauma […] seems to be far more devastating for an individual, than physical or material consequences" (Matek 2018, 131), but it is more difficult to observe it if the affected do not talk about it.

According to Jacek Gutorow et al., it is impossible to represent traumatic experience accurately (2010, 6). Consequently, in fiction, writers attempt to depict the psychological effect of various traumas through effects on the bodies of their characters. Just like in reality, traumatised fictitious characters also "show many different symptoms, such as sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, grief, fatigue, pain, confusion, despair, loss of self-esteem, and loss or trust" (Aydin 2017, 125). These and various other bodily sensations reveal that the traumatised may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such symptoms, nevertheless, may not reveal themselves straight away after the traumatic events take place: "it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of […] experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (Caruth 1995, 8). This means that when trauma happens, it may not be fully grasped or understood as traumatic. Thus, the symptoms or effects, if they are not merely physical, may show themselves later and reveal that the experience was, indeed, traumatic. One more sign of trauma is that it "involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances" (Erikson 1995, 184). This shows that traumatic experience as a phenomenon is quite complicated and covers a variety of issues. The next part of the paper will focus on two characters who suffer from traumas in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. It will reveal their symptoms, which the author, being a former psychotherapist, is, of course, aware of, and discuss how they are represented.

3. Psychological Effects and Physical Embodiment

As the title of the novel indicates, the protagonist Nuri is a beekeeper in Aleppo, Syria. He helps a friend with the bees, and they even start producing other products with the honey they make. The situation in the country becomes unstable as a civil war breaks out and everything is destroyed. However, the key event that makes Nuri and his wife Afra want to leave Aleppo is their son's death when a bomb explodes near their home. In fact, at first Afra refuses to leave because she is in mourning, so they live in danger for a while, but Nuri's business partner Mustafa has left for the UK, and Nuri wishes to follow his lead and start a new life in another country. Only when Nuri is in the UK he learns that Mustafa has travelled to Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia but has been deported to Bulgaria, thus his trip was not going as well as Nuri thought it would. Before migrating Nuri and his wife could not know their own trip would not be easy either. Lefteri's novel reflects on the couple's migratory process as they travel to Turkey, one of the Greek islands, Greece and then finally the UK. While moving to these places Afra and Nuri go through different traumatic experiences, such as physical violence and rape, which will be discussed later, but at the same time they are still affected by the trauma caused by the loss of their only son Sami. Indeed, this trauma is the first and major one in the novel, while other experiences are only added to it to form a cumulative trauma. Sami's death as a trauma manifests itself through certain physical and psychological PTSD symptoms reflected by the characters' behaviour and will be discussed more detail in the paper. Before moving to the discussion, it is relevant to mention that the narrative in the novel consists of fragments and Nuri's flashbacks from different locations rather than a linear story. This may be a representation strategy (Herrero and Baelo-Allue 2011, xxii) chosen by the author to show that the narrative delivered by Nuri as a narrator is traumatic. Traumatic memory is often chaotic and thus the traumatised find it difficult to tell what happened to them in a coherent way (Arizti 2011, 178; Herrero and Baelo-Allue 2011, xxii).

As previously noted, Sami's death, the main trauma or rather the core of what later could be seen as a cumulative trauma, happens in Aleppo during the pre-migratory stage. Ramifications of this trauma are portrayed differently in relation to two characters. In Afra's case, it is her bodily reaction in proximity to the event that is emphasised by the author: since Afra sees her son die, she loses her eyesight straight away and throughout migration to different countries she is blind. Therefore, the last thing she sees is her son's death. Afra and her husband never question the real reason of her blindness, as it is assumed it is caused by the proximity to the explosion of the bomb that killed their son. Nevertheless, as an attentive reader might suspect, at the end of the novel it turns out that Afra's eyes are not damaged physically and she should be able to see, but the psychological trauma of losing her son reveals itself through the body, that is, the loss of the ability to see. In other words, even though Afra experiences the explosion first-hand, since she is a direct witness of the event, she does not have physical wounds. Her injury is of a completely different nature and thus the effect is less expected but probably more complicated.

Afra's husband Nuri thinks there are certain advantages of her blindness, because not seeing protects her from other painful experiences. For example, Nuri is the one who observes how their beloved Aleppo is destroyed and is glad his wife cannot see this:

> A bomb dropped in the darkness and the sky flashed and I helped Afra to get ready for bed. […] It was quiet that night, no more bombs, and the room was full of peace and full of moonlight.
> There was a huge crater in this room; the far wall and part of the ceiling were missing, leaving an open mouth into the garden and sky. (Lefteri 2019, 43)

As Nuri observes the destruction happening in their hometown and even their home every day, he tries to persuade his wife to flee to some other country. However, Afra does not want to leave because their son Sami died here, and her identity as a mother is strongly related to their house where they used to be happy together. Naturally, by staying she will not be closer to Sami, for he is gone. There is no place of mourning, such as a grave, mentioned either. Meanwhile, Aleppo is being destroyed and is becoming more dangerous each day. These memories reflect on what Nuri witnesses in the city:

> 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. […]
> […] 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)

This visual description shows that the city that used to be so full of life and human activity is just the opposite and impossible to live in anymore. As a result, it is not only Nuri's wish to leave, since other people are trying to escape, too. Nuri feels disturbed by the views and his body reacts to them by clenching and shaking hands and by a dry mouth. This is a sort of fight or flight response. It leads to a wish to run away from this place as soon as his wife agrees to go with him. Finally, she is persuaded by Nuri, but it is possible to assume that if she had been able to see what was happening, she may have agreed to leave sooner. That is, the only disadvantage of Afra's blindness that Nuri can identify is the prolonged stay in their destroyed city, as Afra could not imagine how severe the damage was, while Nuri did not have the heart to tell her, even though the stay traumatised him further.

When they migrate, Nuri sees those other places in which they need to stay, but Afra does not and worries less or at least it appears so to Nuri. This means that Nuri

carries the burden of seeing for both of them but does not tell Afra everything he observes and thus keeps protecting her. For instance, he does not feel welcome in the Greek islands because of what he notices soon after their arrival, but he does not reveal his feelings to Afra:

> The billboard just outside says that there are too many of us, that this island will break under out weight. I'm glad she's blind. I know how it sounds! If I could give key that opened a door into another world, then I would wish for her to see again. (Lefteri 2019, 3–4)

It seems that Afra has protected herself from unpleasant and/ or traumatic views the world provides her with by becoming blind in Lefteri's novel. Even though it is not a wishful decision or something Afra as a character does on purpose, it is a way chosen by the author of the novel to show how the body can react physically to a psychological trauma. In addition, to have two main characters, one that can see and the other that suddenly cannot, may be a literary device employed by the author to emphasise how the inner world of these characters differs. When Afra loses her eyesight, she becomes more vulnerable, very much dependent on her husband during the process of migration and more susceptible to other effects of the experienced trauma or further traumatisation while migrating, but her inner world is richer than that of her husband, and her senses of perception are stronger. For example, even if she does not want to go out when she is in the UK, she knowns what the weather is like because she listens attentively. In fact, her inner world has always been important to her identity. This helped her to be a very good painter before the civil war in Syria:

> There was a whole world in her, and the customers could see this. For that moment, while they stared at the painting and then looked at her, they saw what she was made of. Afra's soul was wide as the fields and desert and sky and sea and river that she painted, and as mysterious […]. But in Syria there is a saying: inside the person you know, there is a person you do not know. (Lefteri 2019, 214)

Her identity as a painter is lost together with her eyesight, but painting could help her work through her traumatic experience if she did see. Consciously or not, she probably knows it, so later in migration, she thinks of a solution and asks Nuri to get paper and pencils for her. Pencils leave sort of engraved marks on paper, which allows her to feel what she draws by touching her drawings. This activity is a coping mechanism for her despite the continuing blindness. At the same time, Afra's blindness provides a perspective of migration not noticed by migrants or refugees or readers of the novel who can see.

Nuri's trauma of losing his son manifests itself completely differently. This is normal, "Because by nature, [when] trauma is registered and not experienced, it resurfaces in many different ways" to different individuals (Goarzin 2011, 2). Nuri's identity of being a father is lost, so he uses a particular coping mechanism to deal with his pain,

but he does not understand it at first. When Nuri and Afra leave Aleppo, get to Turkey and are on a boat to one of the Greek islands, he befriends an orphan boy called Mohammed. The boy falls out of the boat, and Nuri tries to save him by jumping out of the boat into the cold water. He remembers the situation in this way: "Mohammed was staring down at me, pulling me" (Lefteri 2019, 127). Later conversations with the boy help Nuri not to think about his own seven-year-old son that he has lost. In addition, he intends to take care of the t boy, so in the refugee-camp on the island he informs the worker they have arrived with a son and presents Sami's passport so that Mohammed could travel with them instead of him. However, Mohammed disappears, and Nuri cannot find him anymore. The worker calms him down by saying that Mohammed could not have gone far. Because it is an island, eventually he will show up again. Soon Nuri learns they can go to Greece by ferry and later may try to get to the UK but hopes Mohammed will find his way to them somehow. When they are finally in the UK, Nuri sometimes sees the boy there too and talks to him. Still, at the end of the novel Nuri understands that only he has been seeing Mohammed all this time, but the boy, in fact, does not exist. According to Aydin, "[p]sychological trauma […] violates the familiar ideas and expectations about the world of an individual and society, plunging them into a state of extreme confusion and uncertainty" (2017, 127). In the novel, Nuri feels confused after the traumatic event (the loss of his son) and psychologically employs a coping strategy. In other words, he replaces his lost son with an imaginary son of similar age to make it easier to deal with the experienced trauma. He acknowledges that "sometimes we create such powerful illusions, so that we do not get lost in the darkness" (Lefteri 2019, 359). This illusion has helped him while going through other traumatic experiences in migration.

In addition to losing his identity as a father and becoming one again with the help of Mohammed, Nuri is torn between who he used to be – a beekeeper – and who he is during their journey – a poor homeless person. In the beginning of their migration process, when they have not been away from home for a long time and get to Istanbul, Nuri reflects on how he feels:

> There were whole families wandering through the streets, some barefoot, sometimes sitting by the sidewalk when they became tired of walking and other refugees on the market stalls, trying to make enough money to move on from here, selling things that people couldn't live without: phone chargers, life jackets, cigarettes.
> Sometimes I forgot that I was one of these people. Like the dogs, I sat everyday on the same bench and watched the yellow cabs circling the red poppies on the roundabout. (Lefteri 2019, 92–93)

It does not become better during the migration process. They are allowed to sleep inside of a building on a Greek island when it is assumed that they travel with a child, but it becomes evident that they are not, so they are taken to sleep outside, in a park. Only later in Greece are they given a room by a smuggler, since Nuri becomes his

delivery boy (he probably delivers drugs to different locations in Athens) to earn a trip to the UK by plane and forged passports, because they are short of money. Moreover, there are other unpleasant experiences while migrating. Even though the living conditions have not been as poor as in their shattered hometown, they can hardly be seen as comfortable as they have endured danger and unfortunate weather conditions. For example, Nuri remembers "the cold was unbearable" (Lefteri 2019, 85) in Turkey when they needed to walk "for what felt like a hundred miles, through fields of wheat and barley" (Lefteri 2019, 85). In comparison to the civil war, they may be seen as minor inconveniencies, but all of these contribute to their cumulative trauma that includes all pre-migration, in-migration, and post-migration traumatic experiences. At the same time, such a trauma can also be seen as a collected one, because it involves various collected traumas experienced throughout a particular period of time and the memories that remain (for more on collected memory see Olick 1999).

Nuri and Afra never speak about their traumatic experiences because such experiences resist verbalisation. Therefore, "witnessing […] proceeds 'from seeing to saying'" (Welz 2016, 105) or rather telling others what happened to them belatedly. Only when Nuri and his wife start speaking about their experiences and symptoms, the process of overcoming their traumas starts. For instance, at some point Afra starts seeing some shapes. Even though at the end of the novel she still cannot see as she used to, there is hope her vision will be restored. However, it takes a long time for this verbalisation of traumas to happen. When they have been in the UK for some time, waiting for their permit to live in the country to be approved, Nuri takes Afra to see a doctor because of her lost eyesight. It is interesting to point out that at that time they cannot speak about their own traumas, so they tell the doctor about each other's traumas. This is the first time their experience is shared with someone. Nuri remembers that moment this way: "Afra begins to cry in a way that I have never seen her cry. She is bent over and crying from her chest" (Lefteri 2019, 240). This cry is a way to let out all her supressed emotions, which she was holding inside. In addition, she knows her husband has been holding something inside as well, but she could not explain clearly what is wrong with him. She attempts to express her concern in this way: "I can't explain what it is, Dr. Faruk, but I know something is wrong. He is not my husband" (Lefteri 2019, 247). This suggests that even though Afra does not see, she can feel that her husband has changed after his traumatic experience as well. Nuri, on the other hand, denies his health issues and feelings at first and says he is only sleep deprived. According to Gabriele Schwab, "[d]efences and denial become second nature" to those who have experienced trauma, especially when it becomes chronic, despite all the coping strategies that the traumatised employ (2010, 42). In fact, in the novel, when Nuri is in the UK, he either cannot get asleep or if he does, it happens in strange places. This is probably how post-traumatic stress reveals itself, since he suffers from the loss of his son and other experiences about which his wife has no idea. Indeed, sleep-related issues are a symptom of PTSD and can manifest themselves differently depending on the context of every individual.

Nuri started not to sleep much in Istanbul when it was only a beginning of their migratory process. By not sleeping, he guarded his wife's sleep or helped her to return to sleep when she used to forget where she was at night. On the other hand, when Nuri did sleep, he had nightmares that haunted him and reflected his trauma of losing his son when a bomb exploded. This flashback from Athens reflects on one of such nightmares Nuri had:

> 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. (Lefteri 2019, 203)

This excerpt shows how staying in the city that was being destroyed by bombs was traumatising for Nuri, while his wife did not see the damage and only prolonged their stay by not wanting to leave. However, he never blames her for the effect of this stay on him. Afra, meanwhile, may or may not have had similar nightmares because of the sounds she should have heard, but these are not focused on in the novel. She is presented as a disoriented woman who sometimes wandered at night instead, which may suggest inability to sleep that is also a symptom of PTSD. In the UK, she does not seem to wander anymore, but Nuri's nightmares do not disappear, even though they are quite safe there: "I've had a dream about something vague, not a murder this time" (Lefteri 2019, 133). Sometimes through such dreams Nuri remembers he contributed to the death of one man and relives the event. Nuri did not murder the man alone but rather joined others who were kicking and beating the man. That is, he assisted in killing him. This man had harmed many other migrants in the Greek islands, especially children, who he raped, and injured Nuri by cutting his hand with a knife. In his dreams, Nuri is haunted by the man's death in addition to his son's. Afra does not know about the man, but Nuri constantly worries someone in the UK will find out what he has done and thus lives in fear:

> The social worker will be here at 1 p.m., and all meetings will take place in the kitchen. She will want to know how we got here and will be looking for a reason to send us away. But I know that if I say the right things, if I convince her that I am not a killer, then we will get to stay here because we are the lucky ones, because we have come from the worst place in the world. (Lefteri 2019, 6)

To get to the UK was not easy, but being in the UK is not easy either, although in a different way. The uncertainty of whether they will be given a permit to stay is threatening. They are also questioned, and Nuri is afraid the social worker might learn something that will prevent them from being allowed to stay. In other words, even be-

ing in the UK and waiting for the final decision is stressful. The reader does not learn what is decided, so this open ending of the novel encourages everyone to consider both scenarios. On the one hand, it is natural to hope for a happy ending after everything Nuri and his wife have been through, but on the other hand, migration laws have little to do with one's hopes and dreams and often lead to unwanted outcomes. Therefore, both endings are equally possible in the novel. It might have been the author's intentional decision not to reveal what happens to the characters later, since migration is not necessarily a phenomenon that has a clear ending. In the modern world, it is relatively easy to change locations and, in some cases, even choose not to settle in one place. A similar idea is pointed out by Eleni Andreouli and Irini Kadianaki who emphasise "the open-ended nature of migrant transitions" (2018, 387) in general. Thus, migration, whether it is a chosen or a forced one, which is the case in the novel, may not even end in the UK or at some point lead to return migration after the war. Similarly, traumatic experience is often understood as something that does not end (Caruth 1996, 11), even if it is voiced or physically healed. As a result, the open ending of the novel can be seen as what Ann E. Kaplan refers to as an "open wound" (2005, 19) which traumatic experience is because it continues haunting the traumatised. This is the reason why Schwab uses the term of "haunting legacies" (2010, 1) while speaking about traumas.

In addition to sleep-related issues and other worries, Nuri seems to experience other PTSD symptoms. For instance, while being awake unexpectedly he hears an exploding bomb like the one he heard when his son died or in his nightmares:

> 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. (Lefteri 2019, 132–133)

The sound that Nuri hears is only in his head, but it is triggered by the noise he hears in his environment that probably reminds of the traumatic event. Consequently, for a moment Nuri is in the past, in Aleppo, not in the UK. Moreover, the expression of his former experienced trauma has a physical response, for example, sweating, both when he is asleep and when he is awake. This, once again, shows how the novel reveals a psychological trauma through physical symptoms while representing it.

Later Nuri and Afra both acknowledge what happened to them and start the healing process. This verbalisation of trauma in turn makes them speak about one more traumatic experience that has metaphorically and physically separated Nuri and Afra as a couple even though they are together. While living in a smuggler's place in Athens Nuri used to leave early in the morning and return at night, because he worked for the smuggler. Afra had insisted on her husband locking her in their room, but once Nuri did lock up his wife and unfortunately left the key in the living room. When he

returned to the apartment, he learned that Afra had been raped by the smuggler. This is how Nuri reflects on what happened:

> 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. (Lefteri 2019, 354)

This was a great traumatic experience to Afra, which she never speaks about in the novel, while Nuri was torn between a wish to kill the smuggler in Athens and a wish to finally get to the UK. He decided not to take any action, because he thought the smuggler was their only hope to get to their desired destination, and soon after this event they indeed were able to get on a plane. However, he has blamed himself since then for having forgotten the key and to what this led. After the event, he has never touched his wife again. Afra, meanwhile, has asked her husband to help her dress up and undress because she has needed his closeness, not because she really needed help, since she could not see. It is important to point out that the novel does not illustrate how exactly the trauma of being raped manifests itself, in addition to the inability to speak about it, but having acknowledged other traumas, Nuri apologises to his wife and they can speak about this painful event for the first time. This and their shared pain make them closer again. Only then Nuri starts focusing on his inner world that he, unlike Afra, has neglected earlier. He thinks about this new understanding in the following way: "somehow the darkness inside me has swallowed me up" (Lefteri 2019, 312), which provides hope for his healing to begin.

4. Conclusion

Even though Lefteri's novel is said to be based on her experience in a refugee centre and does reflect on a difficult and long process of migration, at the centre of the novel is the trauma related to the loss of the couple's son rather than the trauma of migration. Parents often choose to migrate due to economic reasons, since they want to ensure a better future to their children. Lefteri, however, focuses on forced migration rather than economic migration. Consequently, Sami dies early in the novel but at the same time this unexpected turn facilitates the plot. What is more, migration experience adds other traumatic experiences to both Nuri and Afra. Thus, their personal traumas can be seen as collected or rather cumulative ones.

These traumas are never spoken about until the very end of the novel. This reveals the difficulty to speak about traumatic experience but at the same time represents the (un)

speakability itself. The major trauma in the novel is psychological but this and other traumas are represented as physical PTSD symptoms and effects on the bodies of the characters. In addition, the novel consists of memories, flashbacks, and flashforwards, which strengthens the effect of the traumatic narrative that is usually not linear and chaotic.

It is interesting to note that the inability to speak about their traumatic experiences, in other words, verbalise them, pushes the main characters further apart even though they are together. When they finally can speak about their experiences and negotiate them, it brings them closer. This shows how speaking, sharing, and healing are parts of the process of "getting back to normal", but it does not mean that traumatic experience is forgotten. Laurie Vickroy suggests that "writers [who write about traumatic experience] engage in a delicate balancing act by trying to lure readers into uncomfortable or alien material, sharing victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed" (2002, 3–4). It is likely that by writing about the topic of trauma the author tries to raise the awareness about the difficulty of such experiences as described in the novel, calls for discussion of what it means to be a migrant or a refugee, or even negotiates her own familial past about which she does not know much.

The migration crisis in Europe continues. It encompasses more and more countries from which and to which people move. Some recent examples include Eastern Europe where two completely different kinds of migration can be observed. There is unwanted (economic) migration that is seen as a part of the so-called hybrid war between Belarus and Eastern European countries. On the other hand, Ukrainian refugees are welcomed because of the war started by Russia in February 2022. It is likely that more novels on migration and refugee experience will be written in the future, and even those who have lived through it first-hand will write them and provide more details on what it feels like to be a migrant or a refugee. This novel, however, helps to get a glimpse into the personal and psychological rather than political aspects that are quite often left unseen by the public eye.

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